



### Training and Cooperation Activity (TCA)

## Spreading innovative results from

## European University Alliances to other higher education institutions

### Executive Summary

#### About the European Universities Initiative and the conference

The European Universities is a key initiative of the European Union, one of the main elements of the European strategy for universities. Its objective is to establish transnational alliances of higher education institutions promoting European values and amplifying the quality and competitiveness of European higher education.

The conference was co-organised by four Erasmus+ National Agencies, namely OeAD from Austria, DAAD from Germany, Tempus Public Foundation from Hungary and HK-dir from Norway. The event was hosted by HK-dir in Bergen (Norway) and held on 3-5 May, 2023. The event was met with a **great interest** and managed a **broad outreach**: Around 140 participants from 19 countries, including 65 representatives from 41 European Higher Education Alliances, 37 representatives from higher education institutions that are not yet involved or funded in the European Universities Initiative were present. Also, other stakeholders such as student representatives, national authorities, National Agencies (NAs) and the European Commission took part in the three days of the conference.

#### Aims and objectives

The main aim of the conference was to spread innovative results and best practices from European University Alliances to other higher education institutions. Participants were thus preselected to ensure the balance of representatives from these alliances and non-alliance institutions. The programme of the conference was designed to provide participants with opportunities to connect, share experiences, identify good practices and learn more about the transformative impact of the alliances in Europe. The idea of including “both kind of higher education institutions” as active contributors (such as panelists, workshop leaders, and keynote speakers) was to transfer knowledge as well as to initiate collective thinking and problem-solving. One of the objectives of the conference was also to get a better insight into each other’s ongoing European University projects, as well as to share experiences and generate new insights.

## Achievements of the conference

The conference provided, as the first of its kind, a **space/environment** for the European University Alliances to share and discuss their mission as **role models** for the entire European education landscape. In a panel discussion on "Great expectations - what does it mean to be a role model", representatives from alliances explained their understanding of the concept, its different dimensions and the needs of the alliances in assuming their pioneering role: "To be a role model, we need the commitment of the leadership of all our institutions", as one participant put it. The Commission representative confirmed that great expectations are attached to the role: "Being a role model is the *raison d'être* of the alliances". However, a representative from a university not yet represented in the initiative pointed out that: "'Role model' is uni-directional, what we need is reciprocity, role models are not leaders but enablers of participation and anticipatory of needs-based changes". Regarding the question on how to act as a role model, the need for facilitators was expressed in many discussions. Notably the potential of the NAs and national ministries for facilitating the transfer of results to non-EUI universities was one of the key messages.

The conference offered the opportunity to **showcase innovative activities, formats, methods and results** of current alliances. In various plenary sessions, workshops and a world café, participants **discussed** numerous good practice examples, chances, challenges and lessons learned. 17 alliances presented their most promising activities and results within the knowledge square, such as educational offers like challenge-based learning, joint micro-credentials or flexible educational pathways (allowing mobility and transnational learning), research offers like elaborating joint research strategies or provision of seed funds. Participants also gathered an insight into valuable cooperation and governance structures aiming at building up trust in international collaboration. Alliances and other HEIs reflected also on formats and aspects which are still challenging (e.g. joint degrees, motivation of academic staff or student involvement, online transnational learning, aligning research agendas within the consortia etc.). The take-aways were manifold and there was consent on the decisive importance of the commitment from management and university leadership, as well as of intercultural understanding and an international spirit. Also, sufficient time and adequate funding were mentioned as critical success factors.

Participants highlighted the importance of **complementarity, co-creation and knowledge-sharing** among alliance members and non-members: "Making the whole thing visible for all is essential for non-alliance members to benefit from the innovation", as one participant put it. Generally speaking, a clear need for intensifying the discussion on how to disseminate the findings and potential benefits for all HEIs was identified. A general desire for a platform to share best practices (and challenges) with non-EUI members was expressed, as well as the need for good practice guidelines on joint/collaborative courses and programmes.

Among many different workshops, the conference offered the unique opportunity to discuss the **impact of the initiative on national and European policies**. NAs and national authorities exchanged their views on the effects of the European Universities Initiative (e.g. identifying and removing obstacles of international cooperation, updating national strategies for internationalization or implementing the European Approach to Quality Assurance of Joint Degrees) and the support they provide in their respective countries (e.g. financial support to existing alliances, outreach and inclusion of HEIs not participating in an alliance). Another workshop was dedicated to the **new cooperation mechanisms and instruments** designed to facilitate cross-border cooperation of alliances and in particular, the **European degree** and the **European legal statute** for alliances.

The 10 **NAs** present at the conference **discussed their role** - and the challenges they are facing - in **accompanying and supporting the EUI** and collected ideas on how to disseminate their work to HEIs which do not take part. The NAs were willing to assume their role as mediators between national authorities and the HE sector but underlined their need for more support and information. Also, the ministries were aware of their role as enablers of change and in removing barriers to international cooperation. However, they pointed to the potential risk of creating a gap between the members of the alliances and the other HEI, as well as highlighted the **importance of close cooperation on the national level to share experiences and outcomes and enable spill-over effects**.

In highlighting the alliances' positive achievements and the lessons learned so far, and allowing for a fruitful dialogue among all actors, **the conference proved to be a very useful format** to discuss the potential benefits for the whole European Higher Education sector, the outcomes to be shared and appropriate means for the transfer to happen.

### **Future follow-up**

The conference received positive feedback from the overwhelming majority of participants who acknowledged the high quality of the programme and the networking opportunities. According to the evaluation form 90% of the participants were satisfied or very satisfied overall with the conference. Building upon the positive reception and forward-looking comments, the organizing NAs identified the need to continue the event in the future.

The presentations of the various sessions, as well as an extensive conference documentation, and the list of participants were distributed right after the event to further facilitate networking. The executive summary was shared with the European Commission as well as other relevant groups (e.g. Academic Cooperation Association, European University Association, etc.) with the intention to highlight the conference as a point of origin in further discussions of the future of the European University initiative.

The TCA held in Bergen ought to be continued in the long run, as agreed by the four "founding NAs". **From 2024 it will be transformed into an LTA (long-term activity) and included in the Erasmus+ Work Programme** meaning these four countries are mutually committed to a long-term cooperation on this topic. The LTA intends to create awareness among non-alliance institutions by discussing the potential benefits of the European University Initiative. Furthermore, all NAs shall be provided guidance on strengthening the visibility of outcomes and results of the alliances.

**In 2024 an informal NA meeting is planned** to collect best practices, experiences and needs about the alliances and the role of the NAs in this initiative. **The next large international conference will be held in 2025** as the final call to establish "European universities" will be launched by then. Surely, due to the collective efforts of the organizing parties more future steps will be discovered and further milestones will be defined in the **LTA project period 2024-2027**.