

# European university alliances need more sustainable funding

**Success notwithstanding, managing different shorter-term funding streams while working towards a single long-term vision is not ideal, says Olga Wessels**

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The hopes placed in [European University](#) alliances are considerable. The brainchild of French president Emmanuel Macron, these pan-continental, multi-institutional partnerships are charged with truly rethinking the future of education in Europe and contributing to the competitiveness of the European academy and economy on the world stage.

In the past three years, 44 alliances have been formed, and the aim is to involve more than 500 higher education institutions in the programme by mid-2024. In response, many of the current alliances are welcoming new members for the [next phase](#) of the initiative, which will see the 16 alliances from the initial 2019 cohort receive Erasmus+ funding for another four years, alongside four new alliances. Moreover, a new Erasmus+ call has been launched, with a total budget of €384 million (£335 million), that is expected to support both further new alliances and offer additional support for the most successful ones of the 2020 cohort.

During their pilot phase, the first cohort have delivered on the high expectations set for them. Enabling enrichment opportunities for learners, staff and academics is a priority, and one way that alliances have achieved this is to link best practices across partner universities, enabling innovation, internationalisation and curriculum development. A concrete illustration is the Eutopia [communities](#) of best practices.

Partnering on education is another focus. In developing an enormous amount of joint programmes, alliances have overcome national obstacles, such as failings in quality assurance, to the benefit of the wider education community. The dozens of Erasmus Mundus PhD, master's and bachelor's programmes developed by the likes of the European Campus of City-Universities ([EC2U](#)), the [European University](#) on Responsible Consumption and Production ([EURECA-PRO](#)) and the European Universities Alliance for Film and Media Arts ([FilmEU](#)) attest to this.

Alliances are also providers of innovative joint learning opportunities for students who do not have the need or the time to pursue a full degree. Examples include the module-based “tracks” of the [European University](#) for Knowledge Entrepreneurs ([Transform4Europe](#)), the customisable “[education pathways](#)” of the [Enhance](#) alliance of technology universities, and the [challenge-based course offer](#) of the Enlight alliance of comprehensive research-intensives. These are supported by joint platforms such as the [Epicur inter-university campus](#).

As for European integration beyond education and research, clear examples of alliances' commitment can be seen in the efforts of the European Consortium of Innovative Universities ([ECIU](#) University), the [Arqus European University](#) Alliance and Young Universities for the Future of Europe ([YUFE](#)) to make education accessible to diverse types of learners through initiatives such as micro-credentials and personalised learning.

There are many more ways of linking society to the academic world. The [European University](#) of Post-Industrial Cities ([UNIC](#)) bridges the gap between education institutions and cities by hosting CityLabs, bringing together students, researchers, city stakeholders, organisations and citizens to identify and solve local societal challenges. The [UNITA](#) alliance of rural universities has developed a programme of international internships in different working environments connected to local ecosystems. [Ulysseus](#) (“the [European University](#) for the citizens of the future”) offers innovation hubs connecting education, research and knowledge transfer, promoting citizen engagement and European values. The [international internship portal](#) established by the [European University](#) for Customised Education (Eunice) fosters opportunities for transnational, cross-sectoral and cross-disciplinary internships. And the [European University](#) of the Seas (SEA-EU) ran a [research adventure](#) this summer between Gdańsk and Cádiz.

Alliances are grateful for the big Erasmus+ follow-up funding and the momentum for the formation of new alliances. But they also agree that a bright future for [European University](#) alliances hinges on identifying a [new investment pathway](#).

Erasmus+ provides the bulk of the funding. Many member states also support the initiative at the national level. Further funding has been contributed by the EU's research and innovation programmes, too. This is all very welcome, but it means, on the other hand, that European Universities have been managing different shorter-term funding streams while working towards a single long-term vision.

The mid-term review of the European multi-annual financial framework in 2024 is an excellent opportunity to design a more sustainable and holistic approach to funding the European Universities. It would be excellent if this approach were longer term than current funding cycles and covered all four missions of universities: innovation and public outreach, as well as education and research. Since member states bear the main responsibility for their education systems, there also needs to be both financial and policy support from national authorities, too.

Alliances look forward to working together with member states, the EU and stakeholders to realise this bright future.

**Olga Wessels is head of the [European Consortium of Innovative Universities](#)' Brussels office. The article was written in cooperation with coordinators of all 41 [European University](#) alliances that started in 2019 and 2020, brought together in the informal FOR-EU network.**