



# European University Alliances: Europe's Competitiveness Engine

Concept note for the ECIU University high-level  
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The European Commission's **Competitiveness Compass** has set a course to close the innovation gap, decarbonise the economy and reduce dependencies. **The Union of Skills** puts people and talent development at the centre of this agenda. Together they make one undeniable argument: Europe's competitiveness depends on our ability to collaborate across borders, implementing **the Fifth Freedom** (Letta, 2024), the free movement of research, innovation, knowledge and education.

Pioneering much-needed models for deep, long-term and systemic European collaboration rooted in education, research, innovation and exchange with society, **European Universities alliances** deliver on Europe's competitiveness ambitions (FOREU4ALL, 2025). By empowering learners, creating knowledge and responding to societal challenges, the Alliances combine education, research and societal engagement within one European ecosystem.

Having on average 9-10 higher education institutions as partners across Europe, European Universities alliances gather complementary strengths across regions, open-up their infrastructures and networks, and engage over thousands of non-academic partners. These include companies, public authorities, SMEs, and civil society (FOREU4ALL, 2025). Alliances multiply opportunities for students, professional learners and academics while accelerating joint programmes and flexible learning pathways (European Commission, 2025). This makes Alliances a key instrument for building an integrated, competitive and inclusive European Education Area (EEA) and a European Research Area (ERA), capable of responding to global challenges as well as strengthening European identity, culture and values (European Parliament, 2025).



## How ECIU University delivers on the EU's competitiveness ambitions

ECIU University offers an integrated operating model that combines education, research and societal engagement within one challenge-based ecosystem in close cooperation with societal actors.

### *Closing the innovation gap*

With **over 300 societal challenges** addressed, together with **more than 200 societal stakeholders**, ECIU University pioneers challenge-based education and research. ECIU University co-creates solutions with enterprises and public authorities to speed up technology transfer across borders. By making students, researchers, innovators and societal stakeholders work together on real-life challenges, ECIU University empowers its learners resulting in delivering ideas to the market and skills to jobs.

### *Competitive green transition*

Affordable clean energy and green economy are key to the green transition. This requires both the right skills and large-scale action. ECIU University has offered **80+ sustainability learning opportunities developed with societal and industry partners**. The flexible modules link learning to real-world challenges, helping organizations cut emissions and prepare workers for net-zero supply chains. This approach also clearly supports the Competitive Compass ambitions and is interesting in the context of the proposed European Competitiveness Fund (ECF), which aims to the deployment of innovative solutions. A relevant example is the ECIU University Sustainable Forest Challenge, showing how forests can drive rural innovation and green business.

### *Reducing dependencies through talent mobility and recognition*

The Digital Experience Platform is ECIU University's **digital campus**, making the institutional digital systems interoperable. It is a one-stop-shop for learners, academics and stakeholders, offering the full European learning cycle, seamless mobility, and nurturing the ecosystem. This Digital Experience Platform supports skills portability and pan-European learning pathways, responding to Europe's need to attract talent (Choose Europe and Stay in Europe), removing barriers to joint education development and credit issuing.



## ECIU University: evidence of knowledge delivery at European scale

ECIU University is a leading testbed for flexible learning pathways, portable skills development and challenge-based impact. ECIU University combines education, research and societal engagement within one challenge-based ecosystem. Offering smaller learning units, responding to the personal needs of learners, is also relevant for continuous learning beyond traditional degree structures, upskilling and reskilling professionals across all stages of life.

**Education** – since 2019, ECIU University has provided to more than 7,000 participants over **900 learning opportunities**, including over **300 societal challenges co-created with non-academic societal stakeholders** and **more than 600 micro modules**. These flexible and modular formats provide access to learning at scale and to equip learners with future-ready competences. All learning opportunities are part of a structured and thought-through portfolio,

fostering skills and competences such as entrepreneurship, creativity, critical and innovative thinking, teamwork in agile environments, interpersonal skills, media and information literacy, technology, innovation and the ability to address complex real-world challenges.

**Innovation** – Innovation is central to ECIU. **Over 100 Knowledge Valorisation Ambassadors** are involved in co-creation, strengthening university-society links, social innovation and valorisation. ECIU University acts as an intermediate and trusted broker, bridging academia and societal stakeholders, and serving as a Business-to-Business enabler that accelerates collaboration and impact ensuring that innovation flows seamlessly from research labs to markets.

**Research** – ECIU's unique long-term collaboration model has strong value to add to researchers and research managers. It makes ECIU partners attractive for global talents to Choose Europe, providing a single access point to twelve European partners with a likeminded innovation profile. ECIU developed **a framework for Collaborative Doctoral Programmes**, offering international and multi-interdisciplinary opportunities in doctoral training. The excellent research infrastructures of partner institutions are accessible for researchers through the ECIU Researchers Mobility Fund and Seed Programme. Finally, the strong partnership strengthens the implementation of ERA objectives such as modernising research assessment, enhancing knowledge valorisation and building trust in science through citizen science. ECIU's Research & Innovation Hub connects over **1,800 researchers, public and private partners** to challenge-based research and innovation. Over the past five years, ECIU partners have submitted more than **190 joint proposals** via the ECIU Strategic European Project Office, with a success rate of 34%.

These examples show that European Universities alliances empower learners and academics, provide European upskilling and reskilling opportunities to learners across life stages, deliver on the ERA objectives, and develop policy prototypes and valorisation pathways. This is exactly what Europe needs to close the innovation gap, build democratic resilience, enhance social innovation and raise productivity.

## Why this matters to businesses, regions and public authorities

**For business, industry and NGOs**, ECIU University provides one European access point to skills, research and testbeds across multiple regions. This is ideal for SMEs scaling innovation or larger organisations harmonising workforce development across sites. Challenge-based procurement and Alliance-led consortia can deliver faster, de-risked solutions in clean tech, digital and health. Exactly the domains highlighted by the Competitiveness Compass and foreseen under the windows of the ECF.

**For regions and cities**, ECIU University connects local innovation systems into pan-European value chains. Advantages include enabling mobility, internships and Living Labs that attract talent and investment while solving public-sector challenges. Alliances have extensive partner networks and play an important role in overcoming fragmentation across Europe's knowledge square (European Commission, 2025).

**For citizens and democracy**, ECIU University cultivates future-ready competences such as digital, entrepreneurial, green, and personal and social skills. At the same time ECIU University fosters active citizenship, multilingualism and inclusion. This strengthens the democratic fabric that underpins Europe's social market economy and the Union of Skills vision, and it helps build trust in science and public institutions.

# A clear proposition for the EU competitiveness agenda

1. Support **the research, innovation and service-to-society dimensions** of European Universities alliances, currently heavily underfunded, to enable alliances to become the skills-and-innovation spine of competitiveness. Use the ECF, Horizon Europe, and related instruments to back Alliance-driven pipelines from skills and competence development to technology transfer and deployment.
2. Enhance the impact of Alliances **by breaking down silos between education and research and innovation policies**. A holistic approach across all academic missions is needed. The Union of Skills needs support for European competitiveness, and vice-versa.
3. **Simplify to grow**. Move beyond the project-way-of-working to enable Alliances to operate as one-stop-shops across funding and regulatory silos, with reduced administrative burden for SMEs and public partners. A predictable, flexible and non-directional approach to funding will ensure impact and innovation.

## Why now, and why at this event

The EU has a window to convert strategy into scale. The Competitiveness Compass and the Union of Skills provide the policy and governance backbone; next to national support, European funding programmes such as the ECF, Horizon Europe, and Erasmus+ provide the financing architecture. European Universities alliances – such as ECIU University – provide the European partnership model where education, research, innovation and societal engagement flourish.

Today's discussion is an invitation to societal stakeholders and policymakers to use this platform: To co-design challenges, co-fund learning pathways, and co-deploy solutions that strengthen Europe's competitiveness and its democratic resilience.

### Discussed will be:

- **What does society need from European Universities alliances?**
- **How do European Universities alliances contribute to the EU competitiveness agenda?**
- **What do European Universities alliances and their societal stakeholders need from Europe to reach their full potential?**
- **Recommendations from non-academic societal stakeholders.**

### References

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