

A much needed investment pathway for European Universities post 2027

Council Conclusions on a European strategy empowering higher education institutions for the future of Europe invite the Commission and the Member States to support alliances of higher education institutions such as the European Universities “to reach their full potential by addressing the financial costs of transnational cooperation to cover all their missions in the longer term” and take “steps (...) to move towards a more sustainable, holistic and integrated EU funding perspective.”

ECIU welcomes a much needed holistic and sustainable investment pathway for European University Alliances after 2027, delivering on all missions of European University Alliances.

Such a pathway is needed to build innovative European Universities that can deliver on a bold vision to solve Europe's challenges, help overcome Europe's skills gap, create new knowledge and form a European ecosystem that strengthens collaboration across disciplines, sectors, regions, and makes a connection with citizens.

Why an investment pathway

European University Alliances work towards delivering a bold vision to strengthen European collaboration and having a transformative and long-term impact on society. This can only be achieved through a sustainable and holistic, multi-mission approach: linking education, research, innovation, and engagement with society activities.¹

To create a true European University, we need to consider all the functions and structures that such a major endeavour entails, including, for example, infrastructures, management structures (people and processes), governing bodies and advisory bodies such as scientific councils, faculties and/or departments, support services and liaison units. This is an ambitious endeavour, and therefore its foundation needs to be ambitious, sustainable and holistic as well.

ECIU welcomes the support from Member States to a sustainable and holistic funding perspective as mentioned in the **Council Conclusions** that were adopted on 6 April 2022.² With this paper, ECIU aims to provide detailed input for a future investment pathway and activities that need funding.

¹ ECIU supports the 2022-call of European University Alliances to establish a holistic and sustainable long-term funding instrument to deepen transnational cooperation of Alliances across all their missions in a coherent way. This will enable the European Universities Initiative to go beyond a short-term project approach and deliver on their long-term, innovative and ambitious vision of future-proof European universities. See also: Call for sustainable and holistic support by all 41 European University Alliances (generation 1+2) of Spring 2022: [https://assets-global.website-files.com/551e54eb6a58b73c12c54a18/62f51528b9180f5d2c4d9443_FOR%20EU%20on%20funding%20needs%20incl%20research%20support%20\(1\).pdf](https://assets-global.website-files.com/551e54eb6a58b73c12c54a18/62f51528b9180f5d2c4d9443_FOR%20EU%20on%20funding%20needs%20incl%20research%20support%20(1).pdf)

² Brussels, 6 April 2022, p. 18: <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-7936-2022-INIT/en/pdf>

Input to the investment pathway

ECIU highly appreciates the substantial support and financial commitment for European University Alliances in the Erasmus+ programme. At the same time, ECIU relies upon the EU to move beyond the current situation of project funding and the absence of aligned calls in other European programmes to support aspects of the missions of the Alliances beyond education.

When discussing an investment pathway after 2027, **we need to be ambitious** and move beyond the legal base of the current multi-annual frameworks. An investment pathway must integrate funding from multiple European and national programmes, and cover all the missions of the Alliances.

What does long-term funding look like?

We expect the Alliances to implement an innovative and long-term vision. A new approach to project funding would hamper the Alliances' potential. Accountability is important; this can also be reached in a more **structured, sustainable and systematic way** that goes beyond a project-based approach. Projects come with uncertainties, as one needs to follow the apply-evaluate-execute-report routine. Such uncertainty distracts from building towards an ambitious long-term mission with numerous partners across European countries.

Currently, the Erasmus+ programme is in the lead by providing 4+2 years funding to Alliances. ECIU calls for enhanced commitment to the additional 2 years' funding (based on **a light evaluation** and a broadening of remit) to enable Alliances to build towards their ambitious mission in a sustainable manner. In the 4+2 years' scheme, the EU could **be innovative by changing the way in which the +2 years' funding** is structured; it could support e.g. activities in the field of research, innovation, exchange with society and IT infrastructure with the support of other EU programmes.

ECIU supports a controlled EXIT strategy to avoid concerns of endless funding needs to Alliances that are not delivering. An uncontrolled EXIT with unclarity about long-term support, and the sudden stop of the research funding, is challenging the commitment of members of the Alliances.

On synergies with regional and national funds

The strong support to Alliances by Member States is very much welcomed by ECIU. Since Member States bear the main responsibility for their educational systems, there needs to be both financial and administrative support by national authorities. Recent studies have shown that nearly all EU Member States support Alliance activities at national levels.³

³ See Ben Jongbloed and others, *CHEPS study on the state and effectiveness of national funding systems of higher education to support the European Universities Initiative*, table 7, page 44
https://ris.utwente.nl/ws/portalfiles/portal/302207643/final_report_of_the_study_on_the_state_and_effectiveness_NC0822186ENN.pdf

However, there is a big disparity between the national support structures. The differences between base funding, funding schemes, timelines, amount of funding, rules and regulations, types of activities that can be funded, additional requirements – hinder of the work of Alliances. **A Peer Learning Exercise** amongst Member States is valuable to realise a better understanding and to work towards a better alignment of national support structures. ECIU supports the French initiative to align national support structures.

Moreover, additional funding is often given on a project basis. Attribution of deliverables is complicated, as it in theory has to be attributed to two projects: one for which funding has been received and work was done, and on the one for which no funding was granted but for which a deliverable is required. If it is EU funding such as Recovery and Resilience Facility funding, it does not count towards co-financing. Funding is also often limited to priorities for a particular country, which not necessarily fully reflect the Alliance's priorities. There should be more leeway in the use of funds or better alignment of objectives between countries. Moreover, as the political leadership at the national level may change, the benefits of this initiative sometimes need to be demonstrated again. **Ensuring sustainability of national support is therefore critical to the successful implementation of the support initiative towards Alliances.**

In conclusion, coordination and setting priorities both at the level of national authorities and at the level of the European Commission's key Directorate Generals may take place separately, but at a later stage they need to meet and be aligned.

The need for holistic funding

Education, research, innovation and societal engagement are four missions that are interconnected. Building bridges between these missions will lead to reciprocal benefits and increases the impact of each mission. This connectivity is reflected in European policy, such as the European Innovation Agenda, European Skills Agenda, European Education Area and European Research Area. It also features in Alliances' work on the floor: innovation requires excellent research, researchers need to transfer innovation into their teaching and they themselves need to develop skills and competences, researchers need to be able to connect to citizens professionally, who can then provide feedback to the research communities. Education must be research-oriented, and vice versa. These four missions cannot be supported with a siloed approach, there has to be an integrated approach to funding.

The specific ambitions, activities, and funding needs differ between Alliances. Therefore, having **flexible funding pathways** that depend on these ambitions of the different Alliances, should be considered.

A **top-up model in which other programmes such as Horizon Europe and the European Social Fund invest in the Erasmus+ programme**, to support the Alliances missions beyond education, could be a first step towards a more ambitious block-funding instrument. Such a top-up model goes beyond only 'alignment of calls', as it creates a single funding pot. This model is already available in the current programming period. However, it will only work if Member States and the management of other programmes agree. Discussions in the context of European Research Area Action 13 policy regarding research support for Alliances have proven to be complicated. Therefore, ECIU calls on Member States to support a more holistic approach to funding, as stated in the 2022 Council Conclusions (see the first page of this paper).

Moreover, **synergies** among programme funds on one hand, and Structural and Investment Funds on the other hand, even including other institutions and mechanisms like the European Investment Bank and InvestEU, are needed.

Furthermore, **dedicated funding** must be made available in other programmes for those Alliances that need support for activities additional to education, such as research, digitalisation, societal connections, and entrepreneurial activities. It is desirable that such dedicated funding is structured with aligned timelines, calls for funding, and funding rules, including the possibility to have the same consortium, co-ordinator, and management. As a concrete example, ECIU welcomes the prerequisite of a European and institutional strategy in programmes as **Horizon Europe**. Such commitments within consortia help to deliver on policy priorities such as the European Research Area Actions, for which a change in culture across Europe is needed. The commitment and outreach in an Alliance will help achieve capacity building, and the much-needed changes in policy and academic culture. This kind of funding can still be based on excellence and competition, which is a must in programmes as Horizon Europe.

A **seal of excellence** can also support synergies in order to avoid additional application procedures. It could be a recognition of excellence to simplify reception of funding from e.g. European Structural and Investments funds. Member States and other funding programmes would also have to recognise such a seal of excellence, something that has proven difficult with similar initiatives in the past.

What activities need funding?

The following part of this paper offers information on Alliance activities that require funding. These are not directly linked to the investment pathway, but provide examples of what activities require funding to build towards a European University.

There is a need to fund the **joint governance** structure of an Alliance. For example, the cost of hiring people who work centrally for a European Alliance is high in terms of national and fiscal regulations. Also, there is a need for HR-support, as there are strong regulatory challenges when realising a joint management and governance structures. Joint governance and central staff are challenging, since HR, tax and social security is a matter of national competence.

The development of a European **inter-university 'campus' that is supported by novel IT-technologies**, is needed but costly. More realistic opportunities for funding are called for. ECIU is currently developing a Digital eXperience Platform (DXP) by which customer journeys are developed for key stakeholders. One challenge platform will be operational to link challenge providers and the academic community. Also, a user platform will facilitate access to what is on offer in education. In addition, developing an educational metaverse (XR campus) comes at high cost and will be expensive to maintain.

Continuous education is a growing sector, aimed at overcoming Europe's labour and skills shortages, and responding to the deeply rooted shifts in technology. Financial support is of strategic importance **for business development in continuous education**. Related is the ongoing development of **innovative educational technologies**, such as harnessing Artificial Intelligence in teaching and assessment.

As stated before, education, research, innovation and societal engagement are four missions that are interconnected. Unfortunately, there is no dedicated financial support available to transform the research, innovation, societal engagement mission in alliances, while a research and innovation strategy is critical to build European Universities. This strategy must be backed by funding. European Universities are perfectly placed to help transform the European research and innovation, e.g. in engaging citizens, enhancing societal impact, supporting research careers, developing and implementing a challenge-based research model, and more in general working with the priorities on the European Research Area's Agenda. The following activities illustrate the interconnectedness of the missions and the potential to research support to alliances.

For ECTS bearing **research-based micro-modules**, tangible research support is needed, such as lab equipment, research assistants, and materials that offer students a true research experience.

With the Smart-ER **Virtual Research Institute**, ECIU has **developed a platform** as a framework for researchers to do research in innovative ways and network within the community. This community has agreed upon a shared Research and Innovation Agenda,⁴ it has defined, developed and promoted citizen science, has developed a course for researchers on the topic, and has developed a citizen science platform to promote and engage in new citizen science initiatives.⁵ Also, a **hub** has been developed that is aimed at connecting researchers with each other and with external parties (including citizens), at providing them with guidance through the EU research and innovation dimension, at offering them a digital environment to spark collaboration. This is an **excellent investment** for the EU as such a hub can be an excellent tool to disseminate research results, not to mention its potential to engage learners (students) who are interested in challenge-based approaches.

Furthermore, ECIU's Smart-ER has launched a seed programme to develop **research methodologies and build networks**, with external parties as well. Unfortunately, the SwafS-funding is coming to an end; no follow-up calls will be published and the ECIU Smart-ER activities might only be continued with successful applications to different funding opportunities within Horizon Europe calls (e.g., Excellence Hubs and Acceleration services in support of universities). That is challenging.

In ECIU University, we take **training for researchers** so they may acquire new skills to conduct challenge-based research very seriously. A concrete success story is the **ECIU Smart-ER academy**, which is aimed at offering a novel approach of training, capacity programmes that reaches beyond the conventional practices and comfort zone. This has involved researchers at all their professional stages (from R1 to R4) in stimulating training that is based on the ECIU University's approach on challenge-based learning, focusing activities on relevant topics and addressing genuine local and regional challenges. There is a need for funding with regard to **personal staff who can coordinate the educational offer, and to engage experts and trainers** who can conduct the workshops. Without holistic funding, ECIU might be able to continue this kind of training and programmes by submitting multiple proposals e.g. to the MSCA-Staff Exchange or to the MSCA-Doctoral Networks.

Another successful example is the organisation of **society quests** that bring people together in order to solve challenges, to activate the communities and to connect with external partners.

Furthermore, when talking about educational and or research synergies, more **research on teaching and new learning formats** is necessary. We need to collect evidence, resulting in scientific proof of the advantages of Challenge Based Learning about which we hypothesise, as well as an evidenced-based discussion about the possible drawbacks of the pedagogy involved.

⁴ See ECIU University long-term joint research strategy: <https://media.dcu.ie/media/ECIUsummary/>

⁵ See Citizen Science Initiative (csinitiative.eu), and 2 mobile apps in the Google Play and App Store with +500 downloads each: CARE, and BiciZen Google / BiciZen Apple.

In conclusion

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. This approach should be based on a long-term perspective, rather than the current funding cycles, and it should cover all four missions of universities: innovation and societal engagement, as well as education and research.**

ECIU looks forward to working together with Member States, the EU and stakeholders in order to realise a bright future for European University Alliances.

About ECIU

The **European Consortium of Innovative Universities** is a network of universities united by a common profile of shared beliefs, interests, and mutual trust that was founded in 1997. The members of ECIU started ECIU University in 2019. The members of ECIU are:



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