

# ECIU UNIVERSITY PARTNER VOICES

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## FINDINGS FROM SOCIETAL PARTNER CONSULTATIONS

**Abstract:** *European University Alliances can play a distinctive role in connecting knowledge, talent, innovation and societal needs across regions. Drawing on stakeholder consultations, it calls for more structured, reciprocal and sustained collaboration that links education, research and innovation and enables successful approaches to scale across Europe.*

Europe's competitiveness challenge is often described as an innovation challenge, a skills challenge, or a productivity challenge. In reality, it is a connectivity challenge.

Europe produces world-class research. It educates millions of talented learners. It possesses strong regional innovation ecosystems and globally competitive industries. Yet too often these assets remain fragmented across institutions, sectors, disciplines, regions and policy domains. Knowledge is created but not mobilised. Skills are developed but not connected to innovation. Breakthroughs emerge but struggle to scale across borders. Europe does not lack excellence. It lacks mechanisms that systematically connect excellence.

This observation has powerfully emerged from ECIU University's dialogue with businesses, public authorities, civil society organisations and regional stakeholders. Our external stakeholders do not ask for more projects, more pilots or more initiatives. What they call for, above all, is stronger connectivity: the deliberate linking of people, knowledge, institutions and ecosystems so that Europe's existing strengths can generate greater collective impact. Connections between learners and employers. Between researchers and societal challenges. Between regional ecosystems. Between innovation, education and societal impact. Their message aligns remarkably well with the ambitions of the Competitiveness Compass, the Union of Skills and the growing recognition of the Fifth Freedom: the free movement of knowledge, research, innovation and education throughout Europe.

The significance of this finding extends far beyond the future of European Universities. It suggests that Europe may already possess the foundations of an answer to one of its most pressing policy challenges.

Over the past seven years, European University Alliances have evolved beyond their original purpose. While initially conceived as educational collaborations, they are increasingly functioning as platforms where education, research, innovation and societal engagement converge. They connect universities with companies, public authorities, SMEs, NGOs and citizens around shared challenges. They create environments where future skills, new knowledge, entrepreneurship, technology transfer and societal solutions are developed simultaneously rather than in isolation.



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This matters because competitiveness is no longer generated by individual actors. It is generated by ecosystems.

When stakeholders discuss the value of ECIU University, they rarely speak about individual universities. Instead, they highlight access to networks, collaboration platforms, challenge ecosystems, innovation hubs, international partnerships and trusted relationships. What they value is the ability to enter a European ecosystem capable of mobilising talent, knowledge and resources across borders. In other words, they described precisely the type of infrastructure that Europe increasingly needs if it is serious about closing the innovation gap and strengthening strategic autonomy.

This is particularly relevant at a time when the European Union is seeking new instruments to boost competitiveness, deploy innovation faster, strengthen resilience and reduce fragmentation. Europe has invested substantially in generating knowledge. The next challenge is ensuring that knowledge flows effectively between institutions, sectors and regions. The stakeholder dialogues suggest that European University Alliances have become one of the few instruments capable of operating across the full knowledge triangle and increasingly across the broader knowledge square, integrating education, research, innovation and society.

The policy implication is clear.

If European University Alliances continue to be viewed primarily as educational projects, Europe risks underutilising one of its most promising assets. If instead they are recognised as strategic platforms for connecting talent, innovation and regional ecosystems, their contribution to European competitiveness could be transformative.

This requires a shift in policy thinking. Not more projects, but more permanence. Not more fragmentation between programmes, but stronger alignment between Erasmus+, Horizon Europe, the European Competitiveness Fund and future instruments. Not separate policies for skills, research and innovation, but support for the places where these agendas already come together in practice.

The stakeholder message to Europe is therefore straightforward:

Europe's future competitiveness will not primarily be determined by its ability to generate more knowledge. It will be determined by its ability to connect knowledge, talent, innovation and societal actors at European scale.

European University Alliances are demonstrating how this can be achieved. They are becoming the connective infrastructure that links regional strengths, mobilises talent, accelerates innovation and turns Europe's diversity into a competitive advantage.

The next step is not simply to support Alliances as educational collaborations. The next step is to recognise them as strategic European infrastructures for competitiveness, resilience and prosperity.

That is the opportunity now facing Europe. And it is an opportunity that both policymakers and societal stakeholders increasingly recognise.