

PRACTICE-BASED WHITE PAPER

FROM NETWORK TO COMMUNITY

How ECIU University built a community across 12 universities, 2022–2026

Summary

A European University becomes a community by connecting what already exists at its member universities, not by building something new next to them. Between 2022 and 2026, ECIU University used this approach to bring together students, teachers, researchers, support staff and external partners from 12 universities. More than 5,000 learners took part over 12,000 times in its learning opportunities, more than 700 people joined three editions of the ECIU University Forum, and over 2,500 people joined its digital communities.

The approach rests on four building blocks that reinforce each other:

1. **People who make it happen:** a Community Coordinator at every university, working together in alliance-wide task forces.
2. **Local embedding:** ECIU University placed inside existing events, such as welcome weeks, mobility weeks and staff days.
3. **Alliance-wide moments:** recurring formats such as the Forum, Creathons, Lunch & Learn and the Team Impact Award.
4. **Digital spaces:** hubs for researchers, teachers, staff and students that keep people connected between events.

Three main lessons learned stand out for other alliances:

- **Communities form around shared practice.** People came together around what they do, such as teaching through challenge-based learning or doing research, rather than around predefined themes.
- **A network keeps a community running; a dedicated coordinator helps it grow.** Shared task forces kept every recurring format running, but the most developed community, our student community, also had its own dedicated coordinator.
- **Training builds capacity; structure builds community.** Roles, rules and a regular rhythm turn participants into members.



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1. Introduction: from 12 universities to one community

Every European University alliance starts as a network of institutions and aims to become a community of people. That shift is hard: the people are spread across countries, languages and campuses, they have full jobs and study programmes at home, and most of them have never met.

ECIU University faced this challenge with 12 member universities and about 220,000 students and 40,000 staff. In its 2030 vision, the alliance describes its community as all learners, teachers, researchers, support staff and societal partners who work together on urgent societal challenges. During the ECIUn+ project (November 2022 – October 2026), a dedicated Work Package on community building (WP5) set out to make that community real.

The results show the community growing in every direction:

Indicator	Results 2022–2026
Learners in ECIU University learning opportunities	5,280 individuals; 12,127 participations
Participants in the ECIU University Forum	more than 700 over three editions
Lunch & Learn sessions for staff	17 sessions; 594 participations
Members of the digital communities	2,511 across three digital hubs
Challenge providers	more than 140 organisations from 19 countries

Note: Data as of 6th of October 2026

This paper describes how we did it, so that other alliances can use what worked for us. Section 2 sets out the four building blocks of our approach. Section 3 shows that communities formed around shared practice. Section 4 looks at our student community as the most developed example, and section 5 explains what it takes to grow a community.

The paper draws on the community-building report of WP5, the reports of local activities by all member universities, our communication reports, and the ECIU University Impact Dashboard. Student representation and co-creation are covered in more depth in a separate paper, *Students as co-builders of a European University*.

2. The four building blocks

Our approach combines four building blocks. Each does a different job, and together they form one system: people meet ECIU University on their own campus, connect with colleagues from other universities at alliance-wide moments, and stay in touch online in between.

1. People who make it happen

Every member university appointed a Community Coordinator in its local ECIU office. Each coordinator also joined an alliance-wide task force responsible for one central activity: the Forum, the Team Impact Award, Lunch & Learn, the Student Ambassador Programme or the digital hubs. The coordinators meet online every month and on site once a year to review the past year and plan the next. A central role developed the shared framework and supported the organisation of central activities. This design spreads both the work and the knowledge. Every coordinator brings local insight to an alliance-wide activity, and every activity is owned by several universities.

2. Local embedding: join what already exists

Instead of creating new events, coordinators brought ECIU University into what their universities already did. The member universities reported 38 examples, including:

- welcome events for new students at Hamburg University of Technology, Tampere University and INSA Centre Val de Loire;
- mobility weeks and international days at Lodz University of Technology, INSA Lyon and the Autonomous University of Barcelona;
- staff days and "Discover ECIU" sessions for teachers at the University of Twente;
- an ECIU café and pizza nights with the student organisation at the University of Stavanger;
- a recurring info hub in the libraries of Dublin City University.

Local events reach people where they already are, in their own language and at moments when they are open to new opportunities. They are the most common first contact with ECIU University.



3. Alliance-wide moments: a yearly calendar

A fixed calendar of recurring formats brings people from different universities together:

Format	For whom	Results 2022–2026
ECIU University Forum	The whole community	3 editions (Kaunas, Trento, Aveiro) with 210, 230 and 267 participants; the programme is built from an open call for sessions
Lunch & Learn	Academic and support staff	17 one-hour online sessions, 594 participations
Creathon	Students, with teachers and challenge providers	4 editions (Enschede, Linköping, Aveiro, Barcelona)
Team Impact Award	Teams of learners, teachers and partners	3 editions, each presented at the Forum
Staff days	Staff	ECIU sessions in international staff weeks and staff days at member universities

The Team Impact Award shows how celebrating results strengthens a community. The 2025 winners, a team from Dublin City University, made recommendations that Ireland's national water utility, Uisce Éireann, took up in its improvement programme.

4. Digital spaces: staying connected between events

A community spread across Europe needs places to meet between events. ECIU University built four:

Space	Members (October 2026)
Research & Innovation Hub	1,553
Agora, for staff and students	641
Teacher Hub	317
Students' Teams	233

The largest, the Research & Innovation Hub, grew from the researcher community of an earlier ECIU project, SMART-ER. That is the pattern of this whole paper: communities grow fastest where they can build on something that already exists.

3. Communities form around shared practice

People join a community because of what they do, not because of a topic assigned to them. Our original plan was to form communities of practice around the Sustainable Development Goals. In the first project year we saw that people came together more naturally around shared roles and practices, such as teaching through challenge-based learning, doing research or supporting mobility. We followed that, and kept the Sustainable Development Goals and wider societal challenges as the content of our learning opportunities.

Four sources confirm the pattern:

- **Local activities.** Of 38 local community activities reported by the member universities, none was organised around a single Sustainable Development Goal. Those that brought the same people back over time were organised around a role or a practice: a local staff community at the University of Stavanger, the Morning Coffee webinars for teachers at Tampere University, with ECIU sessions every year, a World Café for teachers at the University of Aveiro.
- **Lunch & Learn.** Most of the 17 sessions were about how to do the work: five on challenge-based learning, others on blended intensive programmes, online engagement, working with external partners and AI in teacher education.
- **Digital communities.** Our hubs are organised by role: researchers (1,553 members), teachers (317) and the wider ECIU organisation (641). The community of practice on challenge-based learning uses the Teacher Hub and meets monthly.
- **Communication.** In about 1,300 reported communication actions, none was framed around a Sustainable Development Goal. Messages were built around people (42%) and activities (38%).

Sustainability did not disappear; it found its place as the subject of the work. Forum themes such as "Innovation for Sustainable Futures" and challenges on clean water, food security and climate plans gave people something meaningful to work on. What held them together was the shared practice of working on it. One example shows how a local practice community can grow into an alliance-wide one. In September 2024, the University of Aveiro hosted the first meeting of the Centres for Teaching and Learning from across the alliance, alongside the ECIU Board meeting. A group that already existed at each university found its European counterpart.

For alliances: identify the groups that already share a practice at your universities, and give them reasons and places to meet across the alliance. Use themes as the content of the work, not as the borders of a community.



4. The student community: our most developed example

Our student community shows what the four building blocks can achieve when a group also gets its own roles, rules and rhythm. In four years it grew from a first group of ambassadors into a community with a clear structure and purpose.

What students gained	How it works
Roles	Student ambassadors (23 in 2023–24, 56 in 2024–25, 88 in 2025–26) promote ECIU University locally and work on projects; a Student Council with one member per university, nominated by the local student union, represents students in governance
Rules written together	Terms of Reference for ambassadors, revised seven times with ambassadors and coordinators; Student Council regulations; conduct guidelines for all students, approved by the Council
A rhythm	Ambassador meetings every two weeks, a yearly training that grew from one day to five, an annual Council summit alongside the ECIU Board
A purpose	Projects in communication, education, digital experience and community; contributions to the design of the platform and learner guidance
Recognition	Certificates, training, places at the Forum and visibility on the ECIU University website
A dedicated co-ordinator	A dedicated Learner Engagement Coordinator in the central team

The community is increasingly run by students themselves. In the third cohort, ambassador teams hosted their own coordination meetings. At Dublin City University, ambassadors founded an ECIU student society in March 2026. At Linköping University, students designed their own local signature event.

The student community also strengthens the other building blocks. Ambassadors staff the info stands at local events, help organise the Creathons and the Forum, and produce much of the content that makes ECIU University visible. Half of the first ambassador cohort had taken part in the 2023 Creathon: an alliance-wide event became the way into a lasting role.

ECIU University's separate paper, *Students as co-builders of a European University*, describes student representation and co-creation in detail.

5. What it takes to grow a community

Our four years show two different kinds of community work: running a community and building one. Both are needed, and they need different support.

A network runs a community

Shared task forces made our recurring activities resilient. Because each format was owned by Community Coordinators from several universities, knowledge and responsibility did not depend on one person or one institution. In the final project year, the central community-building role, which had developed our framework and helped organise the central activities, was vacant. The task forces continued every recurring format: three Lunch & Learn sessions, the Creathon in Barcelona with 193 applications, the third Team Impact Award, and the largest ECIU University Forum so far, with 267 participants in Aveiro.

A dedicated coordinator builds a community

Creating new structures for a group (roles, rules, a rhythm, recognition) needs someone whose job is exactly that. All groups shared the same framework and central activities, but students also had a dedicated Learner Engagement Coordinator. That is where new structures kept appearing, right up to the end of the project: a five-day leadership training, Council committees, conduct guidelines and a seventh version of the ambassador Terms of Reference.

Training builds capacity; structure builds community

Our teacher community has a strong base to grow from. Our teacher training work package recorded more than 5,000 training participations, and teachers are active in the Teacher Hub, the monthly community of practice on challenge-based learning and Lunch & Learn. Training reaches many teachers as individuals, who then return to their own departments. The student model provides an interesting example of how a more active community might be fostered across the alliance. While teachers' roles, motivations and professional contexts differ, it suggests several potential avenues to explore:

- a dedicated coordinator for the group;
- a recognised role, for example teaching ambassadors or challenge-based learning champions at each university;
- a shared rhythm of meetings and an annual moment together;
- recognition that counts in an academic career.

Teachers also often combine several roles: they teach, do research and take on management tasks. Communities and digital spaces that connect these roles, rather than separate them, serve them best. We learned this from our digital hubs: separate spaces per group were useful at first, but people move between roles, so we identified ways to connect the hubs more closely.