PRACTICE-BASED WHITE PAPER

STUDENTS AS CO-BUILDERS OF A EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY

How ECIU University organised student representation and co-creation, 2022–2026

SUMMARY

Between 2022 and 2026, ECIU University made students part of how the alliance is governed, designed and run. Over the same period, the number of learners in ECIU University learning opportunities grew from about 1,700 to about 5,000, with more than 12,000 participations.

This paper describes three things we built:

- **Student representation.** A Student Council anchored in the student unions of all member universities, which elects two students to the ECIU Board and sends delegates to European student forums.
- **Co-creation.** Students helped design learner guidance, the digital platform, communication and events, through focus groups, workshops and 88 student ambassadors working inside the project's work packages.
- **Enabling structures.** A dedicated Learner Engagement Coordinator, a Community Coordinator at every university, rules written together with students, and a training programme that grew from one day to five.

An important lesson is that student engagement needs a dedicated champion, especially in its early stage. Our Learner Engagement Coordinator connected students, staff and governance and set up most of the structures this paper describes. The goal is to embed this work in the normal way the alliance and its universities operate, so that it no longer depends on one role.

We support that **student engagement is recognised**, through ECTS, the diploma supplement or Europass, and through equal standing for alliance representation and local student representation. For alliances, we recommend investing early in a dedicated coordinator and treating the budget for students as a deliberate strategic choice.

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1. Why student engagement matters for European Universities

Students are the main users of a European University, so they need a real say in how it works. The Commission's 2025 report on the initiative calls students' direct involvement in alliance governance a game changer for European higher education, and also asks alliances to reach far more students (report summary).

For ECIU University the scale makes this concrete. Our 12 member universities together have about 220,000 students. In two years, the number of learners in ECIU University learning opportunities almost tripled:

	November 2024	October 2026
Individual learners	1,726	about 5,000
Participations in learning opportunities	3,304	more than 12,000

At the same time, students' attention is scarce. They combine study with work, and alliance opportunities compete with Erasmus exchanges, internships and local activities. Engagement therefore does not happen by itself; it has to be organised.

ECIU University organised it in three ways: by giving students a formal voice (section 2), by involving them in designing the alliance (section 3), and by putting structures in place that make both possible (section 4). Section 5 shares what we learned, and section 6 sets out our recommendations.

This paper focuses on students. ECIU University's companion paper, *From network to community: how ECIU University built a community across 12 universities*, describes the wider community-building approach for students, teachers, researchers, staff and partners, and also elaborates more in detail on the student community as our most developed example.

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2. Student representation: a formal voice in governance

Students are represented at every level of ECIU University, from local steering groups to the ECIU Board, through a Student Council that draws its mandate from existing student unions.

The ECIU Student Council

The Student Council was founded in October 2024 and designed together with the two student members of the ECIU Board. Within a year, it had its own statutes, regulations voted by its members, formal recognition by the ECIU Board, and a small budget of its own for an indefinite period.

1. **Membership:** one student per member university, nominated by the local student union, so the alliance builds on democratic structures students already trust.
2. **Leadership:** a presidium of a president, a vice-president and the two student Board members, elected each year at an in-person summit.
3. **Rhythm:** six meetings a year, one of them in person alongside an ECIU Board meeting, so student input reaches the Board directly.
4. **Committees:** digital and user experience, education, community, and marketing. Each gives staff working in that area a clear student contact point and opens the door to students who are not ambassadors.
5. **Local link:** Council members join local ECIU steering groups with staff and connect the student union to the local ambassadors.

Activity varies across universities, as it does in any representative body built on volunteers and annual elections. Where the local student union is closely involved, the Council's work is strongest.

Students on the ECIU Board

Next to the rectors and vice-rectors of the member universities and five external stakeholders, the ECIU Board has two student members, elected by the Student Council. We changed their term from one year, as originally planned, to two years. Experience showed that one year was not enough to understand an alliance of this complexity and contribute effectively. A student delegate also joins the group of Vice-Presidents for Education.

Representation at European level

From November 2023, we set up procedures to select, prepare and support ECIU University students for four European forums: the European Student Assembly, the European Universities Student Ambassador Forum, the European Students' Union Conference of Alliances, and the student group of the FOREU4ALL project. The procedures cover selection criteria, briefing and reporting, funding routes and communication about the participation. This connects ECIU University students to the wider debate on the future of European higher education, and brings ideas from other alliances back into ours.

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3. Co-creation: students helping design ECIU University

Students did not only give feedback on finished products; they helped decide what to build. We used three routes, each with a different depth of involvement.

Workshops and focus groups on learner guidance and user experience

The work packages on learner guidance (WP2) and user experience (WP7) ran two-day focus group workshops with learners from most member universities, starting at the University of Twente in March 2024 and continuing through 2025 and 2026. Surveys after every learning opportunity and a learner guidance survey in September 2024 added to this.

These sessions changed what we built. We had planned to personalise learner guidance by asking students to upload their CV and transcripts and to assess their own skills. In the March 2024 focus group, students made clear they did not want to share that much personal data, and that they did not need a motivation scan to feel motivated. We changed course: the next learner guidance tools are designed with students and let them decide what they share, for example through an AI assistant. Without co-creation, we would have invested in a tool few students would use.

Student ambassadors inside the work packages

Student ambassadors were embedded in the work packages with the strongest student focus: learner guidance (WP2), education (WP3), community (WP5), user experience (WP7) and communication (WP9). They joined meetings and task forces with staff, and named ambassadors sat in the user experience focus group team and the education team. Their projects fall in four areas:

Area	What ambassadors contributed
Marketing and communication	Info stands, presentations, social media content and student takeovers that reached peers in their own words
Education	Student input on the forms and content of learning opportunities
Digital experience	Direct input on the website and the Engage platform
Community and events	Task forces for the Creathons, Forums, ambassador trainings and online events

In communication, the effect was visible in the numbers: posts by and about students consistently reached more students than institutional posts.

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Student-led projects

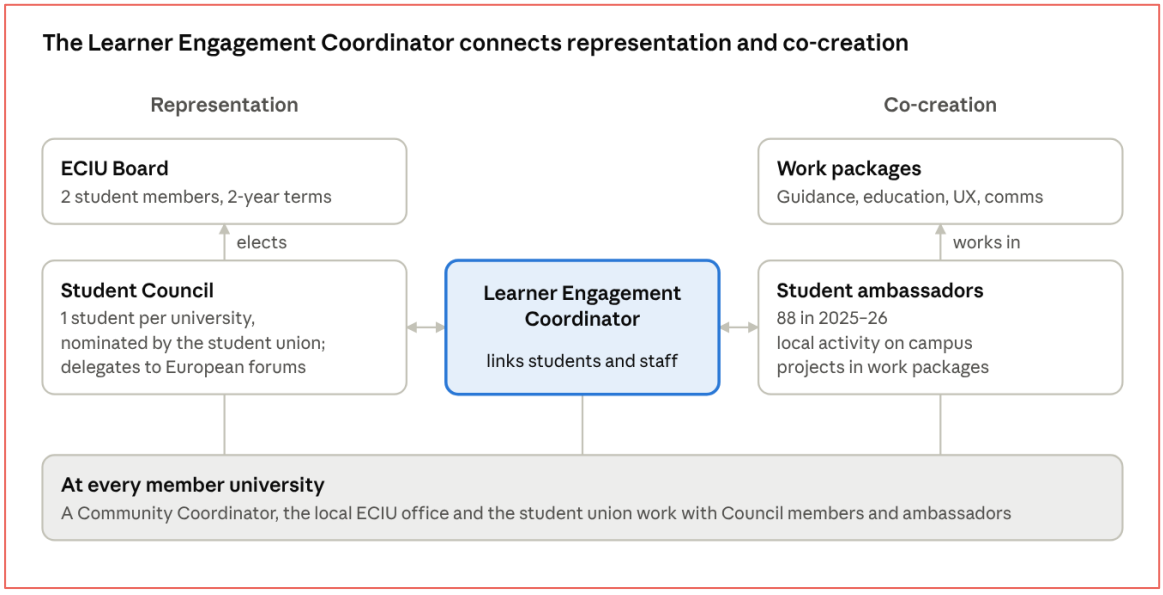
Ambassadors also ran projects of their own, with tangible results:

1. a green travel handbook to encourage sustainable travel between member universities;
2. a board game that students and staff use for team building at the start of challenge-based learning;
3. their own Europe Day celebration and ambassador merchandise;
4. formal proposals for recognising courses and micro-credentials taken through ECIU University, and for a student-led online community.

Students also sit on the selection committee of the Team Impact Award, which recognises the societal impact of challenge-based learning projects, and help shape the programme of the annual ECIU University Forum through its open call for sessions and, since 2025, by leading its Student Day (see section 4).

4. Enabling structures: what made it possible

Representation and co-creation only work when dedicated staff connect students, staff and governance, and when there are rules, training and spaces that outlast individual students. The diagram shows how the parts fit together.



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ECIU University student engagement structure, 2022–2026

The Learner Engagement Coordinator: a dedicated champion for students

ECIU University created the Learner Engagement Coordinator as a dedicated role in its central team, next to the leads for education, community building, user experience and communication. This choice signalled how much the alliance values and takes seriously its students.

The Learner Engagement Coordinator:

- designed and launched the Student Ambassador Programme and led it through three cohorts, growing it from 23 to 88 ambassadors;
- co-designed the Student Council with the student Board members, and supported it from first meeting to formal statutes;
- brought ambassadors into the work packages and organised focus groups and task forces with staff;
- set up the procedures for student participation in European forums;
- ran the ambassador trainings and the regular coordination meetings, and gradually handed their hosting to students;
- was the one person students could always reach, and the one person staff could ask what students think.

A dedicated role matters most in the early stage, when structures still need to be designed, tested and given a start. The aim is not to keep student engagement in one person's hands, but to build structures that become part of the normal way of working of the alliance and its universities. Handing the coordination meetings to student teams and anchoring the Student Council in local student unions are steps in that direction.

Community Coordinators at every university

Each member university appointed a Community Coordinator in its local ECIU office. Coordinators work with the local ambassadors, the Student Council member and the communication contact, and together form alliance-wide task forces for the Forum, Creathons, Team Impact Award and ambassador programme. They meet online every month and on site once a year. This network makes sure that what is designed centrally actually happens on each campus.

Rules written together with students

The Terms of Reference for ambassadors were written in workshops with ambassadors, Community Coordinators and the Learner Engagement Coordinator, and revised each year. They give structure to the ambassador programme: they distinguish lead and local ambassadors, describe local and alliance-wide tasks, and set out recruitment, selection and incentives. The Student Council wrote its own regulations, covering membership, elections, voting and conflict resolution. The Student Council also developed the Code of Conduct, together with ambassadors and staff, to set out and reinforce the values of ECIU University for all students.

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Training that grew with the programme:

Edition	Where	Length	Students trained
June 2024	Kaunas University of Technology, with the ECIU University Forum	1 day	19
December 2024	INSA Strasbourg	3 days	21
December 2025	Lodz University of Technology	5 days	42

The latest edition offered workshops on design thinking, leadership, pitching, intercultural communication and emotional intelligence, given by seven teachers from four member universities. Coordination meetings grew with the group too: quarterly for 23 ambassadors, monthly for 56, and every two weeks for 88.

Spaces to meet

1. **Online:** a Students' channel on Microsoft Teams with 233 members, used by ambassadors and the Student Council, and the ECIU University Agora, shared by staff and students.
2. **Creathons:** four Creathons brought together 184 students, selected from 777 applications. They were also our best recruitment route: half of the first ambassador cohort came from the 2023 edition.
3. **A Student Day at the Forum:** since 2025, the annual ECIU University Forum includes a Student Day, open to all students and led by the student ambassadors. It gives the student community a moment to reflect on the year and plan the next steps for student engagement in the alliance. More than 30 students took part in 2025 and over 50 in 2026.

5. Lessons learned

Four years of building student engagement taught us what works. Most lessons are encouraging; a few show where alliances need help from outside.

What worked

1. **A dedicated champion makes the difference, especially at the start.** Having one person whose job is to represent students enabled good intentions to be turned into structures. The Learner Engagement Coordinator kept students on the agenda of every work package and gave students one person they could always reach. The next step is to embed this work in the normal way the alliance operates.
2. **Two complementary roles.** A Student Council with a democratic mandate and ambassadors with a local, hands-on role let students engage in the way that suits them. Both give students a voice and both take action, and they work together through the Council's committees and local steering groups.

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3. **Building on student unions gives legitimacy.** Because Council members are nominated by their local student union, their voice in the alliance carries the same democratic weight as at home.
4. **Longer mandates pay off.** Two-year terms for the student Board members gave them time to understand the alliance and to contribute with authority.
5. **Co-creation prevents wasted effort and builds better products.** Listening to students early on learner guidance stopped us from building a tool students did not want.
6. **Events are the way in.** Half of our first ambassador cohort had taken part in the 2023 Creathon. Hands-on events show students what the alliance community means, and give them a reason to stay involved.
7. **Ownership grows step by step.** In the third ambassador cohort, student teams hosted their own coordination meetings and chose the topics, and ambassadors now lead the Student Day at the Forum. Clear rules, written together, made that possible.
8. **Students strengthen the whole alliance.** Ambassadors made ECIU University visible on campus and online, tested the platform, and brought new ideas into education and events.

What remains challenging

1. **Engagement depends on individuals.** Most ambassadors are volunteers, so what gets done depends on the energy and time of each student.
2. **Knowledge leaves with each cohort.** Students graduate and representatives change every year, so onboarding and handovers need deliberate attention.
3. **Recognition is unclear.** Students ask what their engagement gives them: credits, a certificate, a line on their CV. Alliances cannot answer this consistently on their own, because recognition depends on each university's and country's rules.
4. **Local anchoring varies.** Activity differs between universities, depending on local structures and how closely the student union is involved.

The first three of these share one solution: engagement that is recognised is engagement that lasts. This is the focus of our recommendations.

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6. Recommendations

Recognition is the one lever alliances cannot pull alone, and it would make student engagement across all 65 alliances more sustainable. For that we need:

1. **A common European approach to recognising engagement.** We need EU level guidance on how student representation, ambassador work and co-creation can be recognised through ECTS, the diploma supplement or Europass, so that students at all member universities of an alliance are recognised in the same way. Students themselves have asked for this, for example in the recommendations of the 2024 European Universities Student Ambassador Forum (EUSAF 2024).
2. **Equal standing for alliance representation.** National authorities and universities should treat representation in an alliance's governance the same as representation in local student bodies, for example in study flexibility, attendance rules and recognition.
3. **Student co-creation be visible in calls and reporting.** Alliances should be able to describe not only how students are represented, but how they take part in designing services and learning offers. This rewards co-creation and makes good practice easier to find.
4. **Continuous support to exchange between alliance student bodies.** Forums such as the European Universities Student Ambassador Forum, the ESU Conference of Alliances and the FOREU4ALL student group help student representatives learn from each other.

For other alliances: build the structures early

1. **Appoint a dedicated student engagement coordinator from the start,** in the central team, with a clear mandate to champion students in every work package. Use the role to set up structures that the alliance and its universities can then carry as part of their normal way of working.
2. **Offer more than one way in.** A student council anchored in student unions, with a democratic mandate, and student ambassadors with a local, hands-on role. Connect them through shared committees and local steering groups.
3. **Write the rules together with students and revisit them over time:** terms of reference, a code of conduct and clear roles, reviewed every year.
4. **Plan co-creation into the work, not after it.** Put focus groups and student task forces into each work package's plan at the design stage.
5. **Invest in training and handover,** so each new cohort starts from where the last one ended.
6. **Treat the student budget as a strategic choice.** With lump-sum funding, each alliance decides how much it invests in students. Making that choice explicitly, and protecting it, is what turns student engagement from an intention into a structure.

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