Standard Policy Brief Template

Under the UNESCO World Higher Education Conference (WHEC2022)

Section for Higher Education | Division for Education 2030

Type: One organisation ☒ | Alliance ☐

TRANSFORMATION THROUGH INTERNATIONALISATION:

THE FUTURE OF EUROPEAN AND GLOBAL HIGHER EDUCATION

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Date [14/03/2022]

Abstract

On 18 January 2022, the European Commission adopted a European Strategy for Universities and proposed a Council recommendation for building bridges for effective higher education cooperation.

In the face of the current global challenges, higher education is undergoing decisive transformations and the approach propagated by the European Commission in these policy papers is to empower and enable higher education institutions to engage in more systemic, sustainable and inclusive transnational higher education cooperation,

The sector needs to be able to move beyond xchanging students and staff to make intense transnational cooperation through joint educational programmes and joint research the norm. Importantly, however, the smaller institutions and those individuals from underrepresented backgrounds should not be left behind.

The full potential of the higher education sector to tackle global challenges such as the climate emergency but also the digital transformation can only be truly unlocked by effective transnational higher education cooperation on an institutional level.

For 35 years, Erasmus students have seen how much one can learn by engaging with peers from abroad. In 2022, the European Year of Youth, it is time to take the decisive step ahead and make transnational cooperation self-evident on the institutional level.

European Commission

Content

Transformation through internationalisation: The future of European and global higher education

New challenges for higher education

Higher education in Europe and the world is at a crossroads. In these turbulent times, the world is facing multiple simultaneous challenges, such as the ongoing global health crisis, climate change and demographic changes. The higher education sector has a key role to play in dealing with all these challenges and in shaping modern, inclusive and sustainable societies and economies. Excellent and inclusive higher education institutions are an essential condition for open, democratic, fair and sustainable societies and for sustained growth, entrepreneurship and employment.

Europe boasts a diverse and flourishing higher education sector, home to over 5 000 higher education institutions, 17.5 million higher education students, 1.35 million people teaching in higher education and 1.17 million researchers.[1] Its institutions are diverse, ranging from large research-intensive universities to institutes of technology, art schools or higher education vocational education and training institutions. Their students treasure the higher education opportunities offered to them, and the European Union is moving in the right direction in regards to gender equality and the inclusion of students with fewer opportunities.

The rapid switch to online learning during the Covid-19 pandemic has showed the adaptability and resilience of higher education institutions. At the same time, it indicated the need to transform higher education faster to be able to keep serving the needs of modern society and educate students in future-proof skills. Digital transformation is part of the many challenges our societies face today and higher education institutions experienced first-hand the work that still needs to be done in this regard. In the digital sphere as well as in other areas, the COVID-19 crisis has shown the need and demands for internationalisation and the capacities of higher education institutions to innovate in their international activities.[2]

A decidedly open and transnational outlook is what makes higher education and European higher education in particular, unique. According to UNESCO, today up to 5.3 million students pursue their higher education abroad.[3] The emblematic Erasmus+ programme plays a significant role in student mobility worldwide, sending almost 350 000 learners abroad in 2018-2019, the all-time high before the pandemic, both to EU member states and third countries associated to the Programme as well as third countries not associated to the Programme.[4] In 2018, around 5% of all graduates in higher education students in Europe had participated in an Erasmus+ exchange.[5]

2022 marks the celebration of 35 years of life-changing transnational experiences for more than 12.5 million young learners, lifelong learners, and academic staff through the Erasmus+ programme. Engaging with learners and teachers from all over the world benefits all and is crucial to rise up to the pressing issues of our times together. Studying abroad enriches lives and opens minds. With the first generation of European top-level political leaders who participated in Erasmus, the impact of the Programme can hardly be overestimated.

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[1] Eurostat, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Tertiary_education_statistics; https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/tsc00003/default/table?lang=en.

[2] For example: https://nesetweb.eu/en/resources/library/the-impact-of-covid-19-on-higher-education-a-review-of-emerging-evidence/, chapter 4.

[3] Global Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education (unesco.org)

[4] Erasmus+ internal data tools. For the most recent statistical information concerning the Erasmus+ programmee see: Erasmus+ annual report 2020 - Publications Office of the EU (europa.eu)

[5] Erasmus+ internal data tools.

Moving transnational cooperation beyond mobility

However, European higher education cooperation is more than Erasmus+ mobility. The future of higher education asks for deeper transnational cooperation than mobility projects alone.The higher education sector is transforming rapidly and European initiatives to boost transnational cooperation between higher education institutions play a crucial role. Mobility should be complemented by deepened and systemic higher education cooperation that transforms the way we learn and acquire skills and that is a motor for innovation and solving global challenges.

Transnational cooperation benefits not only students on an individual level, but helps the entire higher education sector move forward. The Incheon Declaration and Framework for Action for the implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 4, adopted during the World Education Forum in 2015, promised by 2030 to "strengthen international cooperation in developing cross-border tertiary and university education and research programmes, including within the framework of global and regional conventions on the recognition of higher education qualifications, to support increased access, better quality assurance and capacity development."[6]

The European Union has embraced this impetus wholeheartedly. Building on past achievements under the Bologna Process and the Erasmus+ programme, the European Union is working towards realising a European Education Area by 2025. For higher education, the European Education Area envisages closer and deeper transnational cooperation between higher education institutions, excellent joint teaching and learning possibilities, mobility opportunities for all and full and automatic recognition of study qualifications abroad.

Mobility alone is not enough. Since the Incheon Declaration, the European Union has moved towards embedding mobility into a framework of highly transformative models of international cooperation. It is boosting more systemic and sustainable forms of higher education cooperation, including pooling joint resources into inter-campus environments and joint education and research activities and programmes.

To further these aims, the European Union has launched, among other things, the European Universities initiative in 2017.[7] Moreover, it adopted a Council recommendation on promoting automatic mutual recognition of qualifications and learning periods abroad in 2018.[8] Together with the UNESCO Global Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications Concerning Higher Education, this should facilitate international academic mobility of students and staff and the fair, transparent and non-discriminatory evaluation of their qualifications.[9] The results of both developments and the implementation of different recognition, transparency and quality assurance tolos as part of the Bologna Process has yielded many positive results so far.

The European Universities initiative aims at building transnational alliances of higher education institutions in Europe, developing universities of the future by deepened systemic and sustainable cooperation between the institutions. European Universities should evolve into inter-university campuses, offering modern, high quality and flexible curricula and study opportunities to participants from all study levels and fields.

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[6] Education 2030: Incheon Declaration and Framework for Action for the implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 4: Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all - UNESCO Digital Library, p. 42.

[7] European Universities Initiative | European Education Area (europa.eu);

[8] EUR-Lex - 32018H1210(01) - EN - EUR-Lex (europa.eu)

[9] https://en.unesco.org/themes/higher-education/recognition-qualifications/global-convention

Much work remains to be done. Administrative and legal issues are still seen as the top barriers to transnational cooperation.[10] Higher education institutions are bound by their national frameworks for financing, infrastructure, accreditation, quality assurance and employment aspects: 68% of European higher education institutions see legal challenges impeding their involvement in the European Universities initiative and 59% cite administrative obstacles hindering transnational cooperation.[11]

These obstacles include the pooling and sharing of infrastructure, staff and resources, with reports showing that only 8% of transnational partnerships have the opportunity to share their assets, whereas many others lack a legal basis.[12] Joint programmes and joint degrees often face accreditation problems in Member States and signal challenges related to quality assurance and recognition of joint programmes.[13] These barriers to transnational cooperation, combined with insufficient sustainable funding and the lack of structurally embedded mobility in students' curricula, impede the transformation of higher education to face up to society's current challenges.

Transforming higher education through transnational cooperation

The European Union believes that deeper transnational cooperation is key to help higher education institutions transform and lead the way in the world's ecological, digital and demographic transitions. Institutions work better if they work together and leverage each other's strengths. Studying abroad enriches lives and opens minds on the individual level, but systemic international cooperation goes even further. It delivers the cutting-edge research required to solve today's challenges and educates young people to flourish in a globalised society.

This idea, transforming higher education through transnational cooperation, is at the heart of the European Strategy for Universities.[14] The European Commission published this strategic document, outlining the vision for European higher education for the years to come, jointly with a proposal for a Council recommendation on building bridges for effective European higher education cooperation on 18 January 2022.[15] It builds on the needs expressed by the European higher education sector itself: 92% of higher education issues raised the elimination of legal and administrative barriers to transnational cooperation partnerships as a key issue.[16] Moreover, 93% of respondents to a 2018 Eurobarometer surveys thought it would be useful to create European degrees delivered by alliances of European universities which would offer students the chance to study in different European countries, with a flexible choice of courses or modules.[17]

The European Strategy for Universities and the accompanying Council recommendation address the needs of the higher education sector on the institutional level. They propose a framework for action to let European higher education institutions keep up with a rapidly changing society and labour market. With excellence and inclusion as foundation stones of effective higher

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[10] Mapping of European transnational collaborative partnerships in higher education - Publications Office of the EU (europa.eu)

[11] https://eua.eu/downloads/publications/eua%20council%20position%20on%20future%20of%20eui.pdf

[12] https://eua.eu/downloads/publications/eua%20council%20position%20on%20future%20of%20eui.pdf

[13] https://www.nvao.net/nl/attachments/view/background%20paper%20for%20the%20euniq%20workshop-rome

[14] Commission Communication on a European strategy for universities | European Education Area (europa.eu)

[15] Proposal for a Council Recommendation on building bridges for effective European higher education cooperation | European Education Area (europa.eu)

[16] European University Association (EUA) (2020), Publications (eua.eu), p 26.

[17] Eurobarometer (2018): https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2186.

education, the European Commission proposes to work in collaboration with the European Union Member States towards four key objectives:

- To strengthen the European dimension in higher education and research, implementing flagship initiatives for transnational cooperation between higher education institutions
- To support universities as lighthouses of a European way of life through their trifold focus on quality and relevance, diversity and inclusion and democratic principles, fundamental rights and academic freedom
- To empower universities as actors of change in the twin green and digital transitions, equipping learners and staff with green and digital skills and develop digital and green solutions through innovation
- To reinforce universities as drivers of the EU's global role and leadership, becoming more outward looking on the global scene and strengthening higher education systems in third countries

Although the European Strategy for Universities aims to be comprehensive across all missions of higher education, tackling issues related to inclusion, innovation and values, the transnational dimension is the guiding principle from which all other initiatives depart. In the vision of the European Commission, transnational cooperation is what makes effective reactions to global society's challenges possible. Hence, it proposes four key flagships particularly aimed at strengthening this transnational dimension:

- The European universities initiative will be scaled up to 60 alliances involving more than 500 universities by mid-2024
- The European Commission will work towards a legal status for alliances of European higher education institutions by 2024
- The European Commission will explore options towards a joint European degree by mid-2024
- The European Student Card initiative will be scaled up by the deployment of a unique European Student Identifier to all mobile students in 2022 and all university students in Europe by mid-2024

Alongside these flagship initiatives, the European Strategy for Universities proposes a whole set of other initiatives, ranging from boosting Erasmus+ traineeships through supporting access to higher education of refugees to from proposing guiding principles on protecting fundamental academic values and supporting Higher Education Climate Frontrunners. By unlocking more funding from both national and European funding sources and monitoring higher education data through a European Higher Education Sector Observatory, the European Commission hopes to realise these ambitious plans in the coming years. It will be a collaborative effort between European, national and local levels and it will be implemented in close synergy with the European Research Area (ERA) and the European Higher Education Area (EHEA).

Working towards Sustainable Development Goal 4

The transnational dimension of the fresh European higher education efforts is not only a European dimension. The manifold objectives and actions of the European Strategy for Universities resonate with the priorities set for higher education by UNESCO on a global scale

and commit fully to the vision expressed in the fourth Sustainable Development Goal to "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all".[18]

It has already been mentioned that the transnational focus of European higher education is well in alignment with the fourth Sustainable Development Goal's focus on transnational cooperation. The text of the Incheon declaration highlights specifically the need to work together towards international education and research programmes. This is especially relevant in relation to the European higher education policy package. With the upscaling of the European Universities initiative and the experimentation of a joint European degree, joint transnational programmes are at the heart of the European effort. Not only do they encourage institutions to pool their resources and expertise and embed mobility inside their study programmes, but they are also a way to promote the inclusive, digital and green approaches to higher education that are so desired at the moment.

On a global scale, it is the equal access to higher education for everyone that counts. Europe can pride itself on easy and inclusive access to higher education, but more work lies ahead. In line with the Social Dimension of the European Higher Education Area, the European Strategy for Universities commits to the inclusion of students from underrepresented groups.[19] The new Erasmus+ programme for higher education has already expanded the opportunities for students with fewer opportunities to receive additional funding.[20]

In addition, a new diversity and inclusion framework will be set up in collaboration with the Member States. Actions to foster gender equality are enhanced: In Europe, female students are generally overrepresented in studies, but underrepresented in STEM fields. On an institutional level, as highlighted in the 2020 Global Education Monitoring Report, women often face obstacles in reaching higher education governance bodies and senior academic positions.[21] In its inclusion actions, the European Strategy for Universities builds on the Principles and Guidelines to Strengthen the Social Dimension of Higher Education in the EHEA of the 2020 Rome Communiqué.[22]

The European approach to inclusion embraces the concept of inclusive excellence, which posits that attention and funding should be distributed not only to large research-intensive universities, but also to small and locally rooted institutions of any kind, so that learners and staff from underpriviliged communities are targeted.[23] The transnational dimension of the European Strategy for Universities will in this way be a means to increase access to transformative education and mobility for students of every type of institution in every region across Europe. The European experience with underrepresentation of certain groups on an institutional level shows that it is time to ensure that inclusion is not only to be encouraged on the level of the individual student, but requires a systemic effort.

European inclusive excellence can thus regionalise higher education in the sense that it reaches out to local communities to participate in European internationalisation efforts. Promoting geographical balance and access to education in rural and outermost areas, the European Union ensures a geographical spread of learning and research opportunities. The lessons learned in this process will also be useful to connect to other parts of the world, in particular to the Global South.

The European Strategy for Universities connects to the UNESCO education actions for refugees and migrants, most notably the UNESCO qualifications passport for refugees and vulnerable

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[18] https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000245656/PDF/245656eng.pdf.multi, p. 7.

[19] Rome_Ministerial_Communique_Annex_II.pdf (ehea.info).

[20] Erasmus+ Programme Guide | Erasmus+ (europa.eu).

[21] 373718eng.pdf (unesco.org), p. 240.

[22] European Higher Education Area and Bologna Process (ehea.info).

[23] Based on: CPU-HRK-KRASP_Living_Up_to_the_Significance_of_Universities_CZ_SVN_SVK.pdf.

migrants.[24] Different Erasmus+ funded projects, cooperation partnerships and mobility actions are working on the topic. [25] Moreover, it is a priority of the discussions in the EHEA, in line with the 2017 Recommendation of the Lisbon Recognition Convention Committee.[26] The ongoing work on recognition provides a way forward to inclusion of migrants and refugees in higher education. It shows again how Europe's experiences with internationalising higher education spill over to all missions of higher education.

European and global higher education go hand in hand

The European Strategy for Universities marks the global role of European higher education as one of its four strategic objectives. Transnational cooperation at home encourages international cooperation on a global scale. The Erasmus+ programme is inclusive to actors in third countries not associated to the Programme, both in its mobility projects and in the international dimension of many of its Key Action 2 cooperation partnerships and European University alliances. Additionally, the research dimension of higher education was underscored last year by the adoption of Council conclusions on the Global approach to Research and Innovation.[27]

The concurrence of internationalisation and regionalisation of European higher education makes it a pacesetter for higher education cooperation all over the globe. Europe currently attracts 45% of all the international students worldwide.[28] In 2018, more than 1.3 million foreign students undertook higher education in one of 27 EU Member States with large shares of students coming from Asia and Africa.[29] Through Erasmus+ international mobility and the Erasmus Mundus and the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions, opportunities are created for students from all over the world to engage in international higher education.

The global dimension of European higher education should not embrace a top-down approach. Rather than using European internationalisation strategies as a one-size-fits-all model, it should serve as a starting point for policy dialogues on a global scale, such as the AU-EU High Level Policy Dialogue on Science, Technology and Innovation.[30] In EU-Africa relations, education and research play a central rule, fully in line with SDG 4.[31]

European global higher education relations take place in many different fora. Since 2015, the EU has funded the Support to Higher Education in the ASEAN Region (SHARE) programme, targeting strengthened regional academic cooperation in Asia, while at the same time enhancing the quality and competitiveness of higher education.[32] On a smaller scale, Erasmus+ funded around 900 capacity building projects for higher education between 2014 and 2020, mainly in Neighbourhood regions, Asia, Africa and Latin America.[33] The aim of this type of co-creative peer-learning partnerships is to use existing European internationalisation practices without losing sight of particular local contexts.

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[24] UNESCO qualifications passport for refugees and vulnerable migrants.

[25] inHERE-GPC_en.PDF.pdf (inhereproject.eu).

[26] Recommendation on Recognition of Qualifications Held by Refugees Displaced Persons and Persons in a Refugee_like_Situation (enic-naric.net).

[27] Council agrees on a global approach to research and innovation - Consilium (europa.eu).

[28] https://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/international-cooperation/making-eu-more-attractive-foreign-students_en#:%7E:text=Europe%20currently%20attracts%2045%25%20of%20all%20international%20students,world.%20How%20the%20Commission%20promotes%20European%20higher%20education.

[29] Eurostat, Statistics | Eurostat (europa.eu).

[30] EU-Africa cooperation in research and innovation | European Commission (europa.eu).

[31] communication-eu-africa-strategy-join-2020-4-final_en.pdf (europa.eu).

[32] About Share | SHARE EU ASEAN | EUROPEAN UNION SUPPORT TO HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE ASEAN REGION (share-asean.eu).

[33] Erasmus+ internal statistics, see for project results: Search | Erasmus+ (europa.eu).

In many ways, the groundwork for effective global higher education cooperation is already in place. The European Commission, UNESCO and OECD jointly collect education statistics, and participate in meetings of each other's governance bodies.[34] As with the synergies between the European Education Area, the European Research Area and the European Higher Education Area, more work remains to be done to bring this cooperation to a structural and sustainable level.

Transnational higher education solving global challenges

Through the global dimension of European higher education, Europe can boost its effort to solve global problems, building on the knowledge and expertise of its education and research institutions. Target 4.7 of the Incheon Declaration and Framework for Action for the implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 4 points in this direction. Higher education, like other forms of education, should "ensure that all learners acquire knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture's contribution to sustainable development."[35]

Education for sustainable development encompasses individual transformative action, structural changes in institutions and society, and solutions for the technological future.[36] The European approach to internationalising higher education speaks to all three domains.

This becomes apparent if we take the climate emergency as an example. On an individual level, the European Union supports learning for environmental sustainability with a recent proposal for a Council recommendation that will promote acquiring of sustainability competences and skills by children, youth and adults, for which close cooperation with UNESCO is foreseen.[37] Interdisciplinary learning from a challenge-based approach is key in this regard. It is in a context of international cooperation that this is best achieved.

On an institutional and societal level, institutions can learn from each other on how to develop sustainability in their campuses. In a 2021 report by the European University Association, 64% of surveyed institutions have whole-institutional programmes in place for greening activities.[38] For this, both the Erasmus+ programme implementation through the principles of the Erasmus Charter for Higher Education as the European University alliances form perfect platforms to exchange.[39] Furthermore, interaction with the local innovation ecosystem, including local businesses and civil society organisations will be essential to exchange knowledge and resources.

From this stems that it is obvious that support for technological solutions to the climate emergency should result from bringing actors together or encouraging higher education

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[34] Education statistics - UOE (UNESCO-UIS / OECD / EUROSTAT) data collection | CROS (europa.eu)
[35] Education 2030: Incheon Declaration and Framework for Action for the implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 4: Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all - UNESCO Digital Library, p. 48.
[36]Implementation of education for sustainable development in the framework of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development : note / by the Secretary-General, Implementation of education for sustainable development in the framework of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development : (un.org), p. 15.
[37] Learning for environmental sustainability | European Education Area (europa.eu).
[38] EUA (2021), Publications (eua.eu).
[39] Erasmus Charter for Higher Education | Erasmus+ (europa.eu).

institutions to do so through funding research projects. Initiatives such as the European Institute of Innovation Technology (EIT) and its European Battery Alliance, are examples hereof.[40]

These three domains, the individual, the institutional-societal and the technological, are easily transposed to other global domains of action, be it the digital transition or the global health crisis. What stays constant in all domains is the direct need to approach the challenges in each dimension through increased international higher education cooperation.

Higher education as driver for change

The next step towards a higher education of the future is deeper and transformative international higher education cooperation on a systemic and sustainable level. With the launch of the new European Strategy for Universities, the European Commission sets an example of what more effective higher education cooperation could look like. The focus on intercampus environments, embedded mobility and joint programmes, combined with encouragements and incentives to pool resources and expertise will lead to even more meaningful international study and work experiences for everyone in the higher education sector.

The relatively advanced state of the European higher education sector should be open and accessible to everyone. Sustainable Development Goal 4 should not be lost from sight. The European Union adopts a new approach to inclusion in higher education, embracing inclusive excellence to realise a whole-institutional approach to inclusion that will change inclusion practices on a systemic level. Ensuring geographical diversity, the European experience with recognition, quality assurance and accreditation issues is informing regional cooperation and integration on a global scale.

Rather than competing in a rat race for talent and resources, higher education institutions should use their internationalisation experiences to address global challenges. The health crisis, by putting the spotlight on both the great added value of joint medical research as well as on the obstacles to efficient digital education, underlines the need for higher education to work together to develop common solutions also to other global challenges such as climate change. Higher education institutions are drivers of change.

For 35 years, Erasmus students have seen how much one can learn by engaging with peers from abroad. In 2022, the European Year of Youth, it is time to take the decisive step ahead and make transnational cooperation self-evident on the institutional level.

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[40] European Institute of Innovation & Technology (EIT) (europa.eu).