

THE EUROPEAN HIGHER EDUCATION ALLIANCES: THE CHALLENGES OF TRANSNATIONAL UNIVERSITY COOPERATION

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Abstract

The European Higher Education Area has paved the way for a more inclusive and accessible education by facilitating the mobility of teachers and students among universities adhering to the Bologna Process framework. At the 2017 Gothenburg Summit, a further step was taken. Since then, the European Commission has promoted the creation of European University Alliances aimed at improving the quality of higher education through long-term cooperation projects among institutions in the member states. In this context, the European Strategy for Universities was presented in 2022, with four objectives: to strengthen the European dimension of higher education, to consolidate universities as promoters of the European way of life, to make universities key agents of change in the ecological and digital transition, and to position universities as global leaders representing the EU. Achieving these goals undoubtedly requires overcoming significant challenges, including funding, the establishment of joint European degrees, the creation of a legal status for alliances, and international mobility, among others. Therefore, this article will address the current characteristics of higher education, considering not only the common objectives shared by the universities that form the alliances but also the challenges they face in this new phase where joint degrees are being implemented.

Keywords

European Higher Education Alliances, Transnational University Cooperation, Bologna Process, Labor Competitiveness, Educational Mobility.



Resumo

A consolidação do Espaço Europeu do Ensino Superior constituiu um marco fundamental na promoção de uma educação mais inclusiva, acessível e integrada, favorecendo a mobilidade de docentes e estudantes entre instituições universitárias aderentes ao quadro definido pelo Processo de Bolonha. A Cimeira de Gotemburgo, realizada em 2017, representou um avanço adicional neste percurso, ao estabelecer novas diretrizes para o fortalecimento da cooperação no ensino superior a nível europeu. Desde então, a Comissão Europeia tem incentivado a criação de Alianças Universitárias Europeias com o objetivo de elevar a qualidade do ensino superior, através de projetos de cooperação estratégica e sustentada entre instituições europeias de ensino superior. Neste quadro, foi apresentada, em 2022, a Estratégia Europeia para as Universidades, centrada em quatro objetivos estruturantes: (1) reforçar a dimensão europeia do ensino superior; (2) consolidar o papel das universidades enquanto promotoras dos valores e do modo de vida europeus; (3) posicionar as universidades como agentes catalisadores da transição ecológica e digital; e (4) afirmar as instituições de ensino superior como líderes globais representativas da União Europeia. A concretização destes objetivos implica, inevitavelmente, a superação de diversos desafios de natureza estrutural, jurídica e financeira. Entre os mais prementes destacam-se o financiamento sustentável das iniciativas, a implementação de diplomas conjuntos europeus, a criação de um estatuto jurídico próprio para as alianças universitárias e a facilitação da mobilidade internacional de estudantes e profissionais do ensino. O presente artigo propõe-se, assim, a analisar as características atuais do ensino superior europeu, com especial enfoque nos objetivos comuns definidos pelas universidades participantes nas alianças e nos obstáculos que enfrentam na implementação desta nova fase de integração académica, particularmente no que se refere ao desenvolvimento e reconhecimento de diplomas conjuntos no espaço europeu.

Palavras-chave

Alianças Europeias De Ensino Superior, Cooperação Universitária Transnacional, Processo de Bolonha, Competitividade Laboral, Mobilidade Educativa.

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THE EUROPEAN HIGHER EDUCATION ALLIANCES: THE CHALLENGES OF TRANSNATIONAL UNIVERSITY COOPERATION RESEARCH

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Introduction

The European Commission has been promoting the creation of European University Alliances since 2017, with the fundamental goal of improving educational quality, enhancing the competitiveness of universities, and increasing the mobility of the entire university community. Cooperation has become a key axis for adapting educational offerings to the changes experienced by international society, thereby fostering the employability of young people and promoting European values and identity.

The European Universities initiative was proposed by the Commission before the Gothenburg Social Summit in November 2017, with the idea of creating a European Education Area, with a timeline for implementation extending until 2025. Days later, in the conclusions of the European Council on December 14 of that year, various proposals were promoted, one of which was to "strengthen strategic partnerships between higher education institutions throughout the EU," thereby promoting university networks (Chaves, 2022). While considerable progress has been made in student mobility through the Erasmus+ program, it was deemed necessary to take an additional step towards achieving the Europeanization of university degrees.

In a context where the European Alliances for Higher Education must face significant difficulties in achieving their objectives, it is worth asking what are the conditions that the European Alliances for Higher Education face? Are the European Alliances prepared to offer joint degrees? What challenges do European universities face in achieving institutionalized cooperation? From a methodological standpoint, this article represents a qualitative and exploratory investigation of the current situation, starting from the most immediate past, in relation to the actions of the European Union in higher education and looking ahead to 2024 with the achievements made. Additionally, the role of the European Education Alliances and their challenges in improving educational quality and the mobility of students and professors will be analyzed, which should undoubtedly lead to better preparation to tackle the current and future challenges of the European labor market.



Therefore, it is necessary to consider the evolution of university policy in the current context. The first part of this article provides an overview of the Bologna Process, from its implementation to the present day. The second part presents a panorama that analyzes what the European Strategy for Universities of 2022 has meant for higher education. The third part of the article addresses the emergence of the European Alliances for Higher Education; the fourth part presents the current challenges that European higher education must face, and finally, some conclusions.

1. The Bologna Process. The European Higher Education Area

The beginning of a process of change and transformation in European universities started to take shape in 1998 with the Sorbonne Declaration¹, signed by the ministers representing France, Germany, Italy, and the United Kingdom. This declaration was inspired by the Magna Charta Universitatum (Observatory Magna Charta Universitatum)², adopted in Bologna ten years earlier. Its objective was to promote a European Higher Education Area (EHEA), deepening and expanding the path initiated by the Erasmus+ program, which from its inception has fostered student and staff mobility.

The following year would be key to this achievement: in June 1999, twenty-nine European representatives of education and science signed the Bologna Declaration³, titled "The Europe of Knowledge", to promote the convergence of national systems, thus giving rise to the creation of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA)⁴, with a clearly pan-European vocation. The Declaration, with a marked political or programmatic character, outlined a series of objectives (international competitiveness, mobility, and employability) and instruments⁵ to achieve them, setting the year 2010 as the target date for the construction of this area. Undoubtedly, this document, although it did not establish legally binding commitments, was the starting point of a profound educational reform to which states have had to adapt, a transformation that still continues. Since then, 49 countries have joined this construction, whose benefits are shared by students,

¹ Joint Declaration for the harmonization of the design of the European Higher Education System, 25 May 1998, in <https://ehea.info/page-ministerial-declarations-and-communiqués> (accessed 28 January 2025).

² Signed by 400 rectors of European universities.

³ Joint Declaration of the European Ministers of Education meeting in Bologna on 19 June 1999, in http://www.eees.es/pdf/Bologna_ES.pdf (accessed 31 January 2025).

⁴ The Member States of the EHEA are, in chronological order, since 1999: Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland and the United Kingdom; since 2001: Croatia, Cyprus, Liechtenstein and Turkey; since 2003: Albania, Andorra, Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Holy See, the Russian See, Serbia and the Republic of Macedonia; since 2005: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine; Montenegro (2007), Kazakhstan (2010) and Belarus (2015), the Republic of San Marino (2020). The Principality of Monaco is the only member of the Council of Europe that has not been integrated into the EHEA. Other States or territories have applied to join the Bologna Process, but their candidacy has been rejected; namely, Israel, Kyrgyzstan, Kosovo and the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus. Due to the war between Ukraine and Russia, at the meeting held in Strasbourg in April 2022, it was decided to suspend all representation rights of the Russian Federation and Belarus, see: https://ehea.info/page-full_members (accessed 26 January 2025).

⁵ The instruments cover six aspects: adopting a transparent system of comparable grades; following a system essentially based on two main cycles (undergraduate and postgraduate); developing the European Credit System (ECTS); promote mobility; to promote European cooperation for the assurance of academic quality; and to promote the European dimension in the university curriculum (Rodríguez Rodríguez, 2018).



academics, technical, management and administrative staff, higher education institutions themselves, and society at large.

In successive meetings—Prague (2001), Berlin (2003), Bergen (2005), London (2007), Louvain-la-Neuve (2009), Budapest and Vienna (2010), Bucharest (2012), Yerevan (2015), Paris (2018), Rome (2020), and Tirana (2024)—significant progress has been made in this process, although the path has not been easy. National and academic-institutional resistance makes the process even more complex. It is important to remember that "education is closely linked to issues of national, cultural, and linguistic identity, and is crucial in responding to social needs and the demands of the economic and productive system" (Valle, 2006, p. 263), in addition to presenting difficulties arising from the structural changes necessary to implement methodologies based on student self-learning (Delgado Martínez, 2019). In this sense, it is essential to consider that these new methodologies must combine theoretical knowledge with the acquisition of skills, where both teacher and student participation are fundamental (Calvo & Mingorance-Arnáiz, 2009).

The Bologna Process cannot be understood without recognizing its connection to two major vectors of change that occurred in society at the end of the 20th century. The first vector is related to economic, political, technological, social, and cultural transformation; the second, to the expansion of the European Union and the emergence of European citizenship. Therefore:

"Bologna becomes comprehensible in the transition from the 'modern' society to the 'knowledge' society, taking both concepts—modernity and knowledge society—as synthesis-concepts, to describe in one case the society resulting from the combined action of the Enlightenment, the Industrial Revolution, and the Liberal Political Revolutions, and in the other, the society shaped at the end of the 20th century by the combined effect of various processes" (Bajo Santos, 2010, p. 434).

At the core of this process lies the idea that university must be the driving force behind research and innovation and therefore must undergo the necessary changes to adapt to new times in which quality and excellence enable future professionals to develop the skills needed to perform in a globalized world that is completely different from that of the 20th century.

Therefore, the Bologna Process requires, among other things, that European universities strive to adapt not only from an academic-curricular perspective but also structurally, as without this, its goals cannot converge. The curricular adaptation required universities to adopt a three-cycle structure, with widespread use of the ECTS (European Credit Transfer System)⁶. Although this system existed long before the Bologna Process—as it allowed for student mobility and the validation and equivalency of studies within the Erasmus

⁶ European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS). A unit of measurement of study or work and of the competences or learning outcomes acquired. The ECTS is based on the student's effort (not only the hours of face-to-face classes are counted, but also the necessary time to be dedicated to the preparation of practical tests or, where appropriate, laboratory, readings or partial and final exams). It was implemented in 2010, although the "ECTS User Guide" was approved at the Yerevan Conference (Armenia) in 2015, becoming the reference document. In this sense, each ECTS would correspond to 25 hours of student dedication, of which only 10 would be face-to-face.



program—its implementation has been one of the most important reforms adopted by universities. The widespread use of ECTS has led to educational harmonization, removing obstacles to the recognition of studies, facilitating the comparability of education systems, and paving the way for what was still to come: the European Degree.

This transformation would become a fundamental pillar not only to facilitate the recognition of studies between universities, but also for the new design of curricula, as it became a precondition for their structure. This unit of measurement (ECTS) also introduced an innovation in the recognition of teaching work, as it began to account not only for classroom teaching hours, but also for the time a professor dedicates to preparing, organizing, guiding, and supervising students' work outside the classroom. As a result, this change in the unit of measurement inevitably led to the adoption of a new educational model, centered on self-directed learning and student activities, as well as on independent work to achieve learning outcomes, rather than on content and the number of hours taught by instructors.

It was at the ministerial meeting in Bergen⁷, in 2005, that the generic descriptors for the key levels of the EHEA were adopted: Bachelor's degree (replacing the traditional "licenciatura"), Master's degree (with variations like "Maestría" or "Magister"), and the Doctorate. The Bachelor's degree, depending on the country, could have a duration of three years (180 ECTS) or four years (240 ECTS). The Master's degree required at least 60 ECTS, typically ranging between 60 and 120 ECTS, and could have three orientations: academic specialization, professional training, or initiation to research. To get a Doctorate, a student must have completed 300 ECTS, of which at least 60 must come from a Master's program (Valle, 2006).

Likewise, one of the principal issues addressed in the various meetings is the need to adopt common quality standards. In this regard, it becomes clear that to advance the EHEA, it is necessary to adopt "common criteria for evaluation, accreditation of studies, and mutual recognition" (García Gallego & Blanco Alonso, 2007). In the year 2000, the European Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) was established. Just a year later, at the Prague meeting (2001), a call was made for universities, other higher education institutions, national agencies, and the ENQA⁸ to collaborate in the design of a common reference framework (Rodríguez Rodríguez, 2018).

At the Bergen meeting, the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) were officially approved. Since then, considerable progress has been made in this area, but it was still considered necessary to "improve their clarity, applicability, usefulness, and scope" (Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG), 2015, p. 5). With this aim, in 2012, the E4 Group (ENQA, ESU, EUA, EURASHE), in cooperation with Education International (EI), BUSINESSEUROPE, and the European Quality Assurance Register for

⁷ The European Higher Education Area-Achieving the goals. Communiqué of the Conference of European Ministers responsible for Higher Education. Bergen, 19–20 May 2005, accessed in http://www.aneca.es/content/download/12230/142160/file/7.Comunicado_Bergen_2005.pdf (accessed 17 March 2025).

⁸ The EUA (European University Association), the EURASHE (European Association of Institutions in Higher Education) and the ESIB (since 2007 ESU, European Students Union) will also participate.



Higher Education (EQAR), was invited to prepare a proposal for the revision of the ESG (Ferreira, 2019).

As a result of the recommendations presented, during the Erevan meeting in 2015, the Ministers of Higher Education approved the revised ESG⁹, which were the result of a reflective process, and a public consultation carried out throughout the European Higher Education Area. This document, containing the quality assurance criteria, has become the reference tool for universities and quality assurance agencies. Among its key objectives are: establishing a common framework to ensure quality in teaching and learning; providing transparent information on the quality of higher education; and promoting mutual trust to facilitate recognition of credits and international mobility. Undoubtedly, implementing quality assurance is considered one of the core commitments of the Bologna Process. During this same conference, the "ECTS Users' Guide" was also adopted as an official EHEA document, replacing previous versions that had been used unofficially and were never formally approved by any Ministerial Conference. Thus, it became a legitimized reference document, especially as it aims to promote the correct implementation of learning outcomes.

Paris hosted the next Conference of Ministers responsible for higher education on May 24–25, 2018. In it, the key commitments underpinning the EHEA were examined. In addition, the creation of three thematic working groups was approved, which between the years 2018 and 2020 were to address the following issues: the development of national qualification frameworks, compatible with the overarching qualifications framework in the EHEA; compliance with the Lisbon Recognition Convention; and the strengthening of quality, in accordance with the ESG in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA, 2018).

At the 2020 Ministers' Conference, held in Rome, there was a reflection on the progress made in the 21 years since the approval of the Bologna Declaration, but also the work lines for the following years were set, with 2030 on the horizon. This Conference was an opportunity to strengthen cooperation among member countries. As a result of this meeting, some commitments were adopted:

"to provide opportunities and support inclusive and equitable education for all people; to reinforce social inclusion and quality by leveraging the opportunities offered by technology; to protect and promote research, innovation, and knowledge transfer in all areas; and to promote student mobility and strengthen the Erasmus program, aiming to ensure that at least 20% of students completing their studies within the EHEA have had a learning or internship experience abroad, among others" (EHEA, 2020).

And finally, in May 2024, Tirana hosted what is, so far, the latest meeting held by the Ministers of Higher Education of Europe. Among the commitments adopted for the following three years, the following stand out: to make the EHEA an inclusive and interconnected space; the reaffirmation of the commitment to academic freedom, integrity, and institutional autonomy; to develop and publish action plans to address the

⁹ To check the changes, see Comparative Analysis of the ESG 2015 and ESG 2005 in ENQA, 2016, <https://www.enqa.eu/publications/comparative-analysis-of-the-esg-2015-and-esg-2005/> (accessed 25 March 2025).



implementation issues of the Bologna Process and promote knowledge exchange; to update the ECTS Users' Guide and the ESG to reflect current developments and improve quality assurance; to promote flexible, quality-assured, and recognized learning pathways, including micro-credentials; to ensure the responsible use of AI in education and research; to allow hybrid mobility and virtual exchanges; to make automatic recognition of qualifications and periods of study abroad a reality; to ensure proper monitoring of political commitments and plan future priorities of the EHEA; to adopt the new Rules of Procedure for the EHEA and assess the feasibility of an independent secretariat to permanently support the Bologna Process Secretariat and the Bologna Follow-Up Group (BFUG) (Torres, 2024).

Throughout this process, the support of the European Union has been fundamental, in understanding that the rapid and profound changes currently taking place in society require universities for societies to become more open, democratic, just, and sustainable. That is why it continues to advance in university cooperation. Thus, in 2022, the European Strategy for Universities was approved (European Commission, 2022a), which aims to give continuity to the changes experienced by higher education and to promote further progress.

2. The European Strategy for Universities (2022)

Although universities have led this change to implement the Bologna Process, the support of other collaborating institutions and political actors who have driven this modernization and adaptation has been decisive (Alexiadou & Rambla, 2023). The creation of the EHEA cannot be understood apart from the very process of European integration. Although this process is not exclusive to EU member countries, as has already been established, it has been the European institutions that have driven the modernization of universities, considering research and innovation as key issues for generating economic growth, employment, and social cohesion. Regarding the latter, the fact that educational achievements are closely linked to employment and employability might suggest that European education policies have been vulnerable to their "capture" (Antunes, 2016). However, higher education's strategic nature cannot be denied, nor can the capacity of lifelong learning and training to provide solutions and responses to the problems of today's society.

Since the extraordinary European Council of Lisbon in 2000, the EU has been actively involved, through the funding of activities, to promote "the economic competitiveness of the area by integrating scientific and technological knowledge into production and services" (Rodríguez Rodríguez, 2018, p. 7). In addition, various European Council Resolutions and numerous European Commission Communications have made it possible to establish areas to focus on to achieve this modernization: (1) Bringing universities closer to the knowledge economy, (2) Reforming governance, (3) Overcoming financial scarcity, and (4) Seeking closer relationships between universities and businesses (Mora, 2009). Undoubtedly, European institutions are aware of the potential of higher education, as in the European area there are "more than 5,000 higher education institutions, 17.5



million higher education students, 1.35 million higher education teachers, and 1.17 million researchers" (European Commission, 2022d).

In this regard, in January 2022, the European Union approved the Strategy for Universities, which sets out objectives and a set of key measures for achieving them. Among the objectives, the following are highlighted (European Commission, 2022b, p. 1):

- "Strengthening the European dimension of higher education and research.
- Consolidating universities as key points for promoting our European Way of Life through support measures focused on academic and research careers, the quality and future relevance of skills, diversity, inclusion, democratic practices, fundamental rights, and academic values.
- Empowering universities as key agents of change in the dual ecological and digital transition; and
- Boosting universities as engines for the role and global leadership of the EU".

This Strategy and the subsequent Council Recommendation of the European Union (European Council, 2022) – in which Member States were invited to establish coherent and compatible political priorities for promoting transnational cooperation and making the necessary investments for it – show how the European Union and the Bologna Process, with its pan-European nature, are working hand in hand with the same goal: to make universities and the higher education sector the engine of societal transformation by placing them at the heart of education, research, and innovation. This Strategy is, therefore, "a call to EU countries and higher education institutions across Europe to join forces" (European Commission, 2023a). In addition, the need is expressed for universities to work to ensure that more and more young people are equipped "with digital skills and skills for the green transition, or developing green solutions through technological and social innovation, if the higher education sector pulls its weight" (European Commission, 2022c). Regarding digital skills, the European Union states that by 2030, 45% of people between the ages of 25 and 34 must have a higher education degree, and at least 60% of adults must participate in learning initiatives (European Commission, 2022d).

This Strategy represents a shift for the European Commission, as until then it had focused on coordinating European policies. However, at this point, it takes a turn to emphasize organizational coordination, that is, the establishment of European Alliances, highlighting the need for cross-border university cooperation as a means to drive European policies (Maassen, Stensaker, & Rosso, 2022). Therefore, it is stated that universities need to work to ensure that more and more young people are equipped "with digital skills and skills for the green transition, or developing green solutions through technological and social innovation, if the higher education sector pulls its weight" (European Commission, 2022c).



The implementation of this Strategy and the Council Recommendations was expected to yield significant results. One of these was the adoption of the European Approach to Microcredentials (DOUE, 2022), which is considered a tool for higher education institutions to facilitate flexible and modular short duration learning that allows for the certification of the acquisition of specific skills and competencies tailored to the needs set by the evolution of society and the labor market. These microcredentials are not intended to replace traditional qualifications but to provide a complement to them. Although microcredentials already existed in Europe, this Recommendation aims to boost the definition of common standards. Furthermore, it is believed that microcredentials can facilitate the achievement of the EU's main objectives to be reached from that date until 2030, "in particular the objective that 60% of all adults participate in training activities every year and an employment rate of at least 78%" (DOUE, 2022, p. 7).

Another of the expected results was to continue to deepen the joint European degree label. At that time, 90 universities and 17 ministries were participating in 10 Erasmus+ pilot projects where effective, institutionalized cooperation instruments were being tested, leading European universities to a new level and paving the way for the universities of the future. In line with this, work is being done on a possible European legal status for university alliances, which would facilitate closer cooperation, but also the possibility of sharing human, technical, data, education, research, and innovation capacities (European Council, 2022).

Following the path set years earlier, this Strategy includes support for the creation of 60 university alliances under what is known as the "European Universities Initiative" (EUI) launched by the European Commission in 2018.

"This aims to develop and establish long-term, structural, sustainable, and systemic cooperation in education, research, and innovation through the creation of interuniversity European campuses where students, staff, and researchers from all over Europe can enjoy seamless mobility and create new knowledge together across countries and disciplines" (European Commission, 2022b).

In the development of this initiative, there was a lot of skepticism about its implementation due to the challenges it presented, as it could not be considered the same to approach a collaborative interuniversity project as to an institutionalized integration (Maassen, Stensaker, & Rosso, 2022), as this was one of the most important steps in higher education that in the near future would allow the creation of true European Universities (Jungblut, Maassen, & Elken, 2020). More than 500 higher education institutions were called to participate in these alliances.

3. European Alliances: a new form of transnational university cooperation

The "European Universities" are transnational alliances of higher education institutions. The concept of European Universities was introduced by French President Emmanuel Macron on September 26, 2017, in his speech on the refoundation of Europe, titled "For a Sovereign, United, and Democratic Europe" (Macron, 2017). The proposal would create



"European universities that will be a network of universities from several European countries, setting up a path where each of their students will study abroad and take courses in at least two languages" (République Française, 2025). In this speech, he identified the great principles that should support it, with the goal of achieving it by 2024. The objective was to create the universities of the future, based first on innovative teaching methods and a multidisciplinary approach; second, on the promotion of multilingualism and European values; and third, to respond to the challenges posed by today's society. The idea was none other than to form interuniversity European campuses, both physical and virtual, where degrees would be jointly taught and where at least 50% of the students could move between universities.

Although the push for its formation is found in the 2022 Strategy, since 2019 and in 2020, 2022, 2023, and 2024, the European Commission has made calls under the European Universities Initiative to fund the alliances. In the first call of 2019, 17 university alliances were selected, and 24 in the second call, made in 2020. Currently, there are a total of 65 alliances composed of 570 European institutions from 35 countries¹⁰. To support the creation of these alliances, the initiative has been linked to the Erasmus+ 2021-2027 program with a budget of 1.1 billion euros, the largest so far (European Commission, 2024d).

The criteria for its funding, in addition to the creation of inter-university campuses, are based on the use of innovative methodologies centered on the student and the possibility for the student to follow an individualized itinerary with multidisciplinary teaching grounded in challenge-based learning. Furthermore, the alliances must follow a sustainability strategy and ensure geographical balance.

In parallel with the latest 2024 call, where 14 new alliances were approved, a project was selected that brings together all European alliances. This is the project "FOREU4ALL", which aims to be an instrument for "exchanging good practices by establishing a community of practice and strengthening synergies beyond the alliances" (République Française, 2025). This project has a total budget of 1.2 million euros, of which 962,642 have been financed by the EU. It has two main objectives: the first is to reinforce collaboration and learning among the alliances. Shared experiences will allow the exchange of strengths from each one, using those synergies to advance. The second is to "increase the dissemination of results and transferable models within the higher education sector to allow for broader use" (arQus European University Alliance, 2025).

To achieve these objectives that would benefit all the Alliances, FOREU4ALL aims to:

"establish thematic groups on key issues to facilitate the exchange of good practices; prepare guidelines and case studies on best practices that provide valuable ideas and lessons for the alliances between European universities and the higher education"

¹⁰ Number of participating institutions by country: Albania (3) Austria (17), Belgium (17), Bosnia and Herzegovina (4), Bulgaria (13), Croatia (8), Cyprus (7), Czechia (12), Denmark (7), Estonia (5), Finland (23), France (64), Germany (67), Greece (15), Hungary (6), Iceland (4), Ireland (4), Italy (46), Latvia (7), Lithuania (11), Luxembourg (2), Malta (2), Montenegro (1), Netherlands (the) (21), Norway (11), Poland (32), Portugal (29), Republic of North Macedonia (3), Romania (22), Serbia (3), Slovakia (8), Slovenia (4), Spain (56), Sweden (24) and Turkey (5) (European Commission, 2024a).



sector in general; collaborate with experts who contribute to political dialogue; organize events and activities such as webinars, meetings, and workshops to share information and engagement; build the community through activities that foster a sense of belonging and cooperation; promote the dissemination of transferable results, as well as events, webinars, and workshops organized by European university alliances” (Arqus Universidad de Granada, 2025).

The support for European alliances from the Commission is also strengthened by the Master Plan for a European Degree, from March 2024. With this Master Plan, the aim is to ease the path for alliances by reducing bureaucratic procedures and achieving automatic recognition of joint degrees across the EU. This idea of a joint degree automatically recognized was already considered in the European Commission's Communication on achieving the European Higher Education Area by 2025 (published in September 2020). This European degree would constitute “a key element for students of all levels and disciplines to choose what, where, and when to study within the members of a transnational university alliance, following solid pedagogical guidelines” (European Commission, 2020).

However, the diversity of higher education systems across Europe does not allow for rapid progress. Therefore, the European Commission proposes two approaches: first, through a preparatory European label, students would receive a certificate with the European degree label along with their joint degree. Second, through an actual European degree,

“This new type of qualification would be based on common criteria and anchored in national legislation. It would be awarded jointly by several universities from different countries or, possibly, by a European legal entity created by these universities: students would receive a ‘European degree’ that would be automatically recognized” (European Commission, 2024b).

The attainment of a European Degree would have added value for students, universities, and employers. First, for educational institutions, it would allow them to eliminate the existing barriers and facilitate the creation of joint programs, which would increase competitiveness and attractiveness. Both issues would serve to offer better learning experience and greater opportunities, which would be a significant incentive for being considered a good choice for students worldwide. Secondly, students would have the opportunity to study at different universities across Europe, obtain a universally recognized diploma, in addition to having the chance to receive more innovative education, thus gaining transversal skills. Without a doubt, this would provide them with better access to a demanding labor market with the highest qualifications. Lastly, for employers, it would provide the possibility of having highly qualified individuals with the necessary preparation to face the challenges of international society and a significant adaptability to the current labor market. But the European Union and its states would also benefit, as it would help strengthen European identity, student mobility, attract talent to the EU, and reinforce strategic autonomy (European Commission, 2024c).



To take these steps toward the European Degree, the Commission has presented specific actions: first, the creation of a European degree policy laboratory that will develop the guidelines for the implementation of European degrees, composed of experts from higher education institutions as well as accreditation agencies or social and economic stakeholders. This laboratory will be financed by the Erasmus+ program in 2025. Secondly, an annual degree forum that will not only monitor progress but also serve as guidance for the next steps. Thirdly, funding with Erasmus+ grants for "European university pathways projects" that ultimately lead to a European degree (European Commission, 2024b).

4. The next challenges in European Higher Education

In January 2025, the European Commission presented the Compass for Competitiveness based on the Draghi Report (European Central Bank, 2025), which provided a diagnosis and formulated recommendations to boost the competitiveness of the European Union. One of the horizontal facilitators proposed as a roadmap was to promote professional skills and quality employment, placing citizens and their qualifications at the foundation of competitiveness. To achieve this goal, the "Union of Capacities" initiative is announced, with a plan to "improve education, training, and high-quality lifelong learning" (European Commission, 2025). European universities, and by extension, University Alliances, therefore become a fundamental pillar for achieving this, as research and innovation will drive global competitiveness.

However, the Alliances, in their role as a driving force for change, still face significant challenges. In all the reports analyzing the situation of the European Alliances, similarities arise regarding the challenges they face. In general terms, there are differences in legal and financial frameworks, as well as in the culture and organization of research, where each university has different priorities. Undoubtedly, all of this makes collaboration more complex and requires a high degree of flexibility in the approaches, as otherwise, not all universities will be able to participate in the initiatives within the Alliances (European Commission: European Research Executive Agency, O'Neill, G., and Acheson, H., 2023), nor will they serve the purpose intended by the European Union in this "Union of Capacities" initiative.

As already seen earlier, achieving the joint European degree is the most important challenge in the short term; however, there are other challenges that define the path of the European alliances: the legal status, the European student card, the simplification of quality procedures, or sustainable financing.

• Legal Status for the Alliances

Greater and deeper cooperation within the European Higher Education Alliances requires maximizing the resources and infrastructures of each one. In this sense, one of the main instruments for institutionalized cooperation is, without a doubt, the adoption of a specific transnational legal status that would allow overcoming national regulatory complexities.



Considering a structural issue and a matter of the functioning of the Alliances, the Council's draft Recommendation to the Commission of January 2022 emphasized that

"A legal status for the alliances of higher education institutions would facilitate access, exchange, and sharing of joint services and resources (financial, human, digital, and physical). The absence of such a legal status makes it more difficult for higher education institutions to achieve a deeper level of cooperation and limits their competitiveness" (European Council, 2022).

With this legal basis, the European Alliances would gain added value by addressing the challenges of transnational cooperation. This legal instrument would simplify the adoption of strategic decisions, joint contracting, or sharing of human, technical, data, teaching, research, and innovation resources. In this sense, most of these issues depend on national regulations, which complicate, if not prevent, appropriate transnational collaboration, for example, in the mobility of researchers.

Although the European Union has recommended trying the existing legal instruments, such as the European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC)¹¹ or the European Economic Interest Grouping (EEIG)¹², the most widespread conclusion is that there is no European instrument sufficiently suitable to meet the needs of these Alliances. Therefore, in February 2023, four projects funded by the Erasmus+ program budget were launched (European Commission, 2022e) with the aim of exploring new forms of cooperation regarding possible legal status. Although the European Union had set mid-2024 (European Commission, 2022b) as the reference deadline for developing this legal status, as of today, no legal form has been adopted to regulate the Alliances. This is undoubtedly one of the main challenges in the immediate future.

• **The European Student Card (ESC)**

The idea of creating a European Student Card (ESC) began in 2016 and was a pilot project funded by the EU for the period 2016-2018. With it, all students would have easy access to the services of host institutions across Europe during their mobility. But it would also make universities' work easier, as they could quickly and easily verify the students' status, that is, where they are enrolled, at a European level by digitalizing the procedures. In this way, all data would be centralized, which would reduce paperwork and facilitate the transition to digital processes. It is expected that by 2025, a large number of students will benefit from its use, whether with a physical or virtual card. This card will grant access to the host university's campus, library services, or other benefits available to students, enhancing their experience as mobility students. From the outset, the goal was for it to be available to students in the Erasmus+ program countries between 2022 and 2025, not only at universities but also for service providers on and off-campus to recognize it.

¹¹ See *Regulation (EC) n° 1082/2006 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 5 July 2006 on the European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC)* (OJ L 210, 31.7.2006, p. 19).

¹² See *Regulation (CEE) n° 2137/85 of the Council, of 25 July 1985, on the establishment of a European Economic Interest Grouping (EEIG)* (OJ L 199, 31.7.1985, p. 1).



To ensure its implementation, a governance model has been created in which the European Commission (EC) is involved, as it defines policies, oversees implementation, and provides resources; the ESC Steering Committee, which sets the strategic direction and ensures adherence to policies; the Directorate-General for Education and Culture (DG EAC), which promotes the success of the project, defines plans, and oversees progress; the ESC Solution Providers, which scale the project and manage strategic activities; and the User's Working Groups, which consult on technical and business needs and test developments (European Commission, 2023b).

The European Student Card is implemented through a digital platform called ESC Router (ESC-R), which has been operational since October 2024. This platform allows participating institutions to validate student status in real-time and integrate all the features of the card, including a unique card identifier, a student identification number, and an ESC logo composed of a QR code, the text "European Student Card," and the EU flag, which certify authenticity and validity at the European level (European Commission, 2024g). By the end of December 2024, 18 countries were using the ESC, 15 of which are EU members and 3 non-associated countries. Additionally, 16 EU member countries and third-party countries associated with the Erasmus+ Program are connected to the ESC-R, although they do not issue the ESC. Furthermore, 3.4 million student cards had been issued, with 1.56 million active cards. A total of 940 organizations are registered in the ESC-Router, and more than 308 organizations issue the ESC (Conferenza dei Retori delle Università Italiane, 2024).

● **Simplification of quality assurance procedures**

Quality assurance is a key element for any qualification, even more so for transnational joint qualifications. Since the beginning of the Bologna Process, it has become an essential tool within the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). It was expected that by 2005, all member states would have a quality assurance system that included the following elements: "definition of the responsibilities of the bodies and institutions involved; evaluation of programs or institutions; accreditation system, certification or similar processes; international participation; cooperation and networking" (European Ministers of Higher Education, 2003). These agencies should verify that higher education institutions have a coherent institutional strategy concerning teaching and learning (European Commission, 2024f).

There are three main objectives of quality assurance activities (Backhouse Erazo, Domínguez Fernández, & Gutierrez Gómez, 2012). The first is control or accountability, as institutions must comply with a set of standards that allow them to meet the minimum quality requirements. Therefore, universities have the primary responsibility for quality, as it is based on the principle of institutional autonomy. The second is the guarantee of quality, which seeks to assess whether institutions meet what they offer and have the resources and procedures in place to evaluate the minimum quality standards. In this regard, to assess quality, there needs to be both internal mechanisms (within higher education institutions) and external ones that oversee quality (Posca Cohen, 2024). Finally, improvement through recommendations for their performance. Since Berlin



2003, work has been done in this direction, promoting a “culture of quality” (Matarranz, 2021).

Moving forward in time, the 2024 Council Recommendation focuses on working on quality and recognition systems that “support transparency, mobility, and transnational cooperation, and are based on high quality and mutual trust.” Although since 2006, both the Council and the Parliament had been insisting on greater international cooperation, these Recommendations reinforce the progress made so far, such as the creation of the European Register of Quality Assurance Agencies, which allows Member States to choose which one to use (European Commission, 2024e). However, things have changed significantly since 2006, especially because the emergence of European Alliances has been a revolution in the higher education system.

Today, there are obstacles that hinder the provision of joint educational offerings. The procedures established by universities and agencies remain lengthy and costly, which is why the European Union advises working to simplify and improve these processes. It is a necessity for the university of the future that higher education institutions can adapt their programs more quickly to the needs of society, but also that they can more easily offer competitive programs that are recognized throughout the European Union with all the guarantees of quality.

- **Long-term sustainable financing: pooling resources and capacities**

Another major challenge facing the European Universities initiative is undoubtedly financing. Being a strategic project for the European Union, the Alliances are primarily financed through the Erasmus+ programs and the European Excellence Initiative, regardless of the national funds each university receives. However, these funds are not sufficient. Revenues come from different sources: first, the Erasmus+ and Horizon 2020 programs (for research and innovation), with the budget from Erasmus+ not exceeding 80% of the Alliance's budget. Second, the national contributions from the governments and universities participating in an Alliance¹³. Third, external contributions such as private sources, though this is not common. A report from the Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture of the European Commission (Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture Youth, Education and Erasmus+, 2022) reveals that the total costs of the Alliances' activities are higher than the funding they receive from the EU and from the universities themselves, and that in the coming years, their financial sustainability will still require funds from both the EU and the Member States.

However, the Strategy for Universities maintains that the money coming from the EU should only complement national public funding and investment from third parties, both public and private, which is still far from the reality. It is true that participation in an

¹³ Financing can take different forms, for further in-depth information see the Final Report of the Study on the state and effectiveness of national funding systems of higher education to support the European Universities Initiative, pp. 46 and seq (Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture Youth, Education and Erasmus+, 2022).



Alliance adds value to the participating institutions and that this should be rewarded with funding, but it is also true that there is a need to generate social wealth with this value.

Clearly, Alliances must diversify their funding sources to be sustainable in the long term. This is why they are required to explore synergies to find other sources of support, such as micro-credential certificates or joint research projects. At this point, we return to the need for Alliances to have their own legal status, not only to be able to apply for different types of funding alongside their institutional partner members, but especially because with this status, resources and capacities could be shared, as mentioned earlier, which would undoubtedly lower the costs of the Alliances.

Conclusions

European Alliances have been a further step in the European Higher Education Area, driven by European institutions but also by the need to respond to the challenges of today's international society. University Alliances have become one of the key pillars of European policies aimed at innovation and competitiveness.

Although academic and curricular adaptation has not been easy, over the years a European Higher Education Area has been achieved; however, the real obstacles lie in the structural adaptation of universities and in the legal framework that allows for the design of formal structures and decision-making bodies. This would undoubtedly also have economic benefits for the Alliances, as it would allow the finding of public or private funding beyond the contributions from the universities themselves or from the European Union. Overcoming all the challenges requires continuous long-term effort, otherwise the Alliances will not be able to develop institutionalized transnational collaboration that overcomes national barriers. The human factor is also important; in these governance tasks, academics, researchers, students, and administrative and service staff must also be involved, or there will be a risk of disconnecting from the fundamental objectives of the Alliances, which is none other than the effective transmission of knowledge, learning, and innovation.

The European Union must continue working to transform higher education. The Compass for Competitiveness requires Alliances capable of increasing the qualifications of citizens and fostering labor skills from which companies will benefit, leading to greater competitiveness in European markets. In this sense, if Alliances can offer high-quality, attractive, and sustainable academic and research careers, the European Union will be able to compete by attracting and retaining talent.

It is therefore necessary to continue working on actions that transform European higher education. The universality of the European student card, the automatic recognition of qualifications, the design of a legal framework for the Alliances, and sustainable, inclusive, and more technological programs will undoubtedly help this transformation.

In short, European higher education alliances are essential to fostering cooperation and integration between educational institutions from different countries. Collaboration means the exchange of knowledge, resources, and best practices, enriching the



educational experience for both students and faculty. Cooperation allows us to address common challenges, resulting in higher quality qualifications.

The Alliances promote student mobility, which fosters cultural exchange and a deeper understanding of European values and culture. But they also promote researcher mobility by creating innovative international networks, which drives the economic and social development of the region. In a world where industry increasingly depends on technology and innovation, University Alliances play a key role in preparing future generations by applying student-centered teaching methods and encouraging lifelong learning, tools that will undoubtedly enable the personal and professional growth necessary to face the challenges and opportunities of the future.

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