

FOREU4ALL Discussion Paper

European Universities Alliances: Beating Heart of Europe's Future

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European Universities alliances embody and advance the central tenets of the European Union – prosperity, unity, cohesion, inclusion, innovation, and competitiveness. They unite universities of all types, link regional innovation ecosystems across borders, build capacity, attract talent, and contribute to the advancement of the **European Education Area (EEA) and the European Research Area (ERA)** objectives.

Deep and Long-Term Collaboration as the Key Strength of European Universities Alliances

European Universities alliances are the innovative model for the **deep and long-term collaboration** that Europe needs to realise its own **sustainable and prosperous future**. In its European Strategy for Universities, the European Commission highlighted that the transnational alliances of higher education institutions “*develop and share a common long-term structural, sustainable and systemic cooperation on education, research and innovation, creating European inter-university campuses where students, staff and researchers from all parts of Europe can enjoy seamless mobility and create new knowledge together, across countries and disciplines*”. The way forward to implement this holistic vision and commitment to sustainability is precisely the subject of this paper.¹

Bringing together over 600 universities in 35 countries, engaging 2,200 partners from the public and private sectors, and **representing more than half of Europe's students**², the 70+ established alliances are advancing the realisation of the fifth freedom as proposed by Enrico Letta.³ They **experiment, innovate, disseminate, and pioneer** new ways to circulate and share knowledge across Europe – connecting regions, and reducing fragmentation.

The varied institutional models and diverse missions of alliances have enabled **successful experimentation** and achieved impactful results. They serve as lighthouses for sharing and disseminating good practices and act as catalysts for Europe's competitiveness and resilience. Through their diversity they address a broad array of needs.⁴ The European Parliament praised the initiative as a “*successful model*” that has “*not only enabled the participation of the biggest, most internationally recognised universities, but also that of small*”

¹ See page 5 of the 2022 European Commission Communication “A European Strategy for Universities”.

² See European Commission: Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, Grumbinaite, I., Colus, F., and Buitrago Carvajal, H. (2025). *Report on the outcomes and transformational potential of the European Universities initiative*, Publications Office of the European Union. <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2766/32313>

³ Letta, E., Lamy, P., Grabar-Kitarović, K. (2025). *Europe must complete the single market by 2028*, Politico Opinion piece of 15 October 2025. URL: <https://www.politico.eu/article/europe-market-2028-law-finance/>

⁴ See: Craciun, D., Kaiser, F., Kottmann, A., & Van der Meulen, B. (2023). *Research for CULT Committee – The European Universities Initiative: First lessons, main challenges and perspectives*. European Parliament, Policy Department for Structural and Cohesion Policies, Brussels. This report includes a systematic literature review grouping the benefits of alliance cooperation at different levels (see p.40 onwards).

and medium-sized universities, and those in the outermost regions, to unite around shared themes and objectives that contribute to the vitality of their territory”⁵

This **discussion paper** of the FOREU4ALL Community of Practice aims to show why European Universities alliances remain essential for achieving the EU’s ambitions for **competitiveness, the ERA, the EEA, and the Union of Skills**.⁶ Most importantly, from the perspective of those deeply engaged in shaping and advancing the European Universities alliances, our goal is to signpost constructive and purposeful pathways forward to advance *in, with and for Europe*.

Systemic cooperation – or **deep collaboration (“deep coll”)** – is the key tool to navigate Europe’s future. We argue that the answer to Europe’s competitiveness challenge lies in **stronger European collaboration**.

To realise Europe’s single market and the **fifth freedom** – the free circulation of knowledge and innovation – we must invest in cooperation sustainably. **Greater collaboration at the European scale will strengthen Europe’s long-term ability to innovate and compete at a global scale as well as reduce disparities and promote excellence and inclusivity.**

Deep Integration and Diversity

This section looks at deep collaboration – deep coll - in practice. Three features of European Universities alliances illustrate how their diverse models, missions and long-term partnerships reshape cooperation, innovation, and integration across Europe.

1. Next-Level Integration - Deep Coll - as a New Partnership Model

The **enduring partnerships** of alliances represent a fundamentally new approach to European collaboration. They are built on a **long-term vision and mission**, fostering systemic collaboration across all institutional levels – from senior management to faculties and departments, to regional ecosystems. This also includes **capacity building and developing competencies** needed to imagine and operationalise new models for societal impact.

Unlike project-based partnerships, the alliances establish a **shared governance, interoperable IT systems, joint infrastructures, and common research and education strategies**. Through this deep integration, they act as Europe’s “**living laboratories**” for new models of transnational education, research, and innovation, including systemic transformations such as those driven by Industry 5.0.⁷ We advocate for open science, impactful career tracks and new future-proof jobs and roles. We advance reforms that no

⁵ European Parliament, Committee on Culture and Education (2025). *Report on a new vision for the European Universities alliances* (A10-0135/2025).

⁶ See 2025 European Commission Communication “The Union of Skills”

⁷ Breque, M., De Nul, L., Petridis, A. (2021). *Industry 5.0 – Towards a sustainable, human-centric and resilient European industry*, Publications Office of the European Union, <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2777/308407>

single university could achieve alone and offer scalable approaches that reflect Europe's diversity of institutions, our students, and the societies they serve.

These are, for example:

- **Over 300 joint study programmes and over 2300 joint courses**, including over **100 joint degrees** and **over 800 courses leading to micro-credentials** developed by the alliances.⁸
- Advancing new innovative education models, such as the **European Degree pathway**, enabling automatic recognition of learning and degrees across borders, equipping graduates with future-proof skills, and reinforcing common academic values in areas of high societal and economic relevance for Europe.
- **Embedded mobility** into all levels of study as well as, training, and teaching, including research and innovation.
- **Joint doctoral programmes, shared research infrastructures, joint research seed funding schemes** and implementation of the ERA Objectives such as **modernising research assessment**.
- **Interoperable** and agile online learning environments, a European digital campus.

2. Diversity and Inclusiveness as Bridges Across Europe's Knowledge Square

Alliances are **diverse and inclusive**, bringing together universities of various kinds. This diversity creates **genuine pan-European ecosystems of talent and knowledge**. Inclusiveness allows the alliances to **pool complementary strengths, resources, and infrastructures, reduce fragmentation, and make Europe's higher education and research systems more attractive and competitive worldwide**. They prepare graduates, early-career researchers, and lifelong learners for a changing labour market by integrating research and education, combining excellence with regional innovation capacity, and working towards future-proof skills, active citizenship, and a European identity.

Examples include:

- Catalysing the integration of **future-related competencies** - critical thinking, entrepreneurial mindset, leadership, collaboration, analytical skills, intercultural understanding, sector-specific knowledge, communication, and problem-solving - into curricula, often through, **Living Labs, testbeds, and citizen participation hubs**.⁹
- Focusing on long-term **mobility**, and offering diverse (short-term) mobility formats, fostering exposure to diverse cultures, languages, creativity, resilience, openness to new challenges, confidence, and a **shared European identity** as well as **promoting European-wide careers**. Alliances can **attract and retain top talent**,

⁸ Data collected by FOREU4ALL in November 2025. 59 Alliances responded to the survey.

⁹ Page 224 of the Report on the Outcomes and Transformational Potential of the European Universities initiative, European Union 2025. ISBN 978-92-68-20047-6 doi:10.2766/32313 NC-02-24-860-EN-N. [Link to report](#).

reinforcing Europe's global appeal. For example, alliances have already developed international partnerships across **43 countries**.¹⁰

- Creating **pathways for participation** for students, researchers, and staff of all backgrounds. As inclusive bridge builders, alliances practice **science diplomacy** contributing to a peaceful, democratic and prosperous Europe. For example, alliance partnerships include 35 Ukrainian higher education institutions.¹¹

3. Alliances as Drivers of Resilience and Competitiveness

European Universities alliances connect higher education institutions with their surrounding **regional ecosystems** - municipalities, SMEs, large companies, start-ups, NGOs, schools, citizens, and civic actors. By bridging academia and society, they accelerate **skills intelligence, support public-private partnerships** and create **innovation hubs** that connect place-based innovation to global impact.

Crucially, alliances bring **equal partners from every European region, promoting excellence** and fostering participation. They embody the European Project in practice - **making Europe more competitive, comprising much more than the sum of its parts**.¹²

Examples include:

1. Supporting **entrepreneurship and start-up creation** through incubators, innovation hubs, and Living Labs. For example, alliances have developed and now offer 334 entrepreneurship-related courses.¹³
2. Offering **internships and apprenticeships** with local industry partners across borders, developing **over 570 courses** co-created with **over 1000 external stakeholders**.¹⁴
3. Fostering **STEM and STEAM competences**¹⁵, working in a transdisciplinary way, ensuring a workforce prepared for technological and societal transitions which, at the same time, is also more gender balanced.
4. Developing **lifelong learning pathways and micro-credentials** for reskilling and upskilling across Europe's labour markets – including fast developing areas such as **generative AI**.

¹⁰ Page 224 of the Report on the Outcomes and Transformational potential of the European Universities initiative, European Union 2025. ISBN 978-92-68-20047-6 doi:10.2766/32313 NC-02-24-860-EN-N. [Link to report](#).

¹¹ Page 16 and 286 of the Report on the Outcomes and Transformational Potential of the European Universities initiative, European Union 2025. ISBN 978-92-68-20047-6 doi:10.2766/32313 NC-02-24-860-EN-N. [Link to report](#).

¹² See also Member of European Parliament Eszter Lakos' remarks at 15 October 2025 session "Unifying European R&I for Global Leadership and Competitiveness"

¹³ Page 166 of the Report on the Outcomes and Transformational Potential of the European Universities initiative, European Union 2025. ISBN 978-92-68-20047-6 doi:10.2766/32313 NC-02-24-860-EN-N. [Link to report](#).

¹⁴ Data collected by FOREU4ALL in November 2025. 59 Alliances responded to the survey.

¹⁵ Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM), with STEAM adding Arts (A)

Deep collaboration is enacted in a more systemic integration, our diversity and the way we drive excellence, inclusion and resilience. It is embedded in various thematic areas of high social impact and concern. For European University alliances, inter- and trans-disciplinarity is a default mode. Hence, in research, education and innovation, alliances address everything from climate and decarbonisation to robotics and quantum technology, from public health to peace and justice, from teacher education to social engineering and multilingualism.

AI is only one of the current massive technological transformations and European University alliances are currently accelerating science *for* AI and AI *in* science from all aspects and perspectives. They do this responsibly, ethically, and in a human- and value-led manner for the sake of our collective future. Be it in the field of high-performance computing, the collection, curation and use of multivariate data, the development of new methods for machine learning and agentic systems, sustainable AI governance or skilling and training to achieve AI literacy for all. Hence, European Universities will play a crucial role in realising both RAISE¹⁶ and the Apply AI Strategy.

Further examples and success stories can be found in the [European Universities initiative 2025 report](#), as well as through the communication channels of the alliances, their partner universities, and [FOREU4ALL](#).

At a Glance: How Alliances Transform Cooperation in Higher Education

Collaboration	Deep integration with shared governance, strategies, and infrastructures.
Mobility	Seamless, embedded, and diverse (short and long term) models to serve more students in a systematic and personalised manner, working towards automatic recognition, facilitation of curriculum harmonisation, developing on-site, blended, and virtual formats.
Curriculum & Degrees	European education pathways, such as the European Degreelabel , interoperable European curricula, European micro-credentials, innovative personalised learning pathways, recognition across borders, interdisciplinarity, and transversal skill development, co-taught courses, integrated internationalisation into university curricula.
Research	Shared research infrastructures , joint doctoral training, implementation of ERA objectives such as modernising research assessment, comprehensive training of researchers and research managers, developing joint research strategies and seed fund mechanisms, integrating institutions with less intensive participation in European research funding.

¹⁶ The European Commission's new virtual institute, "Resource for Artificial Intelligence Science in Europe" (RAISE), launched in November 2025

Innovation	Over 1000 real-life societal challenges addressed with over 1000 external stakeholders ¹⁷ , linking regional ecosystems , enhanced cross-border technology transfer and impact, innovation hubs.
Regional competitiveness	Involving regional actors into European curriculum design , cross-border and cross-sectoral internships, entrepreneurship support, Living Labs. Reskilling and upskilling the work force, piloting a European approach to lifelong learning.
Civic Engagement	Core mission: civic skills, challenge-based learning, working together with societal actors, inclusion, solidarity, and democratic participation.
Talent	Pan-European talent circulation and retention through joint professional development schemes, competitive compensation, promotion pathways, funding, and branding.
Mission & Focus	Tackle EU and global challenge , climate change, health, economic instability, inequality, geopolitical tensions, disinformation, governance, and ethics.
Sense of Belonging	Shared European identity , multilingualism, diversity, equity, inclusion, and intercultural comprehension. Leveraging plans on gender equality, diversity, and inclusion.
Scale & Resources	Critical mass through pooling: pan-European presence, joint infrastructures, funding leverage, global reputation and competitiveness of universities, increased efficiencies.
Skills & Competencies	Future-proof ecosystems fostering digital, green, entrepreneurial, civic, intercultural, transversal, and employment-related skills of students. Fostering STEM/STEAM and SSH ¹⁸ competences and interdisciplinarity.
Systemic Transformation	Developing prototypes and models for the future European education, research, innovation , and overcoming regulatory obstacles to transnational collaboration. Global Engagement Frameworks that link alliances with partner regions aligned to EU values and standards.

Our vision for European Universities alliances' participation in the Next MFF

Alliances call for meaningful conversations, and co-created decision-making about the alliances' participation in the next EU budget cycle (MFF) based on the following perspectives.

¹⁷ Data collected by FOREU4ALL in November 2025. 59 Alliances responded to the survey.

¹⁸ Social Sciences and Humanities (SSH)

Diverse Models: European Universities alliances draw their strength from the diversity of their member institutions, giving rise to models adapted to their specific goals and contexts. This diversity—of missions, structures and levels of integration—is what makes the initiative resilient and relevant across Europe. The future of the European Universities Initiative must ensure that this diversity is not lost in the pursuit of efficiency or uniformity. Rather, it should be nurtured as a “division of labour” that serves Erasmus+, the Union of Skills, the Competitiveness Compass, and Horizon Europe. A single model cannot meet the breadth of Europe’s needs; multiple models, from platform-based approaches to theme-driven clusters, must continue to coexist and evolve.

Funding: We call for a competitive funding mechanism that reflects the high expectations on alliances as they respond to Europe’s educational, scientific, economic, and societal needs. It must be:

- **Long-term:** Alliances are supported with predictable funding horizons, going beyond short project cycles.
- **Holistic:** Funding covers all university missions—education, research, innovation, and civic engagement—and their connectivity rather than siloed programme strands, to continue developing excellence frameworks for the delivery of education, research, innovation, and civic engagement.
- **Non-directional:** Alliances thrive through bottom-up diversity; while staying accountable, alliances should be guided by a light touch that safeguards autonomy, creativity, innovation, and academic freedom.
- **Flexible:** A single access point with simplified application and reporting procedures and flexible institution-driven funding that goes beyond the project-logic and allows for alliances to maintain their diversity of models while also adapting quickly to Europe’s fast-changing societal and technological contexts.

Considering all that alliances have achieved in a short time, with relatively low investment—and all they aim to realise under the next MFF in service to a more connected and deeply collaborative Europe—the proposal by Enrico Letta for a consolidated budget of **€10 million per year per alliance**¹⁹ can serve as a benchmark for reflecting on what is truly required **to build and sustain transformation at scale across European higher education and across all four corners of the knowledge square.**

¹⁹ See page 25 Letta, E. (2024). *Much more than a market – Speed, Security, Solidarity - Empowering the Single Market to deliver a sustainable future and prosperity for all EU Citizens*, [link](#), 18 April 2024

Way forward

European University alliances are the beating heart of Europe's future. They are promising drivers of Europe's long-term vision for **prosperity, unity, cohesion, inclusion, innovation and competitiveness**. By fostering deep coll across borders, they strengthen Europe's capacity to address shared challenges, from **technological transitions to sustainability and security**. These alliances create dynamic ecosystems for **talent development, acquisition, and retention**—ensuring that Europe remains a global leader in knowledge, research, and innovation. In doing so, they not only advance the European Education Area, the European Research Area, and the **fifth freedom**, but also reinforce the continent's **social and economic cohesion**. Ultimately, European University alliances are not just academic networks; they are strategic instruments shaping the future of a **stronger, more connected, and resilient Europe**.

About FOREU4ALL

[FOREU4ALL](#) is the **Community of Practice of all 73 European Universities alliances**, involving **over 600 higher education institutions** across **35 countries**, including 8 Seal of Excellence alliances. It fosters the exchange of good practices and collective action to amplify impact for the wider higher education sector and society. FOREU4ALL supports the role model alliances have by sharing developed practices and prototypes for all.

FOREU4ALL is **supported by Erasmus+**. See the [Factsheet on European University alliances](#) and the [FOREU4ALL factsheet](#) for more information.