

BM75 - Budva

Resolution: A critical analysis of the European Commission's call for the European Universities Alliances

ESU acknowledges that the call for the European University Alliances was launched on the 24th of October 2018 and already expressed the concerns about the cooperation between Higher Education Institutions in Europe¹. In this statement from the 74th Board Meeting, ESU expressed the need to create a collaboration on the basis of the social dimension and widening participation across European Higher Education Area.

Further on that position, ESU casts a critical eye on the call for the European Universities Alliances and on the information flow regarding it, which does not alleviate our concern towards the project about the will of creating a two-tiered HE system within Europe.

The call contains several flaws. The first one concerns the inclusivity of students. Even though it is called for the projects to reflect the "social diversity of the student body and supporting measures to promote the access, participation and completion of under-represented and disadvantaged groups", there is no request of equal treatment of students enrolling in the alliance through different member HEIs in terms of access, tuition fees, and students' welfare.

According to the call issued, the work of the new European University Alliances should be done according to principles of Bologna Process, the European Higher Education Area and promote its development. One of the basic principles of this process is learner-centred education. According to this paradigm, the student is an equal member of the learning process. Thus, recognising these rights to the students, it is essential to set the framework for the students' representation to take place in a free, organised and independent way. The European Students' Union is highly concerned about the absence in the guidelines of crucial points concerning the European Universities Alliances. This includes the importance of the involvement of the students in designing the guidelines' framework of these new entities, as well as their absence in the structure of governance.

ESU wants to emphasise the necessity of including the students in the decision-making process at any stage and level of development in the Higher Education institutions, and the new European University Alliances cannot be an exception to that.

The intention of having European Universities is recent, but the concept of alliances of universities is not new. Thus, there are examples of practices about how this new type of entities could internalise the concept of students' representation and enable them to have an important role. This would contribute to a beneficial development of educational process for all the parts involved.

One of the main focuses of this new concept is placed on the promotion and valorisation of mobility. By recognising the importance of this aspect, the European Students' Union wants to point out the opportunity of promoting the cooperation as well as the exchange of ideas and good practices at the

¹ <https://www.esu-online.org/?policy=statement-european-education-area>

students' representative level between universities. This expediency should be strongly encouraged and facilitated by this framework of the Alliances of universities. At the same time, the students should be represented within the governing structures of the Alliances with effective say on the issues discussed there. Furthermore, they should be actively involved in the Quality Assurance process held in relation to this new higher education cooperation.

Another critical point which we would like to address is the geographical scope and representativeness of the countries. As mentioned in the call, the project is only open to Erasmus+ countries, excluding multiple members of the European Higher Education Area. We strongly believe in a need of accessible cooperation of all EHEA countries, therefore any successful initiative in HE must be open to all country members of the EHEA. Furthermore, the call allows an alliance to be considered “geographically balanced”² by having only one or even none HEI coming from a Central or Eastern European country .

Another flaw of the call is that it puts virtual mobility on the same level as physical mobility. This might lead the HEIs within the Alliances to promote more virtual rather than physical mobility in order to meet the aim of at least 50% of the students in the alliance in benefitting of such mobility. This fear is also increased by the financial capacity of the call, which would invest for each student in mobility an amount of roughly 6 euros per year³ in the most optimistic case scenario.

Moreover, it should be added that private institutions can be part of the alliance as Associated Partners and Affiliated entities, with the possibility to contribute to the financial sustainability of the Alliances. The merging of virtual mobility with physical mobility, the insufficient funding provided by the call and the possibility of involving private entities in the sustainability of the project, makes ESU fear that students from disadvantaged backgrounds would only be able to access virtual mobility. This increases the risks of higher education commodification coming from the private partners of the Alliances.

Another concern regarding the call is the limited period of time to submit the proposals (from October to February), which will likely allow only universities with strong and established international connections to be able to apply for it. This concern is reinforced by the fact that, even

² The call bases its definition of “geographical balance” on the division of the European countries provided by EuroVoc, which divides Europe among Northern, Southern, Western, and Central and Eastern Europe, which includes all the countries of the former Eastern Bloc of the Cold War, excepted Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania.

³ This case study is based on the Alliance “European Campus of City-Universities”, consisting of the universities of Coimbra (Portugal), Alexandru Ioan Cuza of Iasi (Romania), Pavia (Italy), Poitiers (France), Salamanca (Spain) and Turku (Finland). According to data accessible on open access, they share a total students' body of 160.000 students. According to the aim of 50% mobility of students as stated in the call, the students that should be involved in mobility are 80.000. The maximum amount of money assigned to an Alliance by the call is 5 million euros, of which a maximum of 500.000 euros for travel costs of staff, students and doctoral candidates, and a maximum of 1 million euros for individual support in mobility of students, staff and doctoral candidates up to 3 months. Even assigning the total amount of the 1.500.000 euros of mobility to students, that would lead to “assign” each student roughly 18 euros, which divided by the 3 years period of the programme, would lead to an amount of roughly 6 euros per student each year.

before the call⁴ was published, several universities announced the creation of new “alliances”, which meet the eligibility criteria of the call.

This might point to a possible discrepancy of information among universities on the criteria of the call before its official publication, which would severely undermine the possibility of participation for those universities outside of the information flow.

ESU welcomes the idea of building synergies between Higher Education Institutions and shared visions of common European values. Nevertheless, ESU calls the European Parliament and the European Commission to actively monitor the project of the European Universities Alliances whether improvements are made: (i) regarding equal treatment and inclusivity in regard to social dimension, of students among the HEIs partners of the Alliance, (ii) effective students' involvement and representation within the common management structures of the Alliance, (iii) geographical inclusivity and balance, (iv) the attainment of physical mobility for all students involved, (v) sustainability of the Alliance while avoiding pressures towards commodification, (vi) and equal and fair treatment of all the HEIs eligible to apply regarding the information flow about the call. ESU recommends therefore to consider whether to issue a second call or not after the three years period based, on the attainment of the mentioned above goals.

Proposed by: ANOSR, fzs, UDU

Seconded by: ASM, FEF, UNEL

⁴ The call was launched in 24th October 2018; some examples include: “4EU”, including Charles University (Czech Republic), Heidelberg University (Germany), Sorbonne University (France) and University of Warsaw (Poland), announced the 21th March 2018 <http://en.uw.edu.pl/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/uw-european-university-alliance-press-release.pdf>; the alliance launched on the 23rd April 2018 consisting of Freie Universität Berlin (Germany), University of Bologna (Italy), Uniwersytet Jagielloński w Krakowie (Poland), KU Leuven (Belgium), Universidad Complutense de Madrid (Spain), and Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne (France) <https://www.unibo.it/en/notice-board/europe-begins-once-again-from-its-seats-of-learning-a-european-university-alliance-is-born>; the “European Civic University”, consisting of Sapienza University (Italy), University of Aix Marseille (France), National and Kapodistrian University of Athens (Greece), University of Bucharest (Romania), Université Libre de Bruxelles (Belgium), Universidad Autonoma de Madrid (Spain), Stockholms Universitet (Sweden) and Eberhard Karls Universität Tübingen (Germany), which was launched the 23rd October, i.e. the very day the call was published: <https://www.uniroma1.it/en/notizia/new-european-civic-university>