



The European Universities Initiative: Championing Excellence and Inclusion?

Lee Rensimer and Rachel Brooks

Abstract

The European Universities Initiative is the European Commission's ambitious strategy to integrate universities across the region into transnational alliances centering on common organizational, thematic, or challenge-focused missions. Over consecutive rounds beginning in 2019, the now 44 selected alliances are forming deep institutional partnerships, supported through an uneven patchwork of funding from the Commission, national governments, and institutions themselves, which appears to intensify inequalities in the European higher education landscape, pitting aims of excellence against inclusion.

The European Universities Initiative, or EUI, is a novel policy instrument championed by the European Commission to establish closely integrated alliances between its universities. Initially limited to universities within the European Union and Erasmus+ participating countries, and now broadening out to the 49 countries currently in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), the EUI accelerates the internationalization of universities' teaching, research, and civic activities by funding the formation of "European Universities," typically made up of six to 10 higher education institutions across Europe. Through separate rounds of competitive selection between 2019 and 2022, there are now 44 alliances that collectively involve 340 universities, alongside a much larger number of civic, private, and nonprofit organizations and authorities across 31 countries.

The EUI's mission to foster "excellence, innovation and inclusion in higher education across Europe" is seen as an extension of the region's previous higher education integration initiatives including the Bologna Process (leading to the establishment of the EHEA) and Erasmus+ (the primary mechanism for international student and staff mobility within Europe). Both previous initiatives laid the policy groundwork, with Bologna increasing the international compatibility of qualifications and credits across European institutions, enabling closer cooperation and increasing the circulation of students and staff across borders. The EUI effectively intensifies this cooperation—often through preexisting Erasmus+ partnerships or university associations—by clustering institutions thematically (e.g., an alliance of social science and business schools), organizationally (e.g., "young" research-intensive universities), or around an interdisciplinary challenge (e.g., universities concentrated on coastal sustainability). Participating universities prioritize mobility, exchange, and collaboration within their alliance, consolidating resources while innovating and reshaping the face of European higher education through joint qualifications, mobility opportunities, and influence as policy actors.

More critically, we argue the EUI also extends institutional inequalities introduced through previous initiatives. The transformation of higher education systems in Eastern Europe and the European periphery stemming from Bologna has had mixed outcomes, while the imbalance between mobility to and from major Western European countries is well documented. The emergence of university associations or networks further stratifies universities into respective tiers, consolidating members' profiles and reputations. These inequalities across the sector remind us that the European higher education landscape is a highly uneven terrain, with differing levels of resourcing and experiences of regional integration. If the Commission's stated objectives of the EUI include both excellence and inclusion, we question whether this initiative can advance both simultaneously. With its competitive tendering and one-size-fits-all funding, the EUI appears poised to advance institutions with existing advantages, consolidating their positioning in the European institutional hierarchy and widening the gap between selective and less selective universities.

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Geographical Imbalances

With occasional exceptions, alliances typically include one university per country. However, with an average of eight universities per alliance, their composition is a reflection of strategic decisions made at their inception—or decisions already made in the cases of alliances stemming from university associations. While their membership takes into account the mandate for a broad geographic spread, the collective composition of

universities and countries across the 44 alliances is predictably weighted toward Western Europe, particularly German and French universities, which feature in a strong majority of alliances. The coordinating university responsible for shaping and steering each alliance, especially at the inception stage, tilts equally in favor of Western Europe. This imbalanced representation of national systems reinforces existing asymmetries in European higher education, with countries already on the geographical and political periphery of Europe having considerably fewer universities participating in the initiative and enjoying its benefits.

Varying Financial and Political Support

A critical element of the EUI's funding architecture is the need for participating universities to cofund their alliance activities. The amount required varies by alliance size and scope, but can be prohibitive for many lower-tier and less-resourced universities. In the 2019 and 2020 pilot rounds, the Commission provided each approved alliance the same fixed sum of EUR 5 million for partnership-building activities and a further EUR 2 million for joint research over a three-year period. Some of the alliance leaders whom we interviewed expressed their concerns over the financial burdens that members experienced differently, and how this structured their alliance's choice of partners, its overall size, and the scope of each member's involvement.

Another factor complicating resourcing is the uneven political commitment of national and subnational governments to financially support the EUI, with some national governments supporting their participating universities with unconditional grants of varying amounts. In the case of Germany, federal government support only funded new, add-on activities within its participating universities' alliances, while some state-level governments provided further funding without conditions. Several countries did not offer any funding for EUI involvement, with the Netherlands taking a view that the EUI was an "elitist initiative" fueling internationalization at the expense of Dutch higher education more broadly. As the Dutch government indicates, this highly variable cofunding privileges certain universities, reinforcing existing financial inequalities across national systems and the region as a whole.

Appetite for Risk?

Given the resource commitment required to participate, universities in alliances take on financial and reputational risk without guarantee of further support from the European Commission. Naturally, universities calculate risk differently depending on their financial and positional circumstances; in extreme cases, like UK universities, participating in an alliance poses a means of mitigating geopolitical risks associated with being outside the European Union. The alliance leaders whom we interviewed across Europe described in contrasting language their motives for forming or joining an alliance, the relative importance of the alliance for their international portfolios, and the consequences of failure. For some, the EUI served as a "laboratory for experimenting new ways of cooperating" and operated alongside other major international collaborations. Other alliances saw it as a vital opportunity to transform their institutions and elevate their position, with the express aim to ultimately merge into a single university across multiple campuses. While signaling different appetites for risk, these statements also reflect universities' abilities to take risks and their capacities and autonomy to do so.

The EUI is a new and evolving initiative, with its most recent round creating four new alliances and providing existing alliances with EUR 14.4 million each for four further years. While the Commission highlights the sustained opportunity provided for the now 340 participating universities, it is, in the end, an initiative serving only around 7 percent of the European higher education landscape. The concentration of resources to predominantly Western European universities with existing international partnerships consolidates the advantages of selective and relatively resourced universities, putting the EUI's aim of excellence before inclusion. ▲

Lee Rensimer is a postdoctoral research fellow with the Centre for Global Higher Education at the Institute of Education, University College London, UK. Email: L.rensimer@ucl.ac.uk.

Rachel Brooks is professor of sociology and associate dean (research and innovation), Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, University of Surrey, UK. Email: R.brooks@surrey.ac.uk.