



Position paper of the Academic Cooperation Association on the European Strategy for Universities

7 September 2021, Brussels

The upcoming European Strategy for Universities and the full roll-out of the European Universities Initiative are set to provide a unique chance to spotlight and enable the full potential of transnational collaboration within the European landscape. They could tangibly support the European higher education sector by creating a comprehensive policy framework, rooted in enabling conditions and actions, and fostering synergies between the inclusion, sustainability and digitalisation policy priorities, while drawing insight from sound evidence, data intelligence and foresight.

Key messages

To be impactful, the European Strategy for Universities needs to

1. Further potentiate the innovative processes already ongoing in European higher education and research, and boost them through strategic and impactful international collaboration opportunities and programmes;
2. Build on the long-standing and successful examples from members states, national programmes and inspiring institutional examples;
3. Support the piloting of new modes of strategic collaboration, such as European University Alliances, as well as enable spill-over and the development of a wider diversity of collaborations, in full complementarity;
4. Further build the attractiveness of Europe as a top study and research destination, and as a strategic partner, while fully capitalising on potential synergies between existing programmes and initiatives, to create a stronger European identity and image, building on core values;
5. Deploy international cooperation in higher education and research as a tool to deliver on the top policy priorities – inclusion, sustainability and digitalisation – at the institutional, national, and European, as well as global level;
6. Offer comprehensive guidance on synergies – and how to overcome potential tensions – between the top policy priorities in the field of higher education, through enhanced opportunities for exchange, knowledge sharing and peer learning, involving various stakeholders and experts outside of the education and training field;
7. Enable targeted actions for more in-depth collaboration on specific priorities between interested members states, with the European Commission in the facilitating role;
8. Elaborate a more strategic and forward-looking approach to the monitoring, collection, analysis and use of data on various aspects of (international) education and research, focusing particularly on their value added and transformational impact;
9. Enhance and better align feedback loops with beneficiaries of various EU funded programmes to increase data comparability and usage;
10. Create interconnected systems and promote a more consistent use and cross-use of data collected on various EU funded programmes for data intelligence, evidence making and foresight purposes based on a forward-looking planning, with due attention paid to under-explored areas.



Introduction

In September 2020, the European Commission presented the Communications on *Achieving the European Education Area by 2025*, on *A new European Research Area for Research and Innovation*, and the *Digital Education Action Plan*. These strategic documents set several ambitious goals towards “creating a policy framework allowing for seamless and **ambitious transnational cooperation** between higher education institutions in Europe” and “strengthening the research and innovation dimension of universities”.

The Academic Cooperation Association (ACA) welcomes this level of ambition for creating tangible synergies between various university missions. As advocated in its [Reflection Paper](#) of July 2020, “*further enhancing education, research and innovation and the synergies between them through the internationalisation of higher education [...] is an essential ingredient for maximising the potential*”, enhancing quality and producing a more lasting impact. **ACA is strongly committed to support the co-creation** of this comprehensive policy framework and the co-design of related implementation actions and processes, with its long-standing experience in international higher education and through key insights from its membership – internationalisation funding agencies.

The upcoming **European Strategy for Universities** is expected to bring together the higher education dimension of the European Education Area (EEA) and the European Research Area (ERA), encompassing all missions of higher education institutions with the aim to support and equip the sector with all available tools at European level. Developed in consultation with the main stakeholders in the field, including ACA, this Strategy could be particularly **impactful in three areas**, and in which the Union could provide concrete added value:

1. Placing **transnational cooperation** at the heart of the strategy, highlighting and supporting its full innovative potential and impact, as a motor for domestic and institutional reform and meaningful change;
2. Creating a genuinely **comprehensive framework**, with in-built and in-depth synergies – building complementarity between priorities and strategy pillars, policy areas, funding programmes and key expertise – for more impactful transnational cooperation; and
3. Fostering a more strategic and regular **use of data** on (international) higher education – in strategy making, programme design and institutional action setting.

This paper provides a detailed **description** of these strategic areas, **good practice examples of ACA members’** related work at national level, and **actions** that could be supported at EU level through the European Strategy for Universities.

1. **Placing transnational cooperation at the heart of the strategy, highlighting and supporting its full innovative potential and impact**

Nowadays, innovation and change at all levels require a cross-national perspective and cannot be achieved without transnational cooperation and exchange. **International cooperation** in higher education is a **strong driver of innovation** and a powerful tool for individual growth, upskilling and employability, as well as for raising the quality of learning and teaching, research and service to society. As recently evidenced in the sector’s response to the Covid-19 pandemic, transnational collaborations enable higher education institutions to continuously adapt to changing needs, priorities and conditions and to respond to evolving societal challenges.

Important changes at institutional and system level have been triggered by the **Erasmus+ programme** and are being piloted as part of the **European Universities Initiative (EUI)**, the [full roll-out of which is welcomed by ACA](#). At **national level**, ACA members also lead a broad range of initiatives supporting institutional innovation and change through international and strategic forms of cooperation. For example, the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) runs the [International Mobility and Cooperation through Digitalisation programme \(IMKD\)](#), which enables universities to rethink their institutional partnerships and use digital instruments to support internationalisation strategies. The Norwegian Directorate for Higher Education and Skills supports long-term international institutional collaboration with partner countries through, for instance, the [INTPART programme](#). The Tempus Public Foundation (TPF) coordinates the [Campus Mundi programme](#), with the overall aim to improve the quality of higher education with focus on employability.

Based on the past experience at the EU and national level, the European Strategy for Universities could further enhance the role of international cooperation in triggering domestic and institutional reform and meaningful change, as a horizontal, cross-cutting tool that potentiates all strategy pillars.

For the further development of higher education in the **intra-European context**, **long-term institutional collaboration** based on common vision and strategic priorities will be crucial. Such collaboration should be open to all kinds of higher education institutions and partnerships across Europe, regardless of type and size, while the European University Alliances can serve as change makers and inspire new types of partnership creation. **Stronger partnership-building models**, enhanced commitment and efforts are needed to remove the multiple remaining barriers that hinder international collaboration (e.g. recognition of diplomas and study periods abroad), building on the progress achieved so far in the context of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and supporting a quantum leap forward.

When it comes to **global cooperation**, **making Europe more attractive** to foreign talent is a very important driver for reform both within the EU, as well as for fostering innovation in its immediate neighbourhood and globally. Raising Europe's attractiveness as an appealing study and research destination is key for the global competitiveness of Europe's higher education and research. At the same time, international higher education also serves as a vehicle to promote European values on a global scale, and can make European higher education institutions more attractive to top partners across the world.

In this respect, the European Strategy for Universities should build on and further develop the existing instruments such as **Study in Europe** and **Euraxess** which have proven their value in creating a shared identity and image for European higher education and research outside the continent. More specifically, the following actions could be further supported at EU level:

- Encompassing **promotion of Europe** as a destination for both study and research (e.g. by incorporating staff mobility, offering greater visibility to national scholarship and grant programmes);
- Pursuing a more strategic joint promotion of the existing European / transnational opportunities for study and research (e.g. Erasmus+ student and staff mobility opportunities, Erasmus Mundus Joint Programmes, Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions, etc.) to reinforce the collaboration dimension;
- Offering stewardship, peer learning and **capacity-building opportunities** for national promotion agencies and higher education institutions, particularly with regard to the **new topics arising in the global context** such as virtual marketing, talent retention, international alumni relations or academic cooperation with countries with different value systems and/or where academic freedom and human rights are under threat;
- Building further capacity of Euraxess centers to consult on high-quality support services for international academics, with special emphasis on long-term mobility and exchange.



2. Creating a genuinely comprehensive framework, with in-built and in-depth synergies

Inclusion, digitalisation and sustainability are among the top priorities for the higher education sector at EU level and they are also important imperatives in the national and institutional contexts. Concomitantly, **internationalisation and academic mobility**, as elaborated above, are among the **key tools for achieving these overarching objectives**, enabling institutional capacity to deliver on these wider priorities. While many higher education institutions across Europe are about to review their institutional (internationalisation) strategies and approaches, in line with these objectives, important questions arise about the ways to enhance the overall quality of internationalisation experiences in general, and of mobility experiences in particular, by, inter alia, fostering the **compatibility of these priorities** and ensuring their comprehensive implementation.

Most priorities, already quite encompassing in nature, are usually discussed on their own, 'in silos', without reflecting on implications on the other objectives that are to be addressed at the same time, and by the same higher education actors. Examples of such dilemmas that need to be addressed simultaneously by higher education institutions in the mobility context include:

- **Inclusion vs sustainability:** how to offer more flexible and possibly shorter physical mobility pathways without increasing mobility carbon footprint or how to introduce greener options without creating new barriers to mobility for specific groups of learners, and particularly those from groups with fewer opportunities?
- **Digitalisation vs inclusion:** how to offer new opportunities for connection without creating new barriers for groups with fewer opportunities or with limited access to technology? How to avoid a widening gap at a system level between institutions that can afford developing quality digitally-enhanced solutions and those that cannot?
- **Developing comprehensive approaches:** how to combine the old and the new models in mutually-enhancing ways, that are supportive of the institutional missions?

As possible focus areas and priority actions are discussed in the context of the European Strategy for Universities, there is a growing need for a comprehensive policy framework addressing both synergies and potential tensions between the top priorities and strategy pillars, as well as emerging good practices to navigate these dilemmas, in constant dialogue with and between all stakeholders concerned.

While currently reflecting on how to reinforce the synergies between various policy priorities, embedded in the strategy pillars, particularly in the context of [ACA's dedicated event](#), **ACA members already support institutional transformation** in the international context within the identified areas. Examples of such work include the following:

- Incorporating inclusion imperatives in the national higher education internationalisation strategies and offering strategic guidance for higher education institutions (e.g. Agentur für Bildung und Internationalisierung – OeAD);
- Managing specific programmes for mobility and international cooperation for less mobile groups (e.g. [DAAD's "Lehramt.International" programme](#); [NOTED - Norwegian Partnership Programme for International Teacher Education](#));
- Financing international virtual academic collaborations (IVAC) and digitalisation of internationally oriented Master's programmes (e.g. [DAAD's IP Digital](#));
- Offering fully portable loans, scholarships or scholarship top-ups to support more inclusive mobility (e.g. the Norwegian Directorate for Higher Education and Skills; Tempus Public Foundation; the Finnish National Agency for Education - [EDUFI](#));
- Offering financial support to students and scholars at risk (e.g. the Polish National Agency for Academic Exchange - NAWA's [Solidarity with Belarus](#) programme, [DAAD's Hilde Domin Programme](#); the [Scholar Rescue Fund](#) programme run by EDUFI in cooperation with the Institute of International Education (IIE));



- Developing strategies that guide higher education institutions on their way to climate-friendly mobility activities (e.g. [DAAD](#), [the Czech National Agency for International Education and Research - DZS](#), [the Swiss National Agency for Exchange and mobility - Movetia](#)) in addition to supporting international teaching and research collaboration on environmental topics (e.g. the [Franco-German Fellowship Programme on Climate, Energy, and Earth System Research](#) and [Global Centers for Climate and Environment](#) run by DAAD).

Based on this experience, the following **actions could be supported at EU level** via the European Strategy for Universities or other relevant policy mechanisms:

- Providing comprehensive capacity-building activities to help higher education institutions achieve synergies between various policy priorities, including opportunities for **exchange, knowledge sharing and peer learning** involving various stakeholders, and particularly Erasmus+ National Agencies;
- Facilitating a more comprehensive **dialogue with experts in sustainability, digitalisation and inclusion**, coming outside of the education and training field, similar to the mission-oriented approach adopted for Horizon Europe, to tackle grand societal challenges that cannot be solved alone by one sector or discipline;
- Implementing targeted actions for more **in-depth collaboration on specific priorities** between members states and the European Commission (in the facilitating role), for example, co-funding actions engaging member states with similar objectives and approaches in inclusion (e.g. focusing on the same target groups).

3. Fostering a more strategic and regular use of data on international higher education

Data is a strategic asset for higher education institutions and other stakeholders. The implementation of the EEA and the ERA will not be possible without more robust and consistent efforts at EU level, aiming to monitor, collect, analyse, and utilize evidence and data on various aspects of international education, particularly on the impact and value added of various policy and programme initiatives on transformations at the individual, institutional, national and European level.

Thus, a more **strategic, forward-looking and synergetic approach to evaluations** and assessments is needed to support evidence-based policy- and decision-making at various levels.

With this idea in mind, ACA has recently conducted, together with six of its members and three other national agencies, a [comparative analysis of Erasmus+ staff mobility](#) covering both staff mobility between programme, as well as partner countries, and **exploring the potential of the Erasmus+ dataset** for further in-depth analyses, to better grasp the institutional impact of the programme. The study points to the existence of links between recognition practices at mobile staff's institutions, incentives for staff mobility in the institutional strategies and the reported level of satisfaction. It also shows an overall good potential of this dataset to be more regularly used for in-depth comparative analyses between programme countries, as a sound base for future policy and programme design. This is just one example of how existing datasets could be further utilized to their full potential, for evidence-based policy-making.

In this respect, the following **actions at EU level** could further support this objective:

- Enhancing and better **aligning feedback loops** with beneficiaries of various programmes to increase data comparability and usage (e.g. make feedback surveys more meaningful and impactful);
- Creating interconnected systems and promoting a more consistent use and **cross-use of data** collected on various EU funded programmes, such as Erasmus+ and Horizon Europe, for **data intelligence, evidence making** and foresight purposes (e.g. via impact surveys) based on a joint forward-looking planning;



- Addressing **under-explored areas** such as staff mobility developments and links with student mobility patterns and participation; institutional impact of international cooperation activities (mobility, partnerships) and ways to maximise it; development of English-medium instruction in Europe and its attractiveness compared to other destinations; strategic approaches to inclusive internationalisation; learning outcomes of physical mobility compared to blended and online cooperation formats, etc.

Concluding remarks

The co-creation of the European Strategy for Universities and the full roll-out of the European Universities Initiative provides a unique momentum to set up new conditions for the sector to further innovate and to explore the most powerful ways for the further development of higher education in Europe. Transnational collaboration, both in the intra-European and more global context, is a well-known, yet very powerful driver of reform, supporting change at multiple levels. Tapping into its full potential requires comprehensive enabling policy frameworks and accompanying actions, as well as linking various policy priorities such as inclusion, sustainability and digitalisation in both policy and practice, and based on sound evidence, data intelligence and foresight.

ACA members



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De Vlaamse Universiteiten en Hogescholen Raad (Flemish Higher Education Council) – VLUHR International, Belgium



Dům zahraniční spolupráce – DZS, Czech National Agency for International Education and Research, Czech Republic

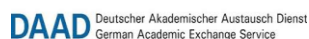


FINNISH NATIONAL AGENCY FOR EDUCATION

Finnish National Agency for Education – EDUFI, Finland



Education and Youth Board of Estonia – HARNO, Estonia



German Academic Exchange Service – DAAD, Germany



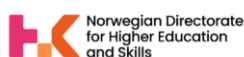
State Scholarships Foundation – IKY, Greece



The Icelandic Centre for Research – RANNIS, Iceland



Tempus Public Foundation – TPF, Hungary



Norwegian Directorate for Higher Education and Skills – Norway



Polish National Agency for Academic Exchange – NAWA, Poland



Centre of the Republic of Slovenia for Mobility and European Educational and Training Programmes (CMEPIUS), Slovenia



SAIA, n.o. (Slovak Academic Information Agency), Slovakia



National Agency for Exchange and Mobility – Movetia, Switzerland



Rectors' Conference of the Swiss Universities, Switzerland



The Agency for Mobility and EU Programmes - AMEUP, Croatia

Associate members



The International Education Center – IEC, Georgia



ETS Global, Netherlands/U.S.



Institute of International Education – IIE, United States