

Event Report



Introduction

To celebrate International Students' Day, DAAD Brussels organised a Breakfast Briefing on the role of students in the European Universities Initiative (EUI). Launched at the 2017 EU Summit, the initiative significantly contributes to the creation of the [European Education Area \(EEA\)](#) and aims to develop a total of 60 European University Alliances (EUAs), representing more than 500 European Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) by 2024. Anna-Lena Sender, Deputy Director of the DAAD Brussels Office, therefore seized the opportunity and invited to an [open dialogue](#) with the initiative's main target group: the students.

While students at all levels of the participating HEIs shall indeed play an active role in the governance structures of the EUAs, the [transformative potential](#) of student-centeredness seems to be barely reflected in the public discussions surrounding the initiative so far. For this reason, the briefing sought to put students at the center and to learn more about the involvement of students as beneficiaries and co-creators, who can and should drive the flagship initiative forward, shaping the next generation of European Universities.

Student-centered approaches in European University Alliances

Matteo Vespa, president of the [European Students' Union \(ESU\)](#) and Juan Rayón, president of the [Erasmus Student Network \(ESN\)](#) pointed out the students' expectations towards the EUI. It is crucial for students to feel integrated in the co-creation of the EUAs to be motivated to engage and untuck the initiative's overall potential. To achieve this, three factors are decisive: 1) Democratic student governance; 2) Student-centered teaching and learning; 3) Reflecting on the social dimension and upleveling students' rights across the EUAs.

Student representatives from four EUAs (EUniWell, Circle U., YUFE and EUTOPIA) shared their experiences, ideas, and proposals on co-creation. Whereas models and institutional practices differ between alliances, student representatives emphasised that bottom-up student engagement is an important factor in the success of each alliance. The main challenges seem to be insufficient resources and funding structures as well as lacking continuity and inclusivity in terms of student engagement and representation. As the respected alliances are primarily built with and for students, the realisation of true inclusion represents a shared top priority.

Open panel discussion: Benefits and challenges for co-creation

In dialogue with Sophia Eriksson Waterschoot, Directorate-General for Education and Culture of the European Commission (DG EAC), the EUAs had the opportunity to reflect on the issues presented, as well as to place them in the broader context of youth empowerment, democratic participation, and a European sense of belonging as important pillars for the EEA and European societies in general. Director Sophia Eriksson Waterschoot expressed her appreciation for the valuable input and welcomed the diverse approaches of the alliances. The European Year of Youth 2022 has set the course for new opportunities and increased youth engagement, also across the EUAs. Student involvement is the key to achieving an ever-closer Union in higher education. As such, students play a crucial role in the governance structures and in the implementation of activities within the alliances. Despite the institutions involved in the alliances coming from different starting points and (cultural) backgrounds, they have nevertheless been able to find constructive ways of working together.

Considering that the initiative has been launched without concrete benchmarks for student-centred approaches, the question of benchmarking and political incentives for student-centred approaches in future actions was critically discussed. While some drew attention to the risk of stimulating the wrong kind of behaviour, others stressed the urgent need for qualitative assessment of student engagement and participation. What is needed is flexibility and openness towards different models and approaches of alliances as well as the involvement of lecturers and professors in addition to student engagement.

Yet increased transnational cooperation in higher education also comes with certain costs. The institutions' diverse cultural and academic backgrounds make coordinated work within and across the alliances more demanding and time-consuming. Especially for students, it might well make sense to integrate the alliances' activities into the curriculum in order to avoid additional workload and encourage student engagement. Better communication formats are needed, as well as resources and funding for bottom-up strategies to engage with other students and reduce the lack of knowledge and participation of students in the EUAs. Permanent structures also need to be created within EUAs and each HEI to enable the flow of information and the exchange of best practices to support internationalisation efforts.

Conclusion and take-aways

The Breakfast Briefing stimulated a rich exchange between different key stakeholders and acted as a catalyst for new ideas and connections. Not only did it illustrate the importance of student engagement and participation for the EUAs, but equally for the overall construction of the EEA in the long term. Providing a [platform for mutual learning](#), it represented a genuine European encounter, in which student representatives from all parts of Europe participated. Many felt inspired and encouraged to push for greater student participation in their own institutions and alliances.

In this context, Kevin Guillaume, Secretary-General of Circle U., proposed to conduct a [study on co-creation and student-centered approaches](#), which was broadly supported by the other alliance representatives as well as by ESN and ESU. Since the EU Commission has funded some studies on various aspects since the launch of the EUI, it would be very welcome if the Commission or other organisations would initiate a study on this important [transversal issue](#). The collection of data, for instance from the student councils, and knowledge about benefits and best practices, barriers and challenges from the EUAs (ideally also from HEIs beyond the EUI) would strongly support the further realisation of student-centered approaches.