

Reinforcing global partnerships in higher education and research: The world needs the EU and the EU needs the world

Position paper (31 March 2025)

About this position paper

Drawing on their extensive experience and expertise in funding and implementing international development programmes in the field of academic cooperation, the organisations affiliated with the Forum on Cooperation for Sustainable Development in Higher Education Group (S-DHG¹) and partners, joined forces to advocate for the role of higher education (HE) and research as key drivers of the EU's global development and partnership priorities, especially in the framework of the EU's Global Gateway.

The forthcoming proposal for the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) 2028-2034 will be a crucial benchmark for the European Commission's commitment to deliver on its ambitions and to solidify the role of the EU as a global player in an increasingly multipolar world, underpinning cooperation with distinct EU values.

A cost-effective investment with lasting returns, also for Europe

International higher education and joint research collaborations across borders and continents are engines of world-class knowledge production, facilitating innovation and change. They connect academic knowledge to real-world solutions, stimulate scientific breakthroughs and boost technological advances, while driving global progress and economic growth that benefit both local and EU industries. Higher education equips future generations with the skills and competences needed to address pressing global challenges, providing a talent pool that businesses, governments and research institutions can tap into, both within partner countries as well as in Europe – an increasingly critical resource in times of skilled labour shortages. Amongst the S-DHG affiliated organisations that support this paper, numerous studies and impact assessments of cooperation instruments have been published to this effect

A critical chance for the EU to lead with its innovative, inclusive and value-driven model

Europe's approach to international HE and research cooperation is unique, rooted in principles such as openness, multilateralism, and mutual benefit, aligning its partnership engagement with core democratic values and sustainable development goals. In an era marked by geopolitical shifts, budgetary pressures and international development cooperation under scrutiny, the EU's commitment to international HE and research cooperation has become even more critical for building robust global connections and strengthening resilient societies within Europe and beyond.

Enhancing international cooperation serves the EU's peace and security interests

As many regions face instability, authoritarian influences, disinformation, and social unrest, there is a pressing need for international collaborations to nurture stable and democratic societies. Enhancing investment in research and higher education in developing and fragile regions through

¹ Since 2011, the S-DHG is an annual forum that brings together funding and implementing agencies and organisations dedicated to sustainable international development and capacity building in higher education. It provides a platform to connect and discuss good practices and future initiative on themes such as building alliances in international and development projects and creating sustainable and long-term impacts through higher education and research. With a proven track record of delivering transformative results, the partners involved in S-DHG have longstanding experience in supporting equitable projects for universities and offering scholarships to students, researchers, and academics in partner countries within Africa, South-East Asia and Latin America.

international partnerships remains essential for fostering social cohesion, securing human capital, and reducing threats. These efforts align directly with the EU's own peace and security priorities and should be secured and scaled up. This means investing in collaborative higher education and research around shared development priorities, but also in institutional capacity building (higher education institutions as motors for local development in partner countries and viable partners to EU institutions).

Leveraging science diplomacy as a significant power in EU foreign relations

Science diplomacy is a strategic element of the EU foreign and security policies, providing pathways for soft as well as – under certain conditions – a hard power. This enables the EU to pursue its own interests and promote values such as democracy, academic freedom, critical thinking, human rights, and the rule of law when addressing global challenges with partners in an increasingly multipolar world. International research collaborations and mobility programmes play a key role for EU science diplomacy as they foster ecosystems that enable the transfer of scientific research into policymaking. Strong alumni networks and academic and research partnerships contribute to long-term people-to-people ties with the EU.

Strengthening the coherence and alignment of existing instruments

A comprehensive strategy calls for synergies across different policy tools. By improving the coordination and alignment of international higher education and research collaboration, capacity-building, and academic exchange components under the Global Gateway Initiative, the Erasmus+ programme, and the next research and innovation programme, the European Commission is called to ensure a more efficient use of EU funding, generating multiplier effects and amplifying the impact of its flagship initiatives. Moreover, we call for more Team Europe initiatives in the field of higher education and research as an impactful multi-stakeholder engagement combining public-private funding.

Some of the concrete actions we would strongly support:

- The establishment of a higher education and research sounding board / advisory board to the Global Gateway to guide the development of EU priorities, provide the necessary knowledge ground for evidence-based investment decision-making and to generate crucial buy-in of stakeholders.
- Continue the commitment to spend 13% of the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument – Global Europe (NDICI-GE) funding on education, with a strong higher education and research portfolio to support economic development, innovation as well as regional collaboration and regional integration. The model of the EU is unique, and it is one of the only global funders/investors to prioritise higher education as a pillar of regional economic integration. Inspiring other regions to strengthen a regional approach will benefit Europe in the long-term.
- Higher education in emergency programmes such as “EU Mobility Programme for Myanmar” (EMPM) are crucial for Europe's credibility in the world as they reflect the EU's commitment to human rights, foster educational continuity, contribute to retaining intellectual capital and to supporting the recovery and reconstruction of research and higher education systems in conflict and crisis-affected regions. Piloting further schemes and scaling up existing initiatives would benefit the EU's standing as a credible partner.

- Driving innovation through university-industry cooperation and this way also engaging the private sector.

Conclusion

The EU already invests significantly in international cooperation, yet stronger funding is essential to scale up its efforts. Cutting support risks weakening global partnerships, diminishing innovation, and reducing the EU’s strategic influence as a key global player in an increasingly volatile world. Now is the time to reinforce investment in international higher education, research and collaborative knowledge production as a cornerstone of global development. We urge the European Commission, the European Parliament and the Member States in the spirit of a true Team Europe approach to act decisively and stand ready to discuss how to shape its agenda under the next MFF.

Names and logos of co-signing S-DHG organisations and partners

AASU, ACU, British Council, DAAD, Danida Fellowship Centre, EDUFI, ERASuD, HK-dir, OeAD, OBREAL, The Guild, UNIMED and VLIRUOS.

