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University alliances want funding shift as EU signals renewed backing

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“Alliances 2.0” hint brings call for greater support to help initiative drive EU’s strategic goals

Alliances of European universities, formed through an EU initiative to enhance cross-border collaboration, have cautiously welcomed European Commission hints at a new phase of support but called for funding changes to help them drive Europe’s strategic goals.

Last month, the Commission president Ursula von der Leyen included “European university alliances 2.0” among her priorities for the coming year set out in a letter of intent—but provided no further detail either there or in her State of the Union address.

Having launched in 2019 with the aim of making European higher education more international, there are now 73 European Universities Initiative alliances involving about 650 higher education institutions, collaborating on activities such as the creation of joint courses and research posts.

But the alliances have long complained that their funding—mainly on a project basis from the EU’s Erasmus+ programme for academic mobility and cooperation, with national top-ups in some cases—is too short-term and uncertain for the kind of strategic joint initiatives the EU has said it wants them to undertake.

With many questions yet to be answered about how the alliances will be funded under the EU’s 2028-34 budget, their inclusion in von der Leyen’s priorities has been taken as a positive sign.

‘Natural next step’

Sophia Karner, secretary general of the Una Europa alliance, said she welcomed the mention.

“It is encouraging to see European university alliances highlighted,” Karner told Research Professional News. “While ‘alliances 2.0’ is yet to be defined, we view this as a natural next step that builds on lessons learned over the past seven years, rather than a new political direction.”

Karner called on the Commission to offer “a clear, consolidated vision” that unites the EU member states behind the alliances and provides sufficient resources going forward.

“[This inclusion] is particularly timely, as we continue to advocate for a more sustainable, coordinated and predictable funding framework for alliances,” she said.

Caution over scope

Kevin Guillaume, secretary general of the Circle U alliance, expressed concern that the mention of the alliances in von der Leyen’s letter came under the heading “social and inclusion”.

“I hope that the categorisation...does not signal a narrowing of the vision for the alliances or of the role they are expected to play,” he told RPN.

This is a particular concern, he said, in the context of plans to create a European Competitiveness Fund to better support technology commercialisation in the 2028-34 budget. He said the ECF could support the alliances, and that their definition should be broad enough to enable this.

Despite these worries, Guillaume said it was an “extremely positive signal” to see the alliances explicitly mentioned.

Competitiveness recognition drive

At about the same time that von der Leyen’s priorities were unveiled, 271 higher education institutions across 30 countries signed a [joint statement](#), organised by the Unita alliance, calling for the 2028-34 EU budget to explicitly recognise the role of alliances in supporting competitiveness.

Cristina Prandi and Laurent Bordes, respectively the coordinator of the Unita alliance and the chair of its governance board, said: “This mobilisation demonstrates that European higher education institutions share a strong expectation: [the] alliances should be recognised as long-term strategic instruments for Europe’s competitiveness, sovereignty, skills and cohesion.”

Beatrix Busse, chair of ForEU4All, an EU-funded project promoting the alliances’ long-term development, told RPN they could also contribute to EU goals around the free movement of knowledge, international cooperation and the adoption of human-centred artificial intelligence.

“We look forward to working together with the...Commission, member states, policymakers and the wider sector to build the vision together,” she added.

Long-term funding settlement

To help the alliances contribute “more to wider EU policy goals around skills and competitiveness”, John Edwards, secretary general of the European Association for the Applied Sciences in Higher Education, said they should be funded not only through Erasmus+ but also through the ECF, the Horizon Europe research and innovation programme and regional cohesion funds.

He suggested this could be subject to their performance, but warned this must “reflect the diversity of the alliances rather than imposing a one-size-fits-all approach”.

Mervin Bakker, executive director of the European Association for International Education, said the long-term success of the alliances will depend on the ability of participating universities to “embed” the alliances in their institutional strategies and core activities.

“The next phase should therefore focus on both dimensions of sustainability: a credible long-term policy and funding framework at European and national government level, and strong institutional ownership.”

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