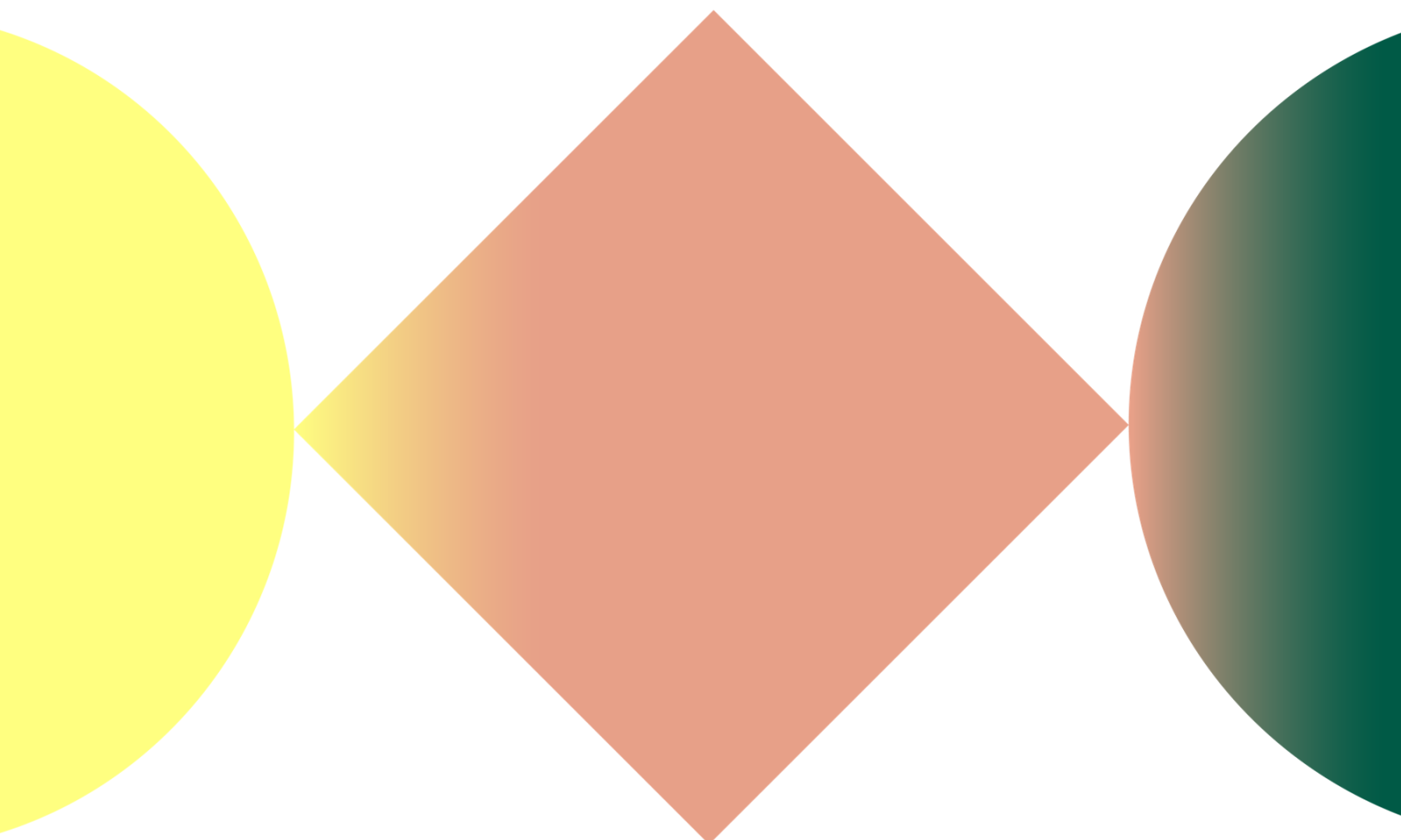


# Catalysts for innovation: European Universities and the European Education Area



Una Europa position paper on the Erasmus+ programme

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# Introduction

European Universities alliances are at the core of a **globally competitive and attractive European Education Area (EEA) and European Research Area (ERA)**. They are catalysts for both **innovation and excellence** in higher education and research in Europe and beyond. As a high-level political priority of the European Commission, most recently highlighted in the European Strategy for Universities, European Universities are seen as pioneers and tasked with ambitious objectives, including in the area of **joint education and mobility provision**.

The Una Europa partner universities have come together to shape the future of quality education and excellent research of high impact, based on their complementary strengths. The alliance has already taken first decisive steps with the establishment of the [Joint Bachelor of Arts in European Studies](#) as well as the [Joint Doctoral Programme in Cultural Heritage](#). At the same time, a truly integrated and transnational European campus requires structural integration of physical and virtual spaces to enable seamless collaboration across the partner universities. In this respect, the Una Europa partner universities are committed to designing **inclusive mobility opportunities and meaningful international experiences** for all students and staff – not only to the benefit of the alliance but with a view towards encouraging collaboration with other higher education institutions (HEIs) and inspiration of the higher education sector as a whole.

In Una Europa, international experiences are not merely seen through a quantitative lens but designed with a focus on **qualitative impact**. International experiences therefore capture initiatives that go beyond simple ‘exchange’ modalities but are also targeting the acquisition of specific disciplinary and/or transversal competences and skills, as well as providing both students and staff with clear added value in terms of **personal, academic and professional growth**. International experiences are also key to promoting European values, fostering social integration, enhancing intercultural understanding and building a sense of belonging. Based on this understanding, Una Europa aims to deliver international experiences at scale by further growing **different types of physical mobility**, ranging from short-term opportunities to embedded semester-long mobility, while also investing increasingly in the design of new and innovative **virtual and blended formats**. In addition, the alliance believes in the value of **internationalisation at home**, taking advantage of the richness of the international environment existing on campus and the diversity of cultures that form the student and staff communities at the partner universities.

The alliance follows its guiding principles of designing more **accessible, inclusive, and sustainable opportunities**, mindful of existing barriers, based on analysis by its Affordably Abroad Task Force. Such an approach ensures that the **transformative benefits** linked to international and intercultural experiences can reach as many students and staff as possible, notably those who are less likely to be exposed to internationalisation.

The Erasmus+ programme is a key to delivering the ambitions of European Universities alliances, which in turn play a pivotal role in implementing the high-level political priorities of the European Strategy for Universities as well as the European Education Area as a whole. The following sections outline Una Europa’s input, with a particular focus on the **future of the European Universities initiative** as well as **mobility and joint programme** components. Each section consists of an overview of key challenges and needs for the future.

A more detailed analysis of KA2 and KA3 actions will be developed with experts across the Una Europa partner universities by Q2 2024. This will also feature relevant final policy recommendations coming out of the [ED-AFFICHE project](#).

## The future of the European Universities Initiative

### Challenges

- While funding through the European Universities initiative thus far has been crucial, it must be highlighted that engagement in European Universities alliances has required – and will continue to imply – significant levels of **internal investment** from the partner universities, ranging from the commitment of university leadership to **in-kind contributions** of both academic and professional staff on a day-to-day basis.
- Furthermore, it is important to acknowledge that **project-based funding**, even if implemented over longer timescales, requires continued coordination efforts across projects and carries significant implications for the key personnel behind the delivery of European Universities alliances, i.e. in the form of short-term contracts and lack of long-term perspectives for staff.
- At the same time, partner universities have been able to benefit from **regional and national co-investment** to support their engagement in European Universities. However, there has been a disparity of co-investment among participating countries and funding provided has often been linked to narrow geographical and thematic scopes.
- Una Europa has partner universities from the **United Kingdom and Switzerland** (The University of Edinburgh and Universität Zürich, respectively), where the non-association of their countries to the Erasmus+ programme has led to concrete limitations regarding their participation in the alliance's flagship Erasmus+ projects and related activities.
- It is also worth noting that the **siloe approach** to providing funding for European Universities alliances at European level has been a major challenge – one that will be compounded in the future, as the alliances' Horizon2020 projects come to an end.

### Needs

- Una Europa continues to call for the development of a **holistic funding to support transnational collaboration** of universities across the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) that allows for co-investment of regional, national, and European sources. Such a funding instrument should:
  - provide a **long-term funding perspective** across education, research, and innovation;
  - be **competitive in nature** and always be geared towards the principles of excellence and impact;
  - represent an **additional investment** and not take away from existing education and research and innovation priorities and associated funding lines;
  - recognise and support the **diversity of higher education collaborations** in Europe;
  - be **open to the world**, encouraging global participation and co-investment.
- At the same time, **clear incentives for coordinated co-investment** must be developed to bring national governments on board in collaboration with the higher education sector.
- The European Commission is in a leading position to play a coordinating role here, in order to bring together national governments, encourage the exchange of best practices and facilitate the development of a joint framework that is supported and co-owned by policymakers at all levels. In this context, engagement with

policymakers from all countries that participate in the European Universities initiative, notably Bologna countries, such as the United Kingdom and Switzerland, is crucial.

- Currently, a total of nine Swiss HEIs, representing around 40% of all universities and universities of applied sciences in Switzerland, as well as addition eight UK HEIs participate in alliances.
- The design of an **international and outward-looking European Universities initiative** is pivotal to support European Universities alliances in their ambition to act as flagships of European higher education, committed to tackling the most pressing global challenges, in collaboration with like-minded partners across the globe.
  - Concretely, we advocate that the European Universities initiative be open to include full partners from all countries in the EHEA in the short term and other interested institutions from priority regions across the globe, such as Africa, in the medium to long term.
- As European Universities alliances move from pilot into consolidation phase, it is equally crucial that sufficient consideration is paid to ensuring **long-term sustainability of actions**. While continuing to invest in new and innovative actions, alliances also require the appropriate time and resources to focus on deepening processes and consolidating initiatives developed thus far.
- At the same time, the **diversity of European Universities alliances** must be increasingly supported in the future to ensure a strategic direction, where each alliance is encouraged to develop in line with their specific vision and mission, rather than being regarded as the testbed for a growing number of policy priorities at European level.

## Provision of mobility opportunities for all

### Challenges

- European Universities are navigating a complex reality when it comes to funding all types of mobility in the alliance context – on the one hand, alliances are tasked with achieving the European Commission's ambitious goals for mobility; on the other hand, the partner universities may be faced with conflicting national policies that often do not support international physical mobility.
- As Una Europa, we are proud to have initiated several **high-impact formats for students and staff**, such as student challenges, Summer and Winter Schools, the 'Live My Life' staff-shadowing initiative as well as International Staff Weeks, which have immensely benefited from Erasmus+ funding in their design and conceptualisation phase. Students at the partner universities have also set up Local Task Forces in each of the Una Europa institutions, where they can benefit from virtual exchanges with their counterparts, thus strengthening internationalisation at home.
- However, it must be clearly stated that the budget provided under the Una.Futura project, Una Europa's roll-out project under the European Universities initiative funded by the Erasmus+ programme, does not begin fund the implementation of these initiatives or embedded mobilities in the alliance's joint programmes – not in the short term, let alone the long term.
- As a result, current mobility activities in the framework of the alliance are primarily funded via the partner universities' existing Erasmus+ mobility budgets at this stage. This poses three key challenges:
  - **Insufficient levels of funding:** The current budgets are insufficient to cover new mobility initiatives, even at this early stage of implementing the alliance's targets. This challenge will likely only continue to grow, as alliances mature and expand their offering. Going forward, it is crucial that appropriate budget underpins ambition at European level.

- **Limited flexibility:** The current Erasmus+ programme does not offer sufficient flexibility to allow for the funding of innovative new mobility formats, or fully accommodate the specific needs of a European Universities alliance as a trust-based and long-term partnership.
- **Competing priorities:** The Una Europa partner universities are global institutions that have many ongoing mobility agreements and existing partnership with other HEIs both in Europe and around the world. It is important to ensure that these commitments continue to be underpinned with the required resources, in complement to ongoing collaboration within the alliance.
- Furthermore, it is important to highlight additional challenges faced by partner universities located in the **United Kingdom and Switzerland**, currently without access to Erasmus+ funding, that are relying on local budgets to fund their outgoing mobilities. This is creating an obvious challenge that requires creativity and flexibility to ensure that alliances can offer equitable mobility opportunities for all students across the EHEA.
- When it comes to embedded mobility, including at Doctoral level, there are numerous ways to integrate blended mobility initiatives, such as funded through Blended Intensive Programmes (BIPs); however, there are numerous challenges, for example linked to lengthy administrative procedures, the minimum requirement for the number of participants as well as the different statuses of PhD candidates across Member States and other participating countries.

## Needs

- First and foremost, it must be clearly stated that, going forward, **unparalleled investment in mobility** will be required at national and European levels to ensure exposure of a growing number of students and staff. At the same time, increased attention must be paid to the **development of new instruments** specifically to design high-quality and meaningful blended and virtual formats, beyond what is currently possible. Importantly, such instruments should also consider the digital infrastructure, such as the development of and support for dedicated digital spaces and platforms, to underpin the delivery of blended and virtual opportunities at scale in complement to physical mobility opportunities. This investment will become increasingly crucial in the next Multi-Annual Financial Framework.
- Una Europa is committed to the development of **Joint Innovative Formats for mobility**, which are designed to be scaled in all types of collaborations with international partners in Europe and across the world, thereby offering more diverse opportunities to students and staff and leading to broader global impact. Targeted investment in these actions would therefore benefit the higher education community more broadly.
- Based on Una Europa's experience in developing and implementing joint programmes (more details in the subsequent section), we additionally advocate for the following **short-term actions** to introduce further flexibility when it comes to embedded mobility in joint programmes delivered in the alliance context, as these often go beyond previously tested models and include more ambitious embedded mobility opportunities, compared to national degree programmes:
  - Duration of mobility opportunities funded, in particular at Bachelor and Doctoral levels;
  - Possibility to pass past performance from one partner university to another, should the coordinating institution of a joint programme change during its implementation;
  - Possibility to pool resources across the partner institutions of an alliance to ensure smooth organization of mobility periods linked to a joint programme.

- **BIPs** have been a welcome addition in the Erasmus+ programme, as a flexible way to support hybrid mobility opportunities, including the context of European Universities alliances. In order to ensure that this instrument is adapted to the needs of alliances, we advocate for introducing more flexibility in terms of:
  - Ability to include international participants, either coming from Bologna countries and/or financed by the Erasmus+ external policy funding, in the overall required number of participants per BIP;
  - Duration of physical mobility periods, which are currently set between 3–5 days, in order to accommodate different types of Summer/ Winter Schools and PhD workshops in a more agile way;
  - Full participation of HEIs not associated to the programme and particular encouragement to include partners from priority regions across the globe.
- **Transnational consortia to drive student and staff mobility:** Within the current Erasmus+ programme, there is a possibility for several higher education institutions in one country to come together in one consortium to submit joint applications for higher education mobility projects. In our view, it would be highly beneficial to European Universities alliances as well as other international partnerships, if this mechanism were to be expanded to enable transnational consortia of higher education institutions.
  - The creation of transnational consortia could, for example, facilitate the creation of a common network of institutions for traineeships within the countries represented in the alliance and beyond, or constitute a possible way of funding job-shadowing initiatives for professional staff.
  - This could also be extended to support the global collaboration dimension of European Universities alliances by extending the scope to priority regions across the globe, i.e. Sub-Saharan Africa.

## Support for the Joint Programmes of the Future

### Challenges

- European Universities alliances are natural testbeds for the next generation of joint programmes, tasked with developing European inter-university campuses. They provide the space for developing the joint programmes of the future, which often go beyond previously tested models and push the boundaries of what is feasible in transnational collaboration today.
- In this ambitious endeavour, alliances are confronted with numerous legislative and administrative obstacles that persist to date and hamper our plans of taking transnational collaboration to the next level.
- As Una Europa, we have experienced this first-hand with our **Joint Bachelor of Arts in European Studies**, the first truly joint Bachelor's Degree in the EHEA.
  - This programme took tremendous efforts by professionals and academics across our partner institutions to get over the line and creative ad-hoc solutions had to be found to navigate existing limitations and divergences across the EHEA.
- In addition, the alliance invested in the development of the **Una Europa Joint Doctoral Programme in Cultural Heritage (Una-Her-Doc)**. Una-Her-Doc is an innovative multilingual, multidisciplinary and international programme, co-created by cultural heritage experts across the Una Europa universities with different disciplinary backgrounds, languages, scientific traditions and methodological approaches that have come together to educate the Cultural Heritage experts of the future.
  - Challenges encountered range from administrative hurdles, including the different status of PhD candidates in different EHEA countries as well as limitations as regards interdisciplinarity and the

award joint degrees at Doctoral level, to major funding challenges, which continue to require constant attention and place a burden on both the institutions and the PhD candidates themselves.

## Needs

- Systemic change is needed to facilitate the development and implementation of joint degrees across Europe. Based on intermediate results of the ED-AFFICHE project, the European Degree Label could be such a catalyst to transform current practices and act an enabler of deeper European cooperation.
- Una Europa advocates the establishment of a **competitive funding instrument for the European Degree label**, as a concrete way to tackle numerous challenges related to the development and implementation of joint programmes within European Universities alliances at present. Such a dedicated open and competitive funding instrument at EU level is crucial both to support alliances in their ambitious mission and ensure that the label itself reaches its full potential.
  - The overarching objective of such a funding instrument should be two-fold: one the one hand, it should support higher education institutions of all types and sizes across Europe in setting up of high-quality joint programmes at all levels of higher education with a particular focus on Bachelor and Doctoral levels.
  - On the other hand, this funding instrument should include provisions for fully funded scholarships, covering both tuition fees as well as mobility opportunities.
  - This funding instrument should be competitive in nature and open to all consortia of HEIs and awarded on a peer review process for evaluating bottom-up bids for competitive funding, along the lines of Erasmus Mundus Joint Masters and European Joint Doctorates).
  - We call for such a funding instrument to be considered as part of the interim evaluation of the Erasmus+ 2021–27 programme in the form of a pilot, with a full roll-out of the instrument recommended in the subsequent Erasmus+ programme as part of the next Multi-Annual Financial Framework for 2028 onwards.
  - In this regard, the final policy recommendations of the ED-AFFICHE project, expected in spring 2024, are crucial to take into account.

## Way forward

- Una Europa and other European Universities alliances are keen to engage with the European Commission and believe in the importance to engage also directly with Erasmus+ National Agencies to discuss future funding possibilities for mobilities in the framework of European Universities alliances.
  - A **co-creation process with all relevant stakeholders** is needed to develop a programme that reflects the needs on the ground and offers sufficient levels of funding and flexibility in the long run.
- A more detailed analysis of KA2 and KA3 actions will be developed with experts across the Una Europa partner universities and shared with the European Commission by Q2 2024, including final policy recommendations of the ED-AFFICHE project.



# About Una Europa

Una Europa is an alliance of 11 leading universities from all corners of Europe. Together, they are forging a new path for education and research in Europe and beyond to shape our shared future for the better. The Una Europa community spans more than half a million students, 100,000 members of staff and 10 languages, grounded in over 1,000 years of collective heritage.

Una Europa partner universities:

Freie Universität Berlin | Alma mater studiorum - Università di Bologna | University College Dublin/An Coláiste Ollscoile Baile Átha Cliath | University of Edinburgh | Helsingin yliopisto/Helsingfors universitet | Uniwersytet Jagielloński w Krakowie | Universiteit Leiden | KU Leuven | Universidad Complutense de Madrid | Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne | Universität Zürich

Founded in 2019, Una Europa has secured successive rounds of European Union funding to realise its vision for a European 'University of the Future'. In just three years, the alliance's pilot project succeeded in launching nine joint programmes – [including Europe's first truly joint Bachelor's degree](#) – transcending boundaries of discipline, institution, and country to take international collaboration to the next level. The alliance has also taken its first steps towards a common research ecosystem underpinned by a shared research and innovation agenda.

Guided by its 2030 Strategy, Una Europa is working towards a truly inter-university and pan-European campus, shaped by universities' universal and fundamentally interwoven obligations to society: research and innovation, teaching and learning, and societal outreach.

Visit [una-europa.eu](https://una-europa.eu) to learn more.

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