"European Universities Networks"

Stakeholders' Meeting Report

On 7 February 2018, a meeting was organised by DG EAC with representatives of transnational cooperation and other stakeholders, such as student organisations and networks of HEIs, with the aim of achieving a better understanding (i.e. a 'mapping') of current cooperation models (what works, the challenges and the solutions – see Box 1 below). Their feedback described below will help shape the concept and the implementation modalities of the new initiative on the networks of European universities. DG RTD, JRC and DG REGIO were all present at this meeting.

Box 1 on mapping

<u>**What works today**</u>: A wide diversity of cooperation models exist, i.e. regional, thematic. For instance, participants indicated the EUCOR, EUROTECH, Franco-German University as current successful stories for cooperation which are 'tried and tested' models. Mutual trust between the institutions is of utmost importance. They also emphasised the relevance of mutual trust between the institutions and that all university staff (i.e. at management, academic and administrative levels), researchers, and students must be involved if any future initiative on networks of European universities is to succeed.

<u>**Barriers for an integrated model**</u>: Participants indicated the following:
Language as a barrier; insufficient and/or inconsistent long-term funding for sustainable partnerships with different modes of national/regional support; the need to apply every year to a multiplicity of calls (at EU and national level) hampers the sustainability of such partnerships; high costs associated with high volumes of student/staff/researchers mobility; lack of mobility windows embedded in curricula; too often curricula are too strict and not open enough; learning outcomes, recognition procedures and national accreditation systems that are non- standardised; national accreditation systems vary from each other; and the political will is too often very short-term and subject to too many changes.

<u>**Possible solutions**</u>: Participants indicated the following:
Ensure the right balance between a top-down and bottom-up approach; a need to define overarching goals leaving it to the partnerships to decide how to reach them; providing adequate long-term funding to set up the framework and provide autonomy to the partnerships to define their priorities themselves according to their specific needs and profiles to be in line with EU policies and priorities in the field of Higher Education and research; a need for a bottom-up approach with a minimum of pre-defined standards - with for example the commitment to implement fully the 3 key commitments of Bologna (through the signature of a Charter that is then monitored); more e-learning and blended/virtual mobility to cut down costs and increase internationalisation; curriculum design based on learning outcomes, and fostering peer-work between students, staff and researchers in multidisciplinary teams; use common shared values as the glue between the partner HEIs; build links with local ecosystems; and set-up a common EU pot (from different EU instruments) as seed money to avoid the multiplicity of calls to apply for the initiative.
Importantly, they stressed on the fact that ALL university staff at management, academic and administrative levels, researchers, and students must be involved if any future initiative on European universities is to succeed.

The stakeholders' meeting also held a discussion on defining key aspects of the initiative such as defining the scope and objectives, the eligibility and evaluation criteria besides exploring ways on how synergies could be created between different EU programmes. Their input is showcased in Box 2 below.

Box 2 on defining key aspects of the initiative

Defining the scope and objectives: Participants indicated the following:

Scope: Strategy and goals must be clearly defined; the main goal should be to achieve a joint governance with a common shared long-term vision and values as the glue between the partner HEIs; objectives and scope should be defined and should not be too specific – they should vary according to the type of network (discipline, thematic, by university-type) but should promote the modernisation agenda in HEIs; it must be a partnership of a new quality (attractive, top quality) enabling broadening of expertise (complementarity of academic offer and research to cover more fields – something which a single HEI cannot offer on its own); locally/regionally grounded (universities better connected with societies and the regions) and internationally focused; and the need to promote a European mind-set in a broader world.

The participants also came up with the following objectives as means to realize the raised level of ambition: more e-learning and blended/virtual mobility to cut down costs and increase internationalization; curriculum design based on learning outcomes and fostering peer-work between students, staff and researchers in multidisciplinary teams; support knowledge societies addressing for instance sustainable development goals in all the EU Member States to tackle competitiveness.

Objectives: Promote European identity (educate European citizens in a global world, intercultural, language learning, no eurocentrism); create 'places of innovation in education and excellence in research' through interaction with other countries (added value); better skills training and employability; provide research oriented education starting already at bachelor level; incorporate Innovation, digitalization in all activities; match academic excellence and societal relevance, with prime focus on diversity and inclusion, societal impact and relevance of research, students' engagement, and finally, innovation of teaching and learning.

Defining the eligibility and evaluation criteria: Participants indicated the following:

Eligibility: All HEIs should be able to apply for this call. Depending on the objectives, other actors (economic, social, etc) may also be involved in such initiatives (discussions moved towards setting a minimum/maximum number of countries rather than HEIs); the possibility of imposing a "1 HEI = 1 bid" rule (this would enforce a healthier level of commitment and strategic resolve); a minimum number of 3 partners/countries for the networks may not guarantee diversity and/or geographically balanced consortia (a minimum of 4 or even 5 countries should be considered); a maximum number (ceiling) of HEIs for the network should not be set (models involving more partners (8 to 12) have delivered no less impactful results in the past; and a core group of up to 8 partners could be complemented by other actors acting in a more limited capacity).

Evaluation: Strategic vision and relevance is necessary; an ability to sustain actions beyond the temporal scope of the call; quality of the proposal; relevance of the model of implementation; quality of the consortium to deliver the planned actions; involvement of beneficiaries; impact

(local/regional/EU) and impact for profound and systemic change; the ability to bridge education-research divide and universities and society at large; and the need of a good communication plan.

Exploring ways on creating synergies between different EU programmes - organisation and funding:

Participants indicated the following:

An integrated approach of application for accessing education research or innovation funding; setting-up a common EU pot (from different EU instruments including E+ and FP9 funds) as seed money to avoid the applications to a multiplicity of calls; industry and structural funds shall be complementary and to be applied for only if and when necessary; one evaluation process with diverse reviewers/experts from education, research and innovation; and Member States need to commit that they will carry on the project when the EU funding is over.