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According to the Coimbra Group – a network of long-established European comprehensive, multidisciplinary universities – the European Universities Initiative should continue promoting flexibility, creativity, bottom-up approach and inclusiveness.

‘These are success keys for implementing an ambition with respect to fostering the quality of higher education and research.’

An unprecedented but still fragile initiative

The essential role of networks

Ludovic Thilly

Coimbra Group, Brussels

Since the speech of French President Macron in September 2017¹ and the follow-up Gothenburg EU Social Summit and December 2017 European Council Conclusions², the Coimbra Group has been continuously involved in the development of the European Universities Initiative.

First, as a permanent member of the Stakeholder Group set up by the European Commission both during the design consultation (2018-2019) and the future roll-out consultation (2020-2021); second, as a proactive supporter to its member universities in the preparation of their applications; third as a platform facilitating the exchanges of experiences

and learning between its consistent universities as well as disseminating the advances achieved through their alliances. To date, 32 Coimbra Group universities are involved in eight alliances (4EU+, ARQUS, CHARM-EU, Circle U., EC2U, ENLIGHT, EUniWell, Una Europa) and the Coimbra Group is an Associated Partner to CHARM-EU, Circle U., EC2U and Una Europa.

In its effort to contribute to transforming the European Universities Initiative into a real game changer with respect to the creation of a single European Higher Education and Research Area, the Coimbra Group has organised two public workshops on the initiative since June 2020 that were both successful in terms of attendance and level of discussion.³ Among the many take-away messages are these three.

- European Universities alliances have already demonstrated to be true game changers in the field of European and international knowledge. Their structure has proved to provide the right framework for universities to address global challenges, as shown by the ways they have been responding to the Covid-19 crisis. Structured cooperation among alliances would be very useful and beneficial to all parties involved.
- The financial sustainability of the alliances still remains a major challenge, though: there is unanimity on the fact that long-term funding support is absolutely needed

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from the European Commission and the Member States. The alliances will not be sustainable only on the basis of calls for proposals (Erasmus+, Horizon 2020, Horizon Europe, et cetera).

- Policy and regulatory developments are necessary. The European Universities Initiative provides a framework for creating a European degree but a good balance of European and national measures will be needed to ensure the removal of existing barriers not only for the first pilot initiatives, but beyond them to systemic level.

What should be the priorities?

In light of its experience with this initiative, and after carefully considering the recent proposals put forward by the European Commission for the next steps, the Coimbra Group issued a statement in July 2021⁴ where it has reiterated some important reflections:

- The European Universities Initiative should continue promoting flexibility, creativity, bottom-up approach and inclusiveness. These are success keys for implementing an ambition with respect to fostering the quality of higher education and research;
- Coimbra Group supports the proposal that the funding period be extended after the pilot phase to avoid any funding gap, but there is an urgent need for a long-term structural programmatic funding after that transition;
- The current and planned funding levels for the alliances are still too modest, leading to a 'danger' that the running of the projects (Erasmus+, Horizon 2020, EIT, Horizon Europe, etc.) gets more attention than the structural building of a European University;
- It is up to the Alliances to decide if they wish to extend their membership or not; should they wish to do so, a gradual extension should be allowed without financial penalties to avoid destabilisation of alliances that are still under construction;
- Coimbra Group reaffirms that research and education are intrinsic components of research-led education and, as such, the impact of Brexit and the withdrawal of the

United Kingdom from the Erasmus+ programme on the success of the European Universities initiative is something to be considered very seriously.

Long-established networks such as the Coimbra Group do and will have in the future an essential role to play in ensuring that the knowledge and innovation gained from the implementation of the alliances are disseminated as widely as possible and put to practice with tangible benefits to the entire European higher education and research community.

Ludovic Thilly

is a Full Professor at the University of Poitiers and Chair of the Coimbra Group Executive Board

Notes

- 1 <https://www.elysee.fr/en/emmanuel-macron/2017/09/26/president-macron-gives-speech-on-new-initiative-for-europe>
- 2 <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/32204/14-final-conclusions-rev1-en.pdf>
- 3 <https://www.coimbra-group.eu/events/2020-open-session-on-the-european-universities-alliances>; <https://coimbra2021.cuni.cz/CG21-10.html>
- 4 <https://www.coimbra-group.eu/coimbra-group-statement-on-the-rolling-out-of-the-european-universities-initiative-after-the-pilot-phase>