



## Meeting of Directors-General for Higher Education

8th April 2021

### Keynote speech on European University Alliances - Jean Chambaz

Minister, Madame la Directrice Générale, chère Themis, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am delighted to be with you this morning, though I would have preferred to come to Lisbon – and I am grateful for this invitation.

I will be speaking today as President of Sorbonne University, as a founder of the European Alliance 4EU+, and, before all as a European citizen.

You asked me to speak about European University Networks.

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President Macron, during his famous 2017 speech in La Sorbonne, dedicated only one single sentence to universities, calling for the creation of European university networks to promote multilingualism and international education. This speech was noteworthy because for once, a head of state did not blame Europe for what didn't work but presented Europe as a lever and a horizon. Still, not much was said.

Some wondered what European universities could be, because very lively programs already existed: Erasmus, Horizon 2020, and others.

Smartly, the DGEAC, Themis Christophidou and her team, seized the idea and started consultations for a large brainstorming operation: What could we do with that idea? And I have to say, they were listening to us carefully. This ended with a first call for pilot projects for European University Networks.

We were, at that time, already discussing with Heidelberg, Warsaw and Prague, a strategic partnership to facilitate mobility between our universities. We were ready. And, alongside Copenhagen and Milan, we applied and were among the 17 selected projects.

DGEAC placed emphasis on the experimental dimension of this call, looking for different kinds of projects. We must preserve this diversity. One size does not fit all. Excellence lies in differentiation, not in standardization.

Deliberately, 4EU+ was meant to be a comprehensive project associating 6 research-intensive universities, developing research and research-based education through brain circulation. On this aspect, the EUN call was imbalanced, focused only on the educational dimension – but that's the perimeter of DGEAC.

To be as efficient as they can, universities have to walk on their four legs: education, research, innovation and service to society. Otherwise, they are limping!

The nomination of Commissioner Maryia Gabriel, with an expansive portfolio that includes education, research and innovation, was great news. And her will to develop a comprehensive agenda to further the European Knowledge Area brought hope.

But the synergies between the European Higher education policy and the European research and innovation policy are still not quite there. The European Universities initiative is a unique opportunity to build up such synergies.

Indeed, a complementary call was launched in 2020 to support the research dimension of European University networks. However, it remained limited in its scope, supporting the organization of research rather than the core of research collaboration, with a small amount of seed money.

In any case, the implementation of the European Universities initiative is off to a pretty good start. Still, there is a long way to go if we are to reach the level of ambition that Europe put in it.

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If I may, I will illustrate this point with 4EU+ :

It was officially founded in spring 2018, because we had to wait for the creation of Sorbonne University – a merger of two prominent universities in Paris. And I am proud to say that both Sorbonne University and 4EU+ are now a reality. And 4EU+ is already our most active and fruitful international partnership.

In the academic year 2019-2020 – despite the pandemic - , three hundred students participated in the 4EU+ online and in-person activities. Nearly eighty joint research & education project proposals were submitted to our internal call - and they were well balanced in terms of disciplines as well as geographic scope. More than 300 academic staff members were involved in the implementation of our activities. Overall, 4EU+ is already supporting 101 projects –

ranging from summer schools to joint bachelor and Masters' programs. We're still working on common data infrastructure, and a number of other initiatives.

One of the most obvious, immediate benefits of a University Alliance is the ability to learn from each other. That goes for education, research, but also for administrative and support functions – so, we are developing short mobility programs for all staff, academic, technical, administrative.

We built our cooperation within 4EU+ around four flagships - on four of the most important issues facing Europe right now: health and demographic change, the transformation of European societies, information and computation, and biodiversity and sustainable development. These flagships are aligned with the UN sustainable development goals, and consistent with our challenge-based approach to international partnerships.

We have just founded a legal entity, under German law, to facilitate the day-to-day functioning of our Alliance.

We have seen remarkable enthusiasm and engagement within our communities. They are ready for an ambitious alliance and for deeper international cooperation. 4EU+ is being built, not by rectors and president, but by teachers, researchers, students and staff.

As you can see, this experiment is already working. But we have much more to do on this journey.

I'd like to give you what I think is a reasonable view of what European University alliances could become, if the European Union and member-states provide appropriate support in the future.

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European University Alliances could become unprecedented hubs for cooperation in education, research and innovation and for building up the future of Europe.

The European Union was built to prevent war, but it eventually became the most integrated international organization in history. Taken together, it is one of the three largest economies in the world. It can achieve a lot – including in higher education and research. Erasmus + is an extremely successful mobility program, counting more than 10 million participants over the last three decades. Horizon 2020 is the world's largest multinational research and innovation program. ERC rapidly got worldwide recognition.

Based on the critical mass of the European Union, its institutions, the unprecedented level of cooperation it fosters, we can build the most ambitious university partnerships in the world, revolutionizing international education and research cooperation.

European universities trust and understand each other. This trust was built up over years of mutually beneficial cooperation – we are ready for truly integrated partnerships.

- EUN could allow for students to build their own, original educational experience, mixing and matching courses and semesters across Europe.
- By integrating our curricula, EUN can boost meaningful mobility – making the most of the diverse strengths of our institutions, through structured, well thought-out programs, with a commitment to improve the quality of education and employment prospects. Most of our curricula could eventually be integrated – leveraging the diversity and quality of the education we provide together.
- EUN could promote sustained excellent collaborative research, doctoral programs to train researchers with unique European and international profiles and original outlooks on the issues we face.
- EUN are an opportunity to tackle societal challenges together and, through international education, shape informed European citizens, with an open mind, who can think out of the box, enriched by different cultures and languages.
- EUN will promote the international, research-based education necessary to prepare these future leaders, in research, in industry, in NGOs, in government.
- EUN could mutualize critical infrastructure – physical and digital, for research and education. That encompasses virtual education platforms, data repositories, and heavy-duty infrastructure such as supercomputers or particle accelerators. This would enable seamless cooperation as well as substantial economies of scale.

Of course, international education already exists. International collaboration in research already exists. The difference is in scale, depth and quality. EUN have the potential to bring diverse opportunities to more students and researchers.

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For that we need: time, diversity, trust, and simplification.

**Time:** Higher education and research are long-term activities. It takes at least 6 years to properly evaluate the outcome of an action at the bachelor's level –that's the time for two cohorts to graduate. It's the same in research. The world was swift in identifying Sars-CoV-2,

in deciphering its pathophysiology, but that's because scientists have been studying coronaviruses for a long time - they were ready. The world was swift in developing vaccines, but that's because scientists were already working on RNA-based vaccines, they were ready.

We know that the political time and the media time are not the academic time. But the development of the EUN is already a full success. An evaluation after the first 3 years can be a progress update, but it cannot require every aspect of the networks to be fully functional in such a short amount of time. Those who did not start should be stopped; the others have to be supported.

It is too early to design the profile of the ideal EUN. And it does not exist. One size does not fit all. Standardization is impoverishment. One institution cannot match all of the dimensions of higher education. Neither can one single EUN. EUN will prosper if they can remain focused and coherent.

I strongly believe in the inclusive dimension of Higher education policy in Europe. To fully succeed in its implementation, I also strongly believe that we should conceive the differentiation of universities – and of EUN - based on their strategic goals, and work on the coordination of this ecosystem as a whole.

We have to go further in the experimentation of different kinds – I won't say models – of EUN.

Time and differentiation go along with trust. And trust with autonomy and accountability.

In order to succeed, we need to be free to develop our project in the appropriate time frame and to experiment on new ways of working together. We have to try different options. We need breathing room.

We are funded by public money; so we have to remain accountable - report on our achievements, our progress and our failures. But it would not be fair to ask us to account for inefficiencies that do not depend on us.

And, now, I address you directly. Because higher education policy is still, mostly, in the hands of member-states.

It will be difficult for EUN to achieve their potential if they face legal and administrative hurdles at every step, because of contradictory national rules.

Again, keep it simple and flexible, give it time, and then assess the big picture.

One solution could be granting some form of derogation to EUN, allowing them to bypass some national rules while experimenting with innovative, more ambitious forms of cooperation.

You would be disappointed if I don't address the budget issue. 4EU+, as of now, has received about 17 million euros in funding for 3 years, from different sources – it is, again, a good start, but it is not enough to ensure long-term sustainability and scaling up. We need more sources of funding – from the EU or from member-states. One solution could be a fast-track system in Horizon Europe calls, for all propositions that involve several members of a single European University Alliance. In doing so, the European Union would leverage funding that already exists, to develop and integrate the European Higher Education and Research Area.

I would conclude by saying that EUN are a fantastic opportunity that European universities seized with enthusiasm. Their long-term success depends on your ability – national Directors general for HE – to remove regulatory and administrative hurdles, which are most often obsolete rules resulting from the historical building of our national systems. Cleaning up these obstacles is a necessity to build up this open area of higher education in Europe, which we all call for.