



Coimbra Group statement on European Universities Networks

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In September 2017, the French President Emmanuel Macron called for a strengthening of European identity and values through Education and Culture. In particular, he proposed to increase the number of student exchanges and create truly “European Universities”, a concept that was subsequently renamed “European Universities Networks” in the European Commission’s contribution to the summit of EU leaders in Gothenburg (November 2017) and in the conclusions of the European Council in December 2017. Since then, the Higher Education community (including national ministries and academia) has collectively sought to understand exactly what is meant by the term “European Universities Networks”, in an attempt to prepare for the imminent first call for proposals. This quest for clarification over definition has also involved the European Commission itself and resulted in the organisation of an ad-hoc meeting with stakeholders in Brussels on 7 February 2018 in preparation for the meeting of Higher Education Ministers on 15 February 2018.

The Coimbra Group Executive Board would like to reaffirm its support for any initiative in favour of strengthening European identity and values, something that our member universities have been advocating for centuries and which still constitutes one of their *raison d’être*. Nevertheless, the Coimbra Group Executive Board calls for urgent clarification of the concept of “European Universities Networks”. Our understanding is that the initiative intends to promote intensive and targeted cooperation in Education and Research among small groupings of universities. From our point of view, the word “network” is inappropriate and should be replaced by “consortia” or “alliances” to avoid confusion with existing larger associations of universities. Established in 1985, the Coimbra Group is the oldest of several university networks in Europe that exist to promote academic collaboration, excellence in Education and Research, and service to society. It is our belief that new concept of “European Universities Networks” and organisations such as the Coimbra Group are completely different entities that should not compete with each other as both can contribute positively to the structuring of the European Higher Education and Research Areas, but at different levels and with different roles. Established networks such as the Coimbra Group have been very successful in fostering close cooperation among their European members but also beyond European borders. Evidence of success is seen in the ever increasing levels of mobility of students and staff, exchange of best practice in Education and Research and close engagement with the European Commission on major challenges such as the internationalisation of curricula, learning outcomes, lifelong learning, Research policies and the modernisation of Higher Education. It is this fundamental work that has, to a considerable degree, promoted the concept of “reinforced alliances” which is the object of the debate today.

Thus, the Coimbra Group believes that the existing Higher Education networks have a crucial role to play at European level in facilitating effective cooperation based on their extensive accumulated experience and expertise. Furthermore, we recognise the need for a specific funding mechanism whereby networks can participate, in collaboration with other stakeholders, in specific supporting actions in order to facilitate these “consortia” or to enhance other aspects of the modernisation and innovation agendas relevant to smaller in-depth partnerships between universities.

The document was adopted by the Executive Board of the Coimbra Group on 12 February 2018.