

Developing “European Universities” as Excellence Networks of Universities

Concept paper as of 22. February 2018

Inspired by French President Macron’s groundbreaking speech at the University of Sorbonne on 26th September 2017, the EU-Council decided that the EU should become more active in the area of education and culture, in which “the EU plays an important supplementing and supporting role.” The European Council called on the member states, the Council itself and the Commission, “in line with their respective competences, to take work forward with a view to encouraging the emergence by 2024 of some twenty “European Universities”, consisting in bottom-up networks of universities across the EU which will enable students to obtain a degree by combining studies in several EU countries and contribute to the international competitiveness of European universities.”

The French, German and Polish rectors’ conferences in this context expressed their active support in favor of more strongly profiled European university networks “that aim to jointly construct their strategy and governance in the triangle of knowledge. Building on previous work and opportunities, this enhanced cooperation will take various forms and fulfill different functions.”ⁱ

Therefore, a European funding program should be developed for universities that have already gained considerable experience in working with each other in the triangle of knowledge (education, research, innovation) and that want to elevate their cooperation to a new level. A network would consist of universities from at least three EU member states. In order to allow different types of institutions to participate two lines of the competition are conceivable. In the first line, applying networks would have to excel in at least one or at least two of the corners of the knowledge triangle. In the second line, the networks would have to excel in all three corners and would thus be able to acquire the network title of “European Universities”.

Ideally, the funding should come out of a common pot of monies from Erasmus+ and the Framework Program for Research and Innovation of the EU. Due to the existing political time pressure a coordinated but separate funding by Erasmus+ and Horizon 2020 (Framework Program for Research and Innovation) is conceivable. The member states will also have to commit financially to the sustainability of the networks beyond the European project funding.

The applying networks will have to present their previous performance, a joint strategy and governance as well as the planned activities in research, education, innovation and mobility and the expected costs. The specific profile of the partnering universities and their previous cooperation experience in the network will decide on the peculiar weight and stress of these activities of the network. The annually available funding should vary between five and fifteen Million Euroⁱⁱ per network, depending on the scope of the cooperation. The evaluation panels should consist of peers with adequate experience in the three corners of the knowledge triangle. Excellence would be the most important criterion for decision in the two lines of the competition. The lifespan of a project should be five plus five years with a midterm evaluation, in order to foster the formation of long term structures that deserve the network title of "European Universities".

The planned pilot action of the DG Education of the EU Commission could start with limited funds in autumn of 2018 in order to test the evaluation processes and to receive more information about the existing networks in Europe. The planned mapping exercise of European university networks could take up these and other findings and present a comprehensive overview before the full start of the program in 2021. An advisory group of EU, member state officials and university representatives should accompany the process.

i https://www.hrk.de/fileadmin/redaktion/hrk/02-Dokumente/02-05-Forschung/Trilateral_Declaration_of_CPU_HRK_KRASP_final.pdf

ii As research measures will be more costly as governance, education and mobility measures, 2/3 of the funding could come from the FP and 1/3 from Erasmus+. As the common strategy and the derived research measures are science-driven, the FP funds should come from the envisaged pillar "Fundamental Science". If the developed research strategies are applicable, the networks could participate in thematic clusters in the framework program, e.g. in the planned EU research missions.