

# University of the Greater Region – UniGR: Position Paper „European University“



University of the Greater Region –  
UniGR  
Central Office  
Villa Europa, Kohlweg 7  
D-66123 Saarbrücken

Contact: Frédérique Seidel, General  
Secretary, [Frederique.seidel@uni-gr.eu](mailto:Frederique.seidel@uni-gr.eu)  
+49 (0)681 301 40 802

Web: [www.uni-gr.eu](http://www.uni-gr.eu)

By setting the objective of creating around twenty European universities by 2024, Emmanuel Macron's speech of 26 September 2017 and the European Council of 14 December 2017 have breathed new life into the European Higher Education Research Area (EHEA). The European confederation of the University of the Greater Region (hereafter abbreviated to UniGR), is composed of six universities (Technische Universität Kaiserslautern, University of Liège, University of Lorraine, University of Luxembourg, Saarland University and Trier University) located in the Greater Region on the border of four European countries (Germany, Belgium, France and Luxembourg).

Since 2008, it has pursued its ambition to develop a continuous and sustainable collaboration and to define a joint development strategy around projects with high added value. It now has a common legal structure and is developing its activity in both the fields of training and research. The UniGR sees the "European Universities" initiative as an exceptional opportunity to strengthen the competitiveness of European higher education through targeted cooperation. The confederation intends to be a source of proposals in the current debate by sharing its experience as well as the obstacles it encounters with the academic community and decision-makers at national and European level. It benefits from recognition of its territorial relevance through Interreg funding which its members place at the service of joint projects.

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### Objectives of the “European University”

According to the UniGR, the European University links higher education and institutionalised research institutions, driven by a shared vision, a set of common objectives and the desire to develop long-term international visibility. The European University is based on synergies between its members in terms of academic excellence (joint study programs, mobility etc.) and societal excellence (strong links with territorial development). It has the following objectives:

- Ensuring the competitiveness of European higher education on a global scale: through the creation of structured university networks, driven by increased mobility, quality of teaching and research collaboration. The major objective of European Universities must be to strengthen the academic excellence, visibility and international attractiveness of the European higher education ecosystem by creating new tools of cooperation. Thus, the initiative invites the components of the EHEA to reinvent themselves to be more competitive and to promote true European citizenship.
- Strengthening the internationalisation of its member universities: the creation of sustainable university collaborations will result in the intensification of inter-university exchanges, the circulation of knowledge, exchanges of experience but also the development of mobility for all publics. All these elements will help institutions to better prepare and anticipate societal challenges together. This institutionalised cooperation must also become a lever for extending partnerships to other universities on a European or even global scale.

- Creating a European identity: European universities are fully in line with the objectives of the European Union to form European citizens - knowing that all university audiences should be concerned - and to develop a "will to live together".
- Stimulating the growth of the territories concerned: universities play a key role in the development of the territory and European Universities will have a territorial, societal and inclusive impact especially as the fields of cooperation concern all university missions. Developing mobility pathways and multidisciplinary training will help prepare the younger generations of Europeans for a multilingual labour market, which requires adaptability and multicultural skills. Strengthening partnerships in the field of research (developing in particular the mobility of early career researchers), innovation and technology transfer will involve territorial partners (companies etc...) for innovative ways of acquiring these skills as well.

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### Components of the "European University"

- A sustainable multilateral partnership composed of universities from the European Union: to achieve its objectives, the European University must be based on the diversity and plurality of its members.
- An integrated development strategy: the quality of the partnership will be defined by its ability to develop common potential in teaching (including lifelong learning), research and innovation by focusing on disciplines with high development potential for universities and their territories.
- The establishment of effective governance: the counterpart of an integrated strategy is the establishment of cooperation structures, or even common legal structures, involving the relevant decision-making and operational bodies of partner universities.
- The development of mobility for all university audiences (students, teachers, researchers, and administrative staff) must be the keystone of the joint strategy.
- The multiplication of joint plurilingual study programmes.
- The development of innovative teaching and learning methods (including virtual mobility).
- The question of critical size: beyond the issue of the quality of cooperation and the choice of really promising areas of cooperation for institutions, one difficulty in creating genuine "European universities" will be to ensure the participation of a sufficient number of universities in the consortium but also that of a sufficient number of students, teachers and researchers. Their collaboration dynamic should have a knock-on effect on the consortium as a whole.

## What levers to overcome the obstacles facing integrated networks today?

- A single financial instrument (with a one-stop shop) funded by training (ERASMUS+), research (FP9) and structural (regional policy) funds to structure partnerships. It would complement existing funding for final beneficiaries. Synergies must be found with other European instruments: today, the financial instruments from which university partnerships can benefit are disparate (ERASMUS+, FP9, KIC, etc.) and sometimes marginal. Only ERDF funds (INTERREG in particular) enable an integrated strategy to be put in place, but they are similar to start-up aid.
- A sustainable financing system: the relative short duration of existing financing (3 or 4 years in general) is not adapted to the time needed to structure the partnership on the one hand, and federate it around a common strategy on the other.
- The recognition of cooperation structures (cross-border association, EGTC, etc.) in funding programmes (e.g. mentioning membership of the university network in the ERASMUS+ charter). It includes:
  - the creation of financial instruments dedicated to these cooperation structures;
  - recognition of joint degrees as European University degrees;
  - the establishment of systems to facilitate the creation of joint professorships.
- The simplification of the system for the recognition of diplomas (internal to the European University).
- The introduction of genuine European diplomas.

In conclusion, the success of the European Universities will depend on the capacity of the partner institutions to unite durably around a common project and to mobilise the actors of the territory for its implementation. It also depends on how the European institutions succeed in combining education and research policies to support ambitious integrated strategies.