



**Position Paper on the European University Networks (EUN) initiative  
by the Academic Cooperation Association (ACA)**

The Academic Cooperation Association (ACA) welcomes the proposal by the European Commission and the European Council to create 20 European university networks (EUNs). ACA regards this initiative as an important step in strengthening Europe's higher education and as a contribution to European cohesion in difficult times.

ACA supports the European Union's approach for this initiative to be based on the principles of excellence, as well as inclusiveness, diversity, and regional balance. ACA further welcomes the fact that the initiative is to cover education, research and the 'third missions' of higher education institutions (HEIs).

What does ACA mean by this?

The EUNs foremost goal is to produce *excellence*. But there is not just one form of excellence. Excellence is too often exclusively used in relation to world-class research. This is a reductionist interpretation of the term excellence. There is also excellence in teaching as well as in all the activities linked to the 'third missions' and outreach to partners in business, municipalities, NGOs, to name but a few. The EUNs must also cater to these forms of excellence.

This broader view of excellence will also make the EUN initiative *inclusive, diverse and non-elitist*. This means that the EUNs must be open not only to internationally top-reputed research-focused universities, but also to mainly teaching-centred institutions ('university colleges', universities of applied sciences) and, indeed, to any type of recognised tertiary education. To be clear, our understanding of 'non-elitist' is democratic and very different from that of 'anti-elitist'.

In being *innovative*, the EUNs will not just 'bundle up' already existing support actions in EU funding schemes for higher education and thus merely create 'more of the same'. By defining the range of eligible activities very widely, they will encourage HEIs and their non-academic partners to act as 'test beds' for unconventional and new activity forms. They are to put into reality 'radically innovative ideas' and be based on 'thinking out of the box'. If this approach is duly applied, the first experiences from the pilot action could still be used to inform the rules for EUNs from 2021 onwards.

The EUNs should be *open*. By this we mean that they should not predominantly fund the many European networks, consortia and alliances in education and research already in existence, some of which are very exclusive. These networks are already doing good work and will continue to do so. What ACA sees as a priority is to create genuinely new networks or to bring existing alliances to an entirely new level of integration and quality.

In terms of *regional balance*, ACA supports the EU Commission's intention to encourage networks of institutions from all regions of Europe. HEIs in the East and the South of the Union must be just as well represented as such in the North-West and North of Europe.

ACA expects the EUNs to be open to HEIs and other institutions beyond EU member states and, particularly, from the other Erasmus+ programme countries. ACA is in favour of treating HEIs from all Erasmus+ programme countries in the same way in this initiative, including eligibility criteria. In addition, the programmes of the European University Networks should have a truly global perspective in teaching, learning, research and outreach and must be open to students from all over the world.

Further, there is the issue of the *level of institutional involvement*. The EUNs could be first and foremost a collaboration mechanism for faculties and departments (and therefore have an (inter)disciplinary or thematic focus), or they could include the entire universities belonging to it. ACA feels that both should be possible, but we believe that it is realistic, at least in the pilot phase, to expect more thematically focussed proposals.

With the EUNs, the European Commission is aiming high. The project is to considerably improve the quality of European higher education. An effect of the desired magnitude needs proper funding and cannot be had on a shoestring. Funding levels should be at the height of the huge ambitions of this endeavour and, therefore, be guided by the 'excellence initiatives' in various European countries in the last ten years. Funding should come not only from DG Education and Culture, but also from DG Research, from the Structural Funds and from the single European countries (some of which have already pledged support). At the same time, the many budget lines this will involve and their different procedural approaches will create a challenge for programme administration at all levels. Acknowledging the problem, we call on the European Commission to devise rules as user-friendly and flexible as possible under the circumstances.

The EUNs are a highly ambitious endeavour, with the intention to considerably enhance the quality of European higher education. The hope is for a quantum leap to happen. The recommendations contained in this position paper are meant to help bring about this quantum leap.

#### **About ACA:**

*The Academic Cooperation Association (ACA) is a European umbrella association of national member organisations from Europe and beyond that support international cooperation in higher education, policy development and international student mobility. ACA's member organisations, in and outside Europe, all support the opening-up of their higher education systems, either by administering large-scale student and staff mobility programmes (some of them also the national agency for the Erasmus+ programme), by promoting their countries as attractive study destinations, by funding the development of joint (international) study programmes, by organising high-level events or by producing core studies and research in the area of international higher education. Beyond being a European network of national-level promoters of international higher education, ACA is a knowledge centre and an information and dissemination platform, and these three main roles of ACA are reflected in the work of its Brussels-based Secretariat.*

For further information, please visit: <http://www.aca-secretariat.be/>