

# FORUM

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*Discussing international education*



## COLLABORATIVE EUROPE

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# TAILOR-MADE NETWORKS

Collaboration is key in higher education, but it's important to choose the right partners and the right kind of partnership. As the European Universities Initiative continues into the second pilot phase, questions around its fit for various types of institutions remain. In the meantime, The Hague Network – comprising three universities of applied sciences and four research universities – is demonstrating how institutions like theirs can collaborate at a smaller scale in ways better tailored to their strengths and needs. ►

The differences between universities of applied sciences and traditional research universities have decreased in recent years, with the former becoming more involved in applied research and the latter tailoring their programmes towards employability. Both types of institution have been innovative and proactive in adapting to changing times. Nonetheless, the two types do have a different focus. Universities of applied sciences tend to offer more vocational programmes – and although they seek to enhance the global outlook of their students and to engage in sustainable internationalisation, the struggle for funding means they have often had to concentrate on collaborating with public and private partners in their local area.

#### THE EUI AND UNIVERSITIES OF APPLIED SCIENCES

Universities in general are skilled at managing multiple collaborations. One model in vogue is forming strategic partnerships of like-minded institutions, increasing competences through knowledge sharing and learning from best practice. Partnership or alliance models range from the European University Association, with over 850 member institutions from across the sector; to the Universities of Applied Sciences Netherlands, which offers a comprehensive national perspective; through to smaller international alliances such as the Utrecht Network, established in 1987, and the CARPE alliance of seven European universities of applied sciences, founded in 2011 by institutions focusing on applied research and professional education.

In a 2017 speech arguing for greater professionalisation of higher education, President Macron of France reignited earlier attempts to create European Universities.<sup>1</sup> The European Universities Initiative (EUI) emphasises common European values and identity via cooperation between existing institutions. It seeks to engender “transnational alliances of higher education institutions developing long-term structural and strategic cooperation [...] fostering excellence, innovation and inclusion [...] accelerating the transformation of higher education institutions into the universities of the future with structural, systemic and sustainable impact”.<sup>2</sup>

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## Universities of applied sciences found it difficult to enter into the first phase of the European Universities Initiative

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The institutional alignments necessary to facilitate such educational entrepreneurialism make great demands on the participating organisations in terms of planning and resources. Universities of applied sciences, with more limited financial means than research universities and fewer opportunities in the past to build up international cooperation, found it difficult to enter into the first phase of the European Universities Initiative.

This added to a perception that the initiative was a *grand projet* primarily focused on elite, resource-rich institutions and not on facilitating improvements within higher education in general. Macron’s ideas of professionalisation,

incorporating higher fees, threaten to price less affluent, marginalised students out of high-quality higher education. While more universities of applied sciences have been able to apply for funding in the second phase, one might question whether this is in the best interests of their traditional student catchment.

#### THE HAGUE NETWORK

As part of its efforts to form strategic partnerships, The Hague University of Applied Sciences sought a geographical spread of partners via a mixed model of approaching existing exchange partners as well as ‘new’ institutions that had the

potential to cooperate across a minimum of three of its faculties. In 2017, it decided with six partners to convert these bipartite links into a small European alliance called The Hague Network. The network covers a range of activities – student and staff exchanges, curriculum development, research and administrative issues – with each partner free to determine their own priorities within the broader goals. Those goals are:

- **Knowledge sharing:** Learning from the best practices of others, saving time, energy and resources
- **Developing people:** Establishing new relationships and engendering confidence and self-esteem in staff and

students, resulting in enhanced outputs and openness to change

- **Connections:** Seizing opportunities that might not be available to lone institutions, as EU and other research funding is increasingly targeted at networks or consortia
- **Promotion and credibility:** Using the network as an indicator of its members' status and intellectual capital

We consider the limited range of partners an advantage, with a largely bottom-up, iterative approach allowing flexibility, informality and agility in decision-making. The asymmetrical nature of our cooperation is also a great strength, enabling partners to concentrate their efforts in the specific areas where they can best contribute and benefit. This was particularly useful in the development of

learning, as all exchange programmes had to move to online or hybrid teaching, taking away part of its unique selling point. It also suffered from the fact that much of the enforced online teaching was an emergency response and that the content, unlike that of our project, was not specifically designed to be taught online. Some students saw online teaching as substandard and inferior to traditional teaching, thus affecting their willingness to consider virtual exchange opportunities.

#### FINDING THE RIGHT PARTNERSHIP

The pandemic had an effect on The Hague Network's activities but they were not curtailed. Guest lectures and courses migrated online, and existing relationships were maintained via increased digital communication. One thing that has helped sustain the network has

and participation in alliances such as The Hague Network. But it's important to think about exactly what type of partnership is right for your institution. The nature of universities of applied sciences means that forming alliances under the European Universities Initiative may not necessarily be the best option. Smaller, bottom-up and asymmetrical networks could be a better way for some institutions to build up their international links while still concentrating on their local area and serving their traditional student base.

Collaboration is the past, present and future of higher education in Europe, but the path forward for universities of applied sciences may in some ways diverge from that of traditional research universities. In the evolving landscape of European cooperation, institutions of all kinds will need to carefully consider the benefits as well as the organisational demands of potential partnerships.

— PAUL NIXON

## The nature of universities of applied sciences means that forming alliances under the European Universities Initiative may not necessarily be the best option

a project called The Hague Network Virtual Exchange, which was envisaged prior to the pandemic to extend mobility to students unable to undertake traditional exchanges due to health, care, financial or cultural reasons. The project is currently in its third iteration.

One of the unexpected consequences of the pandemic was that The Hague Network Virtual Exchange suddenly faced competition in the field of online

been the personal investment, trust and relationships of those involved, the value of which cannot be overstated. Members were willing to support and try to offer solutions to each other's problems during the pandemic. Some initiatives have had to be postponed but it is hoped that these can now be rebooted and that the partnerships will continue to flourish.

We have all seen the opportunities and advantages that flow from partnerships

1. Gunn, A. (2020). The European Universities Initiative: A study of alliance formation in higher education. In A. Curaj, L. Deca, & R. Pricopie (Eds.), *European Higher Education Area: Challenges for a new decade* (pp. 13–30). Springer, Cham. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-56316-5\\_2](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-56316-5_2)

2. European Commission. (2021). European Universities Initiative [Fact sheet]. <https://education.ec.europa.eu/document/european-universities-initiative-factsheet>

The graphic features a background of a colorful mosaic with yellow, blue, and red tiles. Overlaid on this is a large, abstract shape composed of overlapping blue and purple organic forms. A thin black line curves through these shapes. The text 'EAIE | BARCELONA' is prominently displayed in the center, with '2022' below 'EAIE' and '13-16 SEPTEMBER' to the right of 'BARCELONA'.

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