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Subject:	Council Recommendation on building bridges for effective European higher education cooperation

Delegations will find attached the above Council Recommendation, adopted by the Council (Education, Youth, Culture and Sport) at its meeting held on 4 and 5 April 2022.

Council Recommendation on building bridges for effective European higher education cooperation

(Text with EEA relevance)

THE COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION,

Having regard to the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, and in particular Articles 165 and 166 thereof,

Having regard to the proposal from the European Commission,

Whereas:

1. Deeper and more effective transnational cooperation in the higher education sector across all Europe is key to supporting Union values, identity and democracy, to building the resilience of European society and economy, and to building a sustainable future. Strong, inter-connected higher education institutions are one important instrument for tackling the challenges related to the green and digital transitions and to an ageing population, and other key socio-economic challenges, by sharing knowledge and co-creating innovative solutions. They may also secure Europe's capacity to boost technology-driven competitiveness.

2. Building bridges allowing higher education institutions to develop deeper, perennial and effective transnational cooperation at institutional level is an important instrument to make higher education institutions stronger together and prepare students, lifelong learners, researchers and staff for a global future. Higher education institutions across Europe are adapting to a rapidly changing world with fast-changing disciplines and learning environments, for instance in relation to the twin green and digital transitions. This requires new thinking, new approaches and new structures for cooperation and mobility (with physical mobility remaining the core format) of students, staff and researchers across disciplines and across borders. This new reality, fuelled by the digital transition, will entail a new, attractive range of education and new formats and opportunities for transnational cooperation and mobility, in person and online, for all learners, including for people with fewer opportunities or from remote areas, such as outermost regions, and will encourage diversity among academics, researchers and professional staff.

3. Stronger cooperation between diverse higher education institutions, including universities, research universities, university colleges, universities of applied sciences, higher vocational education and training institutions, and higher arts institutions, across the entire EU is a key principle that underpins and is intrinsic to the European Education Area and the European Research Area. Deeper transnational cooperation between diverse and complementary institutions across all Europe supports fair access to high-quality and inclusive education, training and research, fosters knowledge creation and circulation, facilitates the sharing of capacity and infrastructure, and contributes to the vitality of their regions and communities, helping to overcome disadvantage and geographic disparities. It can also foster insertion in the research, innovation and industrial ecosystems. Transnational cooperation equally contributes to unlocking the full potential of the higher education sector as a promotor of skills, competences and knowledge, for instance for the twin digital and green transitions, and contributes to delivering on the European Pillar of Social Rights.

4. The Commission Communication on achieving the European Education Area by 2025¹ calls for seamless and ambitious transnational cooperation, for a facilitated delivery of joint degrees, and for the feasibility of a legal statute for alliances such as the European Universities to be explored. The Council Resolution on a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training towards the European Education Area and beyond (2021-2030)² encourages deeper cooperation, the pooling of knowledge and resources and the generation of more mobility opportunities for students, academics and researchers, including through the full roll-out of the European Universities and the European Student Card initiatives. In its conclusions on the European Universities initiative – Bridging higher education, research, innovation and society: Paving the way for a new dimension in European higher education³, the Council invited the Member States to remove obstacles to more compatible higher education systems and to explore the feasibility of joint European degrees. In its conclusions on ‘Deepening the European Research Area: Providing researchers with attractive and sustainable careers and working conditions and making brain circulation a reality’⁴, the Council called on the Commission to support Member States in designing policy measures for seamless and ambitious transnational cooperation between higher education institutions in Europe, notably in the area of academic and research careers. The Commission Communication on a new ERA for Research and Innovation⁵ and the Pact for Research and Innovation in Europe⁶ call for deeper cooperation and acknowledge the potential of initiatives such as the European Universities to transform higher education. The European Skills Agenda⁷ also calls for obstacles to effective and deeper transnational cooperation to be removed.

1 COM(2020) 625 final.

2 OJ C 66, 26.2.2021, p. 1.

3 OJ C 221, 10.6.2021, p. 14.

4 9138/21.

5 COM(2020) 628 final.

6 Council Recommendation (EU) 2021/2122 of 26 November 2021 on a Pact for Research and Innovation in Europe, OJ L 431, 2.12.2021, p. 1.

7 COM(2020) 274 final.

5. The Rome Communiqué of the ministers of the European Higher Education Area and the Council Recommendation on promoting automatic mutual recognition of higher education and upper secondary education and training qualifications and the outcomes of learning periods abroad⁸ call for transnational cooperation to be promoted and facilitated. The European Parliament Resolution on the European Education Area: a shared holistic approach⁹ underlines the need for more collaboration and calls for the use of synergies between the European Education Area, the European Research Area and the European Higher Education Area.
6. The 41 ‘European Universities’, supported by the Erasmus+ programme and complemented by Horizon 2020 for the research and innovation dimension, and similar long-standing institutionalised cooperation models, provide useful lessons learned while testing deeper transnational cooperation models that go beyond existing individual institutional strategies, governance and collaboration ecosystems. They are a source of inspiration for the wider higher education community to drive system-level reforms while facilitating better coordination between European higher education and research policies.
7. For the purposes of this Council Recommendation, ‘European Universities’ are those funded under the Erasmus+ programme, with complementary support from the Horizon programme for the research and innovation dimension, where relevant. ‘Alliances of higher education institutions’ refers to all other cooperation models, such as the Knowledge and Innovation Communities. The objective of this Council Recommendation is to facilitate transnational cooperation for all European higher education institutions, beyond those supported under the European Universities initiative.

⁸ OJ C 444, 10.12.2018, p. 1.

⁹ P9_TA(2021)0452.

8. 'European Universities' contribute to the quality of transnational cooperation through interinstitutional strategies that combine learning and teaching, research, innovation and knowledge transfer into the economy and society, and contribute to policy and societal change.
9. Higher education alliances could benefit, on a voluntary basis, from institutionalised cooperation instruments, such as a possible legal status for alliances of higher education institutions, that enable them to share, where appropriate, common financial, human, digital and physical resources, and services, to operate virtual inter-university campuses and interoperable platforms for joint digital or blended activities. To deepen transnational cooperation on effectively tackling the twin green and digital transitions, the development of interdisciplinary modules and the design of joint degrees based on co-created European criteria, in accordance with the instruments of the Bologna Process, need to be further facilitated at national, regional and institutional level. Facilitating flexible and inclusive mobility and widening the use of the European Student Card initiative could increase opportunities for learners, academics, researchers and staff. Sufficient long-term perennial funding is required to build capacity and attain the charted ambition level for transnational cooperation.

10. Deeper cooperation between higher education institutions requires all-encompassing challenges to be addressed. The seamless set-up, external quality assurance and accreditation of joint transnational educational activities and programmes at all levels are affected by: differences in external quality assurance; uneven implementation of the automatic mutual recognition of qualifications and study periods abroad and of the related key commitments within the Bologna Process, including differences in degree structures; differences in the adoption of the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes; differences in the application of the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS); and the partial recognition of virtual and blended learning. Addressing these issues and ensuring the full implementation of the Bologna instruments would reduce administrative burdens, facilitate transnational cooperation and nurture the implementation of innovative interdisciplinary pedagogies across different countries.

11. European transnational cooperation at institutional level is a powerful instrument to support and further develop the transformation towards excellent, inclusive, competitive, sustainable and attractive higher education institutions that fulfil all their missions (education, research, innovation and service to society), with benefits within and beyond the higher education sector, for a Europe of knowledge, resilience and democracy, and that reflect our European way of life and values. Transnational cooperation needs to be facilitated through a set of coherent European and national measures, effective implementation of available European initiatives, instruments and tools such as the European Universities initiative, the Bologna Process instruments or the European Student Card initiative, as well as the exploration of possible new instruments. These new instruments could be developed using a co-creative, step-by-step approach, enabling higher education institutions to build bridges and cooperate more effectively across borders and higher education systems to become more cohesive, for the benefit of the entire higher education community, bringing value to society,

HEREBY RECOMMENDS THAT MEMBER STATES

With full regard to the principle of subsidiarity, institutional autonomy and academic freedom, in accordance with national circumstances, and in close cooperation with all relevant stakeholders:

1. Open up the opportunity for higher education institutions to explore, in a co-creation process, the necessity, benefits, risks and feasibility of setting up institutionalised cooperation instruments, such as a possible legal status for alliances of higher education institutions, for example ‘European Universities’, with the objective of facilitating deeper cooperation by sharing human, technical, data, education, research and innovation capacities, where appropriate. Allow them to experiment with the diverse possibilities of deeper cooperation as well as to test, on a voluntary basis, existing European instruments, such as the European grouping of territorial cooperation (EGTC)¹⁰ or the European Economic Interest Grouping (EEIG)¹¹.
2. Encourage, where appropriate, and make it easier for higher education institutions engaged in transnational cooperation to provide joint programmes and award joint degrees, in accordance with the Bologna instruments¹². In this context, and building on the results of the exploratory actions as defined in point 12, examine and facilitate the delivery of a joint European degree label. Later on, work could be undertaken towards a possible joint degree at all levels, based on co-created European criteria, to be delivered at national, regional or institutional level, in accordance with the National Qualifications Frameworks.

¹⁰ Regulation (EC) No 1082/2006 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 5 July 2006 on a European grouping of territorial cooperation (EGTC), OJ L 210, 31.7.2006, p. 19.

¹¹ Council Regulation (EEC) No 2137/85 of 25 July 1985 on the European Economic Interest Grouping (EEIG), OJ L 199, 31.7.1985, p. 1.

¹² Bologna instruments include the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS), the Diploma Supplement (DS), the overarching and national qualifications frameworks (QFs), the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance of Higher Education (ESG), the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes, the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR), the Database of External Quality Assurance Results (DEQAR). The Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region (“Lisbon Recognition Convention”) can also be taken into consideration.

3. Enable higher education institutions to further develop and implement, where appropriate, innovative joint transnational educational activities by allowing and encouraging them to test and implement suitable approaches and measures in relation to:
- a) Admission and enrolment criteria for students and lifelong learners;
 - b) Defining the languages of learning and teaching while respecting multilingualism as appropriate;
 - c) The share of online learning in the overall educational offer; the share of student mobility (physical, virtual or blended) embedded in the joint educational activity; and the share and organisation of internships, work-based learning activities, challenge-based and inter-disciplinary approaches;
 - d) The inclusion of flexible learning pathways, such as small learning experiences which could lead to micro-credentials¹³ where relevant;
 - e) The rules for credit allocation and transfer, and transparency in grading, in accordance with the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) Users' Guide, as the basis for transnational joint programmes, without additional rules or limitations;

¹³ 'Although not deviating from and undermining the core principle of full degree programmes, micro-credentials could help widen learning opportunities to accommodate non-traditional learners and the demand for new skills in the labour market', Council conclusions on the European Universities initiative – Bridging higher education, research, innovation and society: Paving the way for a new dimension in European higher education, OJ C 221, 10.6.2021, p. 14.

- f) The use of information on external quality assurance of European higher education programmes and/or institutions according to the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG), included in the Database of External Quality Assurance Results (DEQAR) to implement automatic mutual recognition¹⁴ for the purposes of further learning, in cooperation with National Academic Recognition Information Centres (NARICs);
- g) Allowing, where appropriate, recognition of prior learning and validation of non-formal and informal learning based on transparent and fair quality requirements and the organisation of appropriate assessment of learners, and awarding relevant credits for such learning;
- h) Allowing, where appropriate, more flexibility in defining the template of their joint degrees when implementing joint transnational programmes.

4. Support embedded mobility in joint transnational educational programmes

- a) Support higher education institutions in embedding mobility (physical, virtual or blended) in a more systematic and flexible way in their joint education programmes, at all levels, to allow a larger body of students, including learners with fewer opportunities or from remote areas such as outermost regions, academics and researchers to benefit from the dynamics of integrated higher education cooperation and to promote balanced talent circulation.

¹⁴ As defined in the Council Recommendation of 26 November 2018 on promoting automatic mutual recognition of higher education and upper secondary education and training qualifications and the outcomes of learning periods abroad, OJ C 444, 10.12.2018, p. 1.

- b) Support the digitalisation of mobility management within multilateral partnerships, in particular the standardisation and digitalisation of business processes for the signing of multilateral inter-institutional agreements, including through the widening of the European Student Card initiative.
 - c) Work towards more coherent approaches for learning mobility, where appropriate, in terms of admission and enrolment systems, grading systems, academic calendars, tuition fee systems, access to and use of higher education facilities over summer/holiday months.
5. Contribute to sustaining direct or indirect financial support for deeper transnational institutional cooperation in higher education, including for ‘European Universities’
- a) Support all types of higher education institutions in their participation in such deep institutional transnational cooperation, where relevant.
 - b) Promote and develop a culture among higher education institutions for quality transnational cooperation by including and stimulating it in national policy and priority setting, where appropriate.
 - c) Mobilise available funding sources at regional, national and EU level¹⁵, while taking into account the different national finance systems, to match or complement where possible the Erasmus+ support, complemented in a synergetic way by the support from Horizon Europe, for the participation of higher education institutions in ‘European Universities’.

¹⁵ Such as the European Regional Development Fund, the European Social Fund+, the Recovery and Resilience Facility and the InvestEU Fund.

6. Promote and protect the core principles of institutional autonomy as a prerequisite for setting up common governance arrangements for deeper transnational cooperation in a bottom-up approach. Enable higher education institutions to take independent decisions on internal governance and on financial, staffing and academic matters, to protect academic freedom, and to actively involve academic staff and student representatives in decision-making related to their institution.
7. Strengthen mutual trust through external quality assurance and accreditation of joint educational programmes and other forms of joint educational offers developed by institutional transnational cooperation models, including ‘European Universities’ in accordance with the European Standard and Guidelines (ESG).
 - a) Move further towards the use of institutional-based external quality assurance. This could support the development of a genuine institutional quality culture that leads to a greater accountability and compatibility of systems across Europe, building on tools and frameworks already in place in the context of the European Education Area, the European Research Area and the European Higher Education Area.
 - b) Consider the possibility of allowing for self-accreditation of programmes, where relevant, based on institutional quality assurance, to underpin the self-responsibility of higher education institutions.

- c) In countries relying on programme-based external quality assurance, consider the possibility of:
- i) enabling the full implementation of the European Approach for the Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes¹⁶;
 - ii) ensuring that the external evaluation of joint transnational programmes can be carried out by one single agency registered in the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR)¹⁷ and that the outcomes are automatically accepted in all other higher education systems concerned, without adding further national requirements; and
 - iii) ensuring that the re-accreditation of joint transnational programmes follows the rules of the ESG and the European Approach¹⁸.

¹⁶ The approach, approved by EHEA ministers in May 2015, aims to *'dismantle an important obstacle to the development of joint programmes by setting standards for these programmes that are based on the agreed tools of the EHEA, without applying additional national criteria'*.

¹⁷ According to the European Approach for the Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes, if some of the cooperating higher education institutions require external quality assurance at programme level (e.g. programme accreditation or evaluation is mandatory), they should select a suitable quality assurance agency from the list of EQAR-registered agencies. The agency will carry out a single evaluation or accreditation of the entire joint programme. The result is to be accepted in all EHEA countries and, depending on the national legal framework, the external quality assurance decision should come into force or be recognised in all countries where the programme is offered. EQAR is the official register of national external quality assurance agencies that are in compliance with the commitments within the Bologna Process.

¹⁸ ESG Standard 1.10: *'Institutions should undergo external quality assurance in line with the ESG on a cyclical basis'*. The European Approach (9. Periodicity): *'The joint programme should be reviewed periodically every 6 years, which should be specified in the published decision'*.

8. Support, where appropriate, the development of high-quality virtual collaborative learning in accordance with the General Data Protection Regulation as part of teaching, learning and research to foster and facilitate inclusive and student-centred transnational cooperation that complements face-to-face interactions, and in particular to:
- a) Support higher education institutions in developing virtual and on-line collaborative international learning models as an integral part of blended learning, including through leadership commitment, strategic planning, robust and internationalised pedagogical training and support services.
 - b) Support higher education institutions in valorising and recognising in their career assessments the time spent by academics on developing new innovative pedagogies and new research practices through transnational cooperation, where appropriate.
 - c) Support institutionalised cooperation models, including ‘European Universities’, in their efforts to pool expertise and resources to develop and implement joint digital strategies and shared interoperable IT infrastructure, for example by granting mutual access to online learning and research environments, learning management systems, digital libraries or massive open online course (MOOC) platforms, training and support services, seamless access to findable, accessible, interoperable, and reusable (FAIR) data and other interoperable services.
 - d) Support the testing and piloting of open source solutions to overcome common challenges, thus contributing to the interoperability, digital readiness, data sovereignty and responsibility of higher education systems.

9. Support higher education institutions in developing joint interdisciplinary transnational educational activities at all levels (short cycles, Bachelor, Master, and Doctoral).
 - a) Enable and facilitate transnational challenge-based approaches where learners from different disciplines, cultures and countries cooperate together with researchers, companies, cities, regions, non-governmental organisations and local communities in finding creative and innovative solutions to global and shared challenges.
 - b) Encourage the provision of high-quality lifelong learning opportunities for all to facilitate upskilling and reskilling, with a focus on the most in-demand areas in the labour market, thereby contributing to their personal and professional development.

10. Encourage higher education institutions to involve learners, academics, researchers and staff in the governance of structures for transnational cooperation between higher education institutions, while taking into account the existing democratic elements of academic self-governance, notably:
 - a) Encourage higher education institutions to make their governance structures reflect the increasingly diverse backgrounds of learners and staff as well as different employment and educational experiences, in line with the principles of inclusion and equality.
 - b) Support capacity building for strong and effective leadership as an important driver for holistic institutional transnational cooperation.

- c) Promote gender balance at all levels of governance structures.
- d) Establish opportunities for peer learning to encourage and support initiatives under which higher education institutions can share experiences and engage in mutual learning and knowledge exchange.

It is recommended that Member States implement this Recommendation as soon as possible. They are invited to inform the Commission by *[insert date 12 months after adoption by Council]* of the corresponding measures to be taken at the appropriate level to support the objectives of this Recommendation as essential steps towards achieving the European Education Area by 2025.

HEREBY INVITES THE COMMISSION

With full regard to the principle of subsidiarity, institutional autonomy and academic freedom, in accordance with national circumstances, and in close cooperation with the Member States and all relevant stakeholders, to:

11. In parallel to the analysis of ongoing studies and other preparatory work, support the Member States and higher education institutions in testing the use of existing European instruments from 2022 onwards as a step on the way to facilitating deeper, long-term and flexible transnational cooperation and in examining the need for and feasibility of institutionalised cooperation instruments, such as a possible legal status for alliances of higher education institutions. To be used on a voluntary basis, such instruments should facilitate the sharing of capacities and data and the exchange of staff, where appropriate, and the implementation of joint programmes, with the aim of awarding joint degrees at the level of alliances, including a joint degree based on co-created European criteria.

Based on the results of the preparatory work and the Erasmus+ pilots, report at each step to the Council for further decision.

12. Examine the options and necessary steps - in close cooperation with Member States, higher education institutions, student organisations and stakeholders - towards a possible joint degree based on a common set of co-created European criteria. This degree, to be delivered on a voluntary basis at national, regional or institutional level, could attest learning outcomes achieved as part of transnational cooperation ‘combining studies in several EU countries’¹⁹, offered for example within ‘European Universities’. It should be easy to issue, store, share, verify and authenticate, and recognised across the EU. It will build on and boost the implementation of the Bologna instruments in the Member States.
 - a) Pilot in 2022 the development and implementation under Erasmus+ of European criteria for the award of a joint European degree label. Such a label would be issued as a complementary certificate to the qualifications obtained by students graduating from joint programmes delivered in the context of transnational cooperation between several higher education institutions.
 - b) Based on the results of this preparatory work, report to the Council for further decision at each step towards a possible joint degree based on co-created European criteria, in accordance with the instruments of the Bologna Process.

¹⁹ European Council Conclusions, 14 December 2017 (EUCO 19/1/17 REV 1).

13. Pursue the further development of the European Universities initiative following a bottom-up approach through the Erasmus+ programme, on the basis of the main outcomes of the mid-term review of the first alliances. As of 2022, provide sustainable funding for successful existing ‘European Universities’ following a competitive and qualitative call for proposals, and allow for the creation of new ones, based on the principles of geographical balance, inclusion, high quality and excellence. Test synergies with the Horizon Europe programme for the research and innovation dimension and possibly other EU programmes by 2024, within the remit of their legal bases. Take benefit of the mid-term review of the MFF programmes to consider ways of enabling possible innovative approaches for a better joint mobilisation of EU sources of funding, exploiting possible synergies with regional and national funds.
14. Support, in close cooperation with the Member States, the widening of the European Student Card initiative, in particular the digitalisation of business processes that involve multiple signatories and data exchanges in order to reduce the administrative burden associated with managing the mobility and exchanges of students and staff embedded within transnational partnerships of higher education institutions.

15. By mid-2022, provide a comprehensive roadmap indicating key milestones and the expert groups involved, with a view to co-designing the new instruments with the Member States and relevant stakeholders. The roadmap should be regularly updated.

The Commission is invited to analyse and evaluate the progress made in the implementation of this Recommendation, as well as its use in the context of the work on the implementation of the strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training towards the European Education Area and beyond, via existing relevant Union monitoring and reporting frameworks, in cooperation with the Member States and after consulting the stakeholders concerned, and to report to the Council within five years from the date of its adoption.

Done at Luxembourg,

For the Council
The President
