

How European university alliances contribute to Dutch higher education

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Introduction

The European Universities Initiative (EUI) was launched by the European Commission in 2019 with the ambition of stimulating a systemic transformation of higher education in the EU, through the creation of university alliances. The Netherlands, home to 14 universities and 36 universities of applied sciences, has enthusiastically embraced the approach of European university alliances. These alliances are potentially important levers for modernising and strengthening Dutch higher education. They create systemic, diverse, cross-border partnerships in education, research and regional development, thus contributing to the quality of higher education and to Dutch competitiveness. In light of discussions on the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), Universities of the Netherlands (UNL) calls on Dutch policymakers and institutions to support, align and fund these alliances. Based on the commonly agreed missions of Dutch universities, we summarise a number of innovation areas in which the EUI adds significant value.

Education

Development of Skills

One of the main advantages of the alliances, is that combining the strengths and expertise of the various participating institutions leads to unique programmes of very high quality. For Dutch institutions, this gives them access to expertise and infrastructures beyond what is already available at the national level. Students gain access to knowledge, teachers, other European students, infrastructures, and cross-border social assignments that are not always available in their home country. Students can integrate online, blended and/or on-campus programmes and courses from different institutions in their programme, even within one semester or study period. In doing so, they gain experiences, perspectives and skills they would not otherwise have gained and develop an international network.

*Eindhoven University of Technology has implemented a **Dutch IT application for a joint study guide in EuroTeQ** together with SURF and the Dutch EWUU alliance. This IT application can become an example of a European IT standard with Dutch principles such as 'privacy by design.'*

Innovative education

Within European alliances, institutions can easily experiment with new, innovative forms of education. For example, in terms of digitalisation and exchange, but also with the flexibility of following different programme components at different institutions. This creates open curricula where students can put together their own programme in different ways, which contributes to skills development: students can have a broad orientation or develop their own specific expertise. It also contributes to brain circulation and balanced student flows. This flexibility does depend on a reliable digital infrastructure for exchanging data, registration systems and making study guides available. Dutch initiatives such as Edubadges, Eduhub, edXchange and "federated identities" are good examples.

In addition, cooperation within alliances offers opportunities to identify -or, alternatively, remove- barriers such as automatic recognition, issuing credits, student administration, differences in accreditation and quality assurance and more, which can contribute to achieving the joint Bologna goals.

*Delft University of Technology has developed innovative interdisciplinary education and **well-run micro-credential programmes** in D&I and STEM in the **ENHANCE** alliance. They are working on a single campus network with flexible and guided learning paths, including modules for transnational and inclusive STEM education.*

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Life Long Learning (LLL)

Alliances can contribute to Lifelong Learning (LLL) with their flexibility, innovation and diverse expertise. The demand for professional skills continues to evolve. Alliances are well-suited to offer widely available, attractive, modular short courses and microcredentials, with the possibility of identifying new LLL needs. Dutch institutions are conducting several pilots, giving LLL a greater foothold.

*The Open University works within the **OpenEU alliance** to innovate **LLL**. The strength of the alliance lies in cooperation between universities with a **strong profile in distance learning and digitalisation**. **Interoperability** is a fundamental element of this cooperation. Work is under way on **exchangeable LLL products and a joint Bachelor's programme in Software Development and Testing**.*

European Degree and Accreditation

Within alliances, joint courses and educational programmes that award credits are already being developed. This makes alliances the perfect place to enhance cooperation and harmonisation for accreditation. The proposed 'European Degree' will encourage harmonised accreditation and mutual recognition of degrees. Dutch universities see this as an opportunity to maintain the international appeal of their joint programmes. In addition, the European Degree can encourage targeted reforms and remove administrative barriers between member states. You can read more about why Dutch universities support the development of a European Degree in [this position paper](#).

*Maastricht University has open curriculum programmes in **YUFE** using a **Virtual Campus**, with the flagship programme being the **Joint Bachelor in Urban Sustainability**. The next step is exploring a **Joint Master's programme**.*

Research & Innovation

Leveraging networks and fostering talent

Alliances form ecosystems and structures that connect researchers from different disciplines and countries and help them form strong, long-term consortia. These consortia can pursue competitive European funding, like within Horizon Europe, and especially if the new MFF puts more explicit emphasis on themes. Like students, researchers can gain new skills through close collaboration and exchange opportunities. Researchers, especially early-stage researchers such as PhD students, benefit from extensive mentoring opportunities, joint supervision, (shared) infrastructures, publication opportunities, knowledge exchange and the aforementioned mobility. Alliances thus pave the way for Dutch institutions to remain attractive breeding grounds for talent while nurturing European research infrastructures. The research-education nexus encourages the direct absorption of new research insights into the classroom and promotes an interdisciplinary culture.

Institutional Benefits

Not only students and researchers learn from each other. There is also much to be gained at the institutional level. Sharing knowledge and infrastructure makes just as much sense for domains such as Research Management Services, Human Resource practices, Student Support, and universities' distinct strategic missions. Institutional cooperation within alliances also leads to capacity building and innovation at these levels.

Regional Development

Extending impact beyond university walls

Support for alliances by the European Commission (and others) stimulates regional growth and innovation by bringing together different parties and stakeholders. It also provides opportunities for engaging students at a societal and social level by exposing them to regional and European challenges. All this, generates economic and social benefits at all these different levels: local, regional, and national. Dutch universities active within

regional alliances can share their efforts and experiences with partners in other alliances and thus make an even greater impact. This is attractive for investors and funders (such as Interreg) and for expanding the labour market. Such cross-border cooperation can help retain talent, create new jobs and boost (local) SMEs.

*The Joint Virtual Administrative Office of CHARM-EU (Utrecht University) supports the **joint degree master's programme Global Challenges for Sustainability**: from open days to graduation. In addition, the alliance is working to expand with more partners the **Student Research Hub** between UU and Montpellier University. In this, researchers, students, professionals and civil society partners work together on complex issues.*

How to Proceed?

The alliances are an essential tool to strengthen Dutch higher education, but we recognise operational challenges around legal, financial, digital and administrative barriers. However, the vision is promising: a flexible, pan-European ecosystem in which Dutch institutions benefit from structured, multi-institutional programmes, internationally shared research infrastructures, and more thriving regional cooperation. The success of this vision depends on whether the Netherlands, together with other member states, the European Commission, and supported by the “Union of Skills”, actively steers towards “mainstreaming” alliance-based innovations.

Specifically, Dutch universities suggest:

- 1 Align national policies: The ministries of Education (OCW) and Economic Affairs (EZ) need joint strategies to address ‘macro-efficiency’ (optimal use of educational programmes) of bachelor's and master's programmes outside the current national perspective.
- 2 Invest, simplify and mainstream: Adapting existing accreditation frameworks, providing flexible funding mechanisms and pooling EU and Dutch resources is crucial.
- 3 Champion in attracting European and global talent: The Netherlands has a good track record in welcoming international students and faculty. Alliances can help keep that funnel sustainable and useful by sharing experiences with international student and staff programmes with other countries, and by putting more effort into balanced and online exchange. Internationalisation will be redefined for the benefit of the Dutch economy and society.

The Netherlands should fully commit to these initiatives, not just by following, but by acting as a key driver, shaping policy around the European Degree, microcredentials and cross-border research networks. The biggest risk is the lack of sustainable funding and policy support.

Let's therefore take a proactive stance. By making alliances a core part of the national innovation strategy - rather than temporary projects - Dutch policymakers and university administrators can enhance the standing and influence of the Netherlands' higher education system in the global market. All this contributes to achieving a Fifth Freedom, realising a flexible labour market and expanding the competitiveness of the Netherlands and the EU.