



European University Association

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# The role of universities in the European Neighbourhood Policy

## EUA's response to the public consultation “Towards a new European Neighbourhood Policy”

### **About the European University Association (EUA)**

With 850 members – individual institutions and national rectors' conferences – across 48 countries, EUA is the largest and most comprehensive organisation representing universities in Europe. 17 million students are enrolled at EUA member universities. EUA's aim is to strengthen the convergence of European higher education and research, and enhance its global recognition. Since its conception, EUA has contributed actively to policy development, both as a member of the Bologna Process and in the discussion on the Lisbon Agenda and the European Research Area. Higher education reform, mobility and cooperation within Europe and with other parts of the world are of crucial interest for EUA and its members.

**The European University Association takes a keen interest in the European Neighbourhood Policy.** EUA cooperates with higher education institutions and organisations in the eastern and southern neighbourhood in order to foster dialogue and mutual understanding, exchange knowledge and expertise, build capacities and encourage greater system compatibility. It has members in all countries of the eastern neighbourhood; in the southern neighbourhood, it joins forces with university associations and networks through the AECHE platform.<sup>1</sup>

## I. Rationale

### **1. Higher education and research cooperation and exchange bring countries and people together**

Cooperation in higher education and research has long connected countries and peoples, and, as such, it has been an important driver for European integration and enlargement. In the wake of the political upheavals of 1989 higher education cooperation and mobility were considered as crucial tools for enabling integration between East and West, promoting innovation and fostering inter-cultural understanding. Globalisation and growing connectivity have since further increased the prospects and need for exchange and collaboration with partners outside of Europe. For today's universities, international exchange and cooperation have become indispensable means of enhancing the quality and relevance of their teaching and research. This also explains the growing participation in international higher education cooperation programmes, such as Erasmus, Erasmus Mundus and Tempus.

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<sup>1</sup> Recent EUA activities include the [Arab-Euro Conference on Higher Education \(AECHE\) platform](#), the Tempus-funded [EUREQA project](#), which supports the development of internal quality assurance systems in the Western Balkans, and the Tempus-funded [ATHENA project](#), which fosters the development, reform and modernisation of higher education systems in Armenia, Moldova and Ukraine.

## **2. Higher education and research collaboration and exchange improve relations between Europe and its neighbours in an effective way**

While the geographical distance is small, countries of the neighbourhood region and Europe differ in cultural, social, political and economic terms. Higher education cooperation offers a means to overcome these differences: by recognising and working with them, otherness and diversity are effectively turned into an asset.

Higher education and research cooperation under the ENP takes the form of policy dialogue, national and regional capacity building, collaboration in research and innovation, and increased mobility opportunities for students, researchers and academics, supported through the Erasmus Mundus, Tempus and other programmes. The Erasmus+ programme, launched in 2014, provides funding for student and staff mobility within university partnerships and for structured inter-university cooperation to achieve higher education modernisation.

The direct nature of the dialogue and relationships resulting from such cooperation helps foster an atmosphere of equal partnership and a sense of ownership in the neighbourhood countries. At the same time, higher education and research cooperation results in flexible and dynamic approaches that differentiate between partnerships, taking account of a wide range of interests and circumstances. Compared with many others, cooperation measures are of relatively low cost, rely on existing infrastructure and (university) personnel in both regions, and usefully complement political, commercial and civil society exchanges. Experience indicates that they also tend to be sustainable and enduring, even in times of political crisis and conflict.

## **3. Higher education and research exchanges contribute to higher education reform, system development and regional convergence within the neighbourhood and between the neighbourhood and the EU**

Exchanges and cooperation between institutions and systems help foster higher education reform and regional collaboration and convergence both within the neighbourhood and between the neighbourhood and the EU. Countries of the eastern neighbourhood region actively participate in the Bologna Process, while a number of institutions and countries in the southern Mediterranean have adopted some Bologna features, such as the three-cycle system and ECTS. Beyond Bologna, higher education dialogue and collaboration have inspired national and regional approaches to modernisation and reform. Such voluntary convergence processes demonstrate the formative impact of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), and have a positive effect on further exchange with the European neighbourhood. In the light of serious crises in the regions, reducing or removing incompatibilities within and between higher education systems is also essential to enable neighbouring countries to welcome displaced staff and students.

Furthermore, higher education, research and innovation systems in the EU and its neighbourhood stand to be strengthened by close and sustainable partnerships, through the development of new and joint curricula and programmes, the promotion of interdisciplinary approaches and a re-focusing of collaborative research on specific societal challenges.

#### **4. Higher education and research exchange generates benefits beyond the academic sector**

Beyond its primary importance for academia and research, international collaboration and exchange in higher education renders considerable political and social benefits. Mobility and exchanges foster the professional development of individuals and human resource development in general, with immense benefits for the EU and neighbourhood countries, particularly in view of current demographic and migration patterns. Institutional capacity building in partner countries helps to prevent brain-drain by providing opportunities for young talent to receive a better education and career opportunities at home.

While some of the medium- to long-term benefits for neighbouring countries may be difficult to quantify, numerous case studies and testimonials bear witness to the positive impact of higher education and research cooperation and exchange: they strengthen civil society in partner countries, and ultimately contribute to system reform and democratisation and promote social and economic development and innovation.

#### **5. The importance of higher education and research collaboration grows in times of political crisis and social and technological change**

The EU neighbourhood region receives greater financial support for international cooperation and mobility than all other global regions, thus clearly underlining the EU's political commitment. Over the last five years this can also be seen as a reaction to political crises in parts of the neighbourhood region, as well as to a growth in political and religious extremism and violence which affects countries in the neighbourhood region and the EU, albeit to very different degrees and in different ways.

To address these challenges, governments in the EU and the neighbouring countries have for the most part committed to providing better education and career opportunities for ever more citizens, to improving their education sectors and, particularly in the case of higher education and research, to internationalising them. In this context, digital innovation could play an important role, as a common topic of interest and as a tool for the development of institutions in both regions.

## **II. The way forward: EUA's proposals to the future development of the ENP**

Against this background, the European University Association (EUA) welcomes the European Commission's consultation on the future of the neighbourhood policy with its focus on civil society – including higher education – exchanges. EUA strongly supports the development of closer relations between the EU and its neighbouring countries, to the benefit of both sides; welcomes the fact that, hitherto, higher education and research have played an important role in the European Neighbourhood Policy; and encourages the European Commission to continue to strengthen higher education and research cooperation as a crucial element of the civil society dialogue between Europe and its neighbours.

In particular, EUA urges the European Commission to:

- i. **maintain a strong focus on and ensure the visibility and recognition** of higher education and research cooperation within the ENP. Cooperation should be comprehensive and incorporate, but also go beyond, mobility and exchange. Given the current crises, it would also, for example, be important to promote targeted exchanges between the EU and the neighbourhood countries that involve both the responsible national administrations and universities.
- ii. **allow for better reciprocity in the exchanges between EU and neighbourhood countries.** The EU should stimulate and support measures for promoting outgoing mobility to institutions in neighbourhood countries, for instance by supporting universities and thus providing incentives for developing and or enhancing mobility towards the ENP partners. Remaining administrative obstacles to mobility should be eliminated, by simplifying, harmonising and liberalising visa procedures and instituting fast-track options for short-term mobility (e.g. conference participation). In this light, rules and regulations that impede the reciprocity of partnerships and exchanges, such as the 10% limit imposed on Erasmus+ mobility from the EU to neighbourhood countries, should be reconsidered. While the goal cannot be to even out incoming and outgoing mobility, there are asymmetric exchange measures that could help to make exchanges more balanced (e.g. short study stays, shared classrooms, placements for practical experience and summer schools for EU students and staff).
- iii. **ensure synergies and exchanges between ENP measures and activities in the context of the Bologna Process, the EHEA and also the ERA.** All EU member states and eastern neighbourhood countries participate in the Bologna Process and its reform initiatives, while several of the southern Mediterranean countries have confirmed their interest in the Process, and participated in the Bologna Policy Forum. However, there is scope for better aligning and synergising ongoing thematic work, support measures and events. This could strengthen the implementation of Bologna commitments in neighbourhood countries as well as the visibility and relevance of dialogues and dedicated networks. For example, the ongoing Higher Education Reform Experts (HEREs) project would definitely benefit from cooperating with the National Teams of Bologna Experts in Europe. Both are funded by the EC, but they work separately and run under different funding mechanisms.
- iv. **extend cooperation to the ‘neighbours of neighbours’.** Some neighbours of ENP countries play an important political and economic role. Excluding them from dialogue and cooperation initiatives could limit the effectiveness of actions, and even lead to tensions. At the same time, the EU already provides under other schemes funding for collaboration between the EU and countries that would be ‘neighbours of neighbours’. The aim should be to foster inclusiveness and flexibility, by allowing ‘neighbours of neighbours’ to participate in neighbourhood measures under certain conditions, both at their own cost and with support from other dedicated EU funding instruments.
- v. **promote and enable coordination and collaboration among the DGs of the EC** is of critical importance to ensure an efficient use of funds and resources and to maximise the impact of projects and stakeholder contacts. Higher education institutions and organisations have multiple missions, and higher education collaboration in the framework of the ENP therefore concerns issues dealt with by the EEAS, DG ELARG, DG DEV, DG EAC, DG RTD, the EACEA and the ETF. A sectoral approach should be

ensured to allow universities to address research collaboration as well as learning and teaching mobility and exchanges within the ENP.

- vi. **make the best possible use of the EC's funding for research collaboration as well as higher education exchange and cooperation.** Joint projects developed in these areas constitute key trajectories to enhance mutual understanding, knowledge exchange, capacity building and system convergence. Beyond their actual duration, projects and individual mobility grants often build relations between institutions and individuals that endure, sometimes with unintended spin-offs in different thematic and organisational contexts. Involved staff and students develop an immense and valuable knowledge of disciplinary and generic cooperation and exchange, the benefits of which should be shared within institutions and beyond. The EC should therefore use a small part of Erasmus+ funding to support exchanges between projects, and ensure that their outcomes and lessons are disseminated via stakeholder meetings and websites. This would also help to support further networking.

**The EC should also consider improving its funding instruments and rules.** Feedback from EUA university members and partners on the first two calls of the Erasmus+ programme suggests that higher education institutions face a number of difficulties, such as low ceilings resulting in insufficient cost coverage and unsatisfactory simplification.<sup>2</sup> As a result, institutions from neighbourhood countries, but also from Europe, may not be able to participate on an equitable basis. Erasmus+ funding, if it is to reach its goals, would need more realistic ceilings, simplification of rules and more flexibility in the use of funding and the design of project budgets. While Action 1 Erasmus+ Credit Mobility with Partner Countries is in its early days, it seems to require more promotion, both at European and partner country institutions. The latter would also require capacity building support to develop institutional approaches and processes for in- and outgoing mobility, e.g. by supporting the development of institutional internationalisation strategies.

### III. Concluding remarks: challenges and opportunities for the ENP

The ongoing economic crises in Europe as well as tension and turmoil within and between a number of neighbourhood countries, while adding to the challenges, also makes this an even more pressing issue. We strongly believe that there is an opportunity now to promote even more active higher education and research cooperation, that will lead in future to long-term benefits in terms of democratisation, system improvement and social and economic development. If we do not act now, the consequences could be damaging and long-lasting.

The contribution of universities to the ENP is far from being the answer to all the challenges we face, but universities can contribute in a major way to underpinning and enhancing political dialogue and economic cooperation, as well as to capacity building and mitigating the impact of tension and conflict. Moreover, at a recent consultation meeting of the EEAS and DG EAC, stakeholders present broadly agreed that 'cultural diplomacy' should – not exclusively, but particularly – focus on the neighbourhood region and that crisis management should be one important element. The university sector has, with its own limited resources, developed structures and instruments to respond to challenges and crises: many EUA members

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<sup>2</sup> Also see a recent report by the UK HE International Unit: "[Erasmus + Survey report: Experiences of the Implementation of the Erasmus + Programme in the UK](#)"



belong to the Scholars at Risk Network or participate in the Scholars Rescue Fund's programmes. The Magna Carta Observatory plays a crucial role in monitoring academic freedom and autonomy, as does EUA itself. It is clear that the sector itself can develop initiatives, but it requires support from policy makers and funders, particularly at the European level, to reach critical mass.

EUA would also like to offer its active support to the EC in further developing the ENP and ensuring that it contains a strong higher education and research component. This could consist both in providing further direct feedback and expertise and in encouraging our member institutions to do so, by participating in and organising dialogue events or contributing to a platform bringing together governments and key stakeholders.