

Call from the Mission Opérationnelle Transfrontalière (MOT) and the Conférence des présidents d'université (CPU) for an ambitious European policy on higher education and research in cross-border regions



I. Preamble

In its Communication of 30 September 2020¹, the European Commission reaffirms its ambition to establish a European education area by 2025. This ambition is rooted in the Bologna Declaration, which is in turn fuelled by the Sorbonne Declaration (May 1998) and the Magna Charta Universitatum (1988).

Together, these texts cement the fundamental values of the place of universities in the construction of Europe. These texts aim to erase borders in the quest for knowledge; to recognise the place of Europe and its territories in their development; to build the future of Europe through technological and social innovation; and to facilitate access for young people (initial training) and workers (lifelong learning) to local and European labour markets. To achieve this, it is necessary to combine excellence and territorial cohesion, to create a continuum between research, innovation and training, in particular through the Smart Specialisation Strategies specific to each region. University cooperation in cross-border regions is emblematic in this respect.

II. Cross-border university cooperation: major levers for a stronger, more resilient and more cohesive Europe

Within the most integrated cross-border areas, both economic and academic exchanges are characterised by the progressive interweaving of sectors. Economic and technological specialisation could thus, in the long term, no longer know borders and be reflected in the joint training offer and in cross-border research projects.

Provided that the obstacles (legal, cultural, political) to cooperation are removed, proximity will encourage regular meetings between research teams, teachers, students and companies. It will offer students the possibility of following face-to-face modules in a partner institution on the other side of the border. The mobility of students and researchers and the cooperation of companies and universities within a cross-border economic ecosystem also have a favourable impact on the capacity for innovation and development of the territory as a whole, as well as on the employability of the populations. Finally, the optimisation of research facilities between several institutions on either side of a border is a real asset that only institutions located nearby can fully make use of.

Cross-border universities realised these advantages very early on. The construction of an integrated cross-border higher education and research area was initiated, for some of them (University of the Grande Région - UniGR, EUCOR - the European Campus, the Communauté du Savoir - CdS), several decades ago. These initiatives are therefore a source of example for European universities, whose emergence is encouraged by the European Commission through the ERASMUS+ programme and which sometimes include cross-border partners. Local and regional authorities often support these initiatives, mostly on an ad hoc basis according to their competences and available resources. However, some territories, such as the New

¹ Establishing a European Education Area by 2025 and re-defining education and training for the digital age

(https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/fr/ip_20_1743)

Aquitaine-Euskadi-Navarre Euroregion, the Nice Côte d'Azur Metropolis and the Franco-Swiss Jura Arc cross-border area, have chosen to initiate and co-construct genuine strategies for cross-border university cooperation, or even cross-border smart specialisation strategies.

The construction of the European education and research area thus contributes to a more innovative Europe. It goes without saying that its horizon, in certain respects, must be global. But the crisis we are going through, and the necessary adaptation to the new climate regime that it prefigures, highlights the need to master the European destiny with regard to research and innovation and the capacity for technological transfer to European companies, and even to encourage the mobility of people and goods within functional regions, including when they have a cross-border dimension.

III. European instruments are insufficiently adapted to foster cooperation between border institutions

The importance of such cooperation in cross-border areas within the European Union is generally recognised by institutions, local and regional authorities and cohesion policy programmes (Interreg). However, the authorities of the Interreg programmes are increasingly demanding applied research projects that are firmly rooted in their territory, which excludes a whole area of cross-border research. Furthermore, the other European sectoral policies and programmes (HORIZON, ERASMUS+, etc.) are not currently designed to encourage cross-border university consortia, especially when it comes to cooperation involving establishments located in non-EU Member States. The possible exclusion of Switzerland from the Horizon Europe programme is a source of concern in this respect.

Higher education institutions report real difficulties in the use of Interreg funds: administrative red tape, time-consuming controls, excessively long payment deadlines, etc. This is all the more regrettable as this is currently the only European instrument that universities can apply for to finance cross-border cooperation. As for the ERASMUS+ programme, which supports the construction of European universities, it is the ideal instrument for strengthening European university excellence in the face of the globalisation of knowledge. Strangely, cross-border university cooperation is not eligible for this programme because of the strict application of a criterion of geographical balance, although it is significantly inspired by the examples mentioned above which pursue the same objective in a closer cooperation area.

The exclusion of cross-border universities from the calls for pilot projects organised by DG EAC in 2019 and 2020 in

the framework of the "European universities" initiative could have serious consequences both in terms of recognition of their know-how on a European and global scale and in financial terms. It would also demonstrate the lack of consideration of European public policies towards cross-border spaces, even though they represent territories of life which erase borders and participate fully in the strengthening of the European identity. We therefore hope that the Member States and the Commission will give due consideration to cross-border university cooperation so that it can be eligible for this scheme in the future.

IV. Continuing and supporting the development of cross-border university cooperation: progress to be made and actions to be undertaken

The development of cross-border studies and research, even within the Schengen area, as well as the recognition of diplomas obtained remain subjects on which we must collectively make further progress.

While national regulations have all adopted the LMD system, many differences remain and are an obstacle to the deployment of cross-border and transnational training. Cross-border territories regularly communicate on the need to continue efforts to achieve facilitated training pathways within interdependent territories: standardisation of diplomas and university calendars, financial aid, joint work and development of entrepreneurship networks with companies in the cross-border living area facilitating the matching of training with the needs of the economic world and giving concrete expression to technological and social innovations, which are the fruit of cross-border cooperation.

At the financial and administrative level, there are still unresolved issues. The financial support available to learners may differ from one country to another, particularly with regard to the remuneration of doctoral students.

The development of double degree courses must be continued and facilitated in cross-border contexts, as must identical certifications, even a posteriori, in order to facilitate and enhance the value of cross-border university careers within local companies.

It will also be necessary to undertake substantial work on improving the living conditions of cross-border students. The costs of mobility between partner universities are still an obstacle to learning on both sides of the border. Since the employability of students with mobility experience has been widely recognised, the proximity of cross-border universities can be a truly facilitating element for developing this.

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The full deployment of the European student card, including facilitated access to culture or sport at negotiated

rates, should contribute to the enrichment and diversification of student life.

On the eve of the French presidency of the Council of the European Union and the finalisation of the new Interreg programmes for the period 2021-2027, and with a view to the future period of the Horizon Europe and Erasmus+ programmes, we call on the national and European authorities to recognise the importance of cross-border university cooperation for the development of cross-border territories and the construction of a European citizenship.

To strengthen the scope and power of cross-border university cooperation for the benefit of a European citizenship, of a coherent and inclusive development of territories, and of the integrated European Higher Education Area, we propose :

- ▶ To recognise the exceptional potential that cooperation between universities in cross-border areas represents for the European higher education and research area and for all territories;
 - ▶ To support their eligibility for the 'European University' scheme of the ERASMUS+ programme;
 - ▶ To call on the European Commission and national authorities to simplify the management of Interreg projects;
 - ▶ To encourage the development of cross-border Smart Specialisation Strategies in line with the four orientations defined for targeting investments in the Horizon Europe 2021-2024 Strategic Plan;
 - ▶ To continue the Bologna process, in particular as regards the harmonisation of academic calendars, the improvement of policies to support the mobility of students and researchers and the recognition of diplomas throughout Europe.
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The following have already joined the initiative:



Local authorities, universities, cross-border structures,
Become a signatory to support cross-border
university cooperation!

If your institution or organisation is interested in joining this initiative, please contact us:

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