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## **Macron's Idea of European Universities**

From Vision to Reality –  
The Implementation

**Discussion Paper**

**C265  
2021**

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### ***Introduction***

In July 2020 – 2 years after President Macron's initial speech on the “Initiative for Europe” – 24 European Universities involving 165 higher education institutions from 26 member states and Erasmus+ countries were selected from 62 applications.<sup>1</sup> Neurotech<sup>EU</sup>, the European University of Brain and Technology, and the University of Bonn and its consortium partners were among the participating institutions in the European Universities Initiative.<sup>2</sup>

With the selection of the 24 university consortia after the second round, Macron's aim of 20 European Universities was more than achieved. That this took place during the COVID-19 pandemic was a testament to the critical importance of international collaboration. The more alliances and the stronger the collaborative networks, the greater is the potential to mutually strengthen and jointly benefit from the resulting synergies. This goal is now more important than ever, given the pandemic's devastating effects on higher education, including the challenges of teaching and studying remotely, travel restrictions, and financial shortages.

1 Cf. European Commission (07/09/2020): Press Release. 24 new European Universities reinforce the European Education Area. Retrieved from [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip\\_20\\_1264](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_20_1264) (08/24/20).

2 I.e. NeurotechEU, the European University of Brain and Technology, consists of Radboud University (NL, network's COO), Boğaziçi University (TR), Iuliu Hațieganu University of Medicine and Pharmacy (RO), Karolinska Institutet (SE), Miguel Hernandez University of Elche (ES), University of Debrecen (HU), the University of Oxford (UK), and the University of Bonn (DE).

The Commission recently conducted a survey of the already existing 17 European Universities selected last year. The results show that 96% of the institutions think they would have been better prepared to face the coronavirus pandemic if their European University had already been fully operational (they only started 6 to 9 months ago). More than 60% of them consider that being part of a European University has already been helpful in addressing the current difficulties linked to the crisis. Good examples include the creation of virtual inter-university campuses, offering joint blended courses and common teaching units integrated in the curricula of all the member universities.<sup>3</sup>

It is certainly more efficient to respond to these types of challenges together than alone. Being part of a prestigious inter-European network has been the force for higher education institutions to implement fundamental educational innovations such as digital tools and joint blended learning efforts that have equipped them to tackle this type of challenge and others that Viadrina, for example, could not have handled previously.

### ***Macron's Idea of European Universities – the Initial Speech<sup>4</sup>***

On September 26, 2017, French President Emmanuel Macron gave a speech on Europe's future – the “Initiative for Europe” – at Paris' oldest university, the prestigious Sorbonne.<sup>5</sup> To the audience of students from

3 Cf. European Commission (07/09/2020): Press Release. 24 new European Universities reinforce the European Education Area. Retrieved from: [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip\\_20\\_1264](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_20_1264) (08/24/20).

4 Most parts of this section are taken from an older article by the authors published in 2018 (see [https://www.zei.uni-bonn.de/dateien/discussion-paper/DP\\_C249\\_Hutgens-Conermann.pdf](https://www.zei.uni-bonn.de/dateien/discussion-paper/DP_C249_Hutgens-Conermann.pdf)).

5 For the original version in French, see Macron, Emmanuel (2017): Initiative pour l'Europe. Retrieved from <http://www.elysee.fr/declarations/article/initiative-pour-l-europe-discours-d-emmanuel-macron-pour-une-europe-souveraine-unie-democratique/> (11/24/20). For the English version, see Macron, Emmanuel (2017): Initiative for Europe. Speech by M. Emmanuel Macron. President of the French

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Europe and across the world, he provided an ambitious, and at the same time detailed, plan on how to reform and change Europe. “The Europe of today,” he said, “is too slow, too weak, too ineffective, but Europe alone can enable us to take action in the world, in the face of the big contemporary challenges.”<sup>6</sup> The global challenges he mentioned, such as climate change, digital transition, migration, and terrorism, can be solved only within the union of Europe, not individually by inward-facing countries themselves. Moreover, the various counterproductive elements that Europe has had to increasingly face in recent years, including nationalism, identitarianism, protectionism, and isolationist sovereignty, reveal the need for a “European sovereignty,” which requires the rebuilding of a strong, “sovereign, united and democratic Europe.”<sup>7</sup> To reach that goal, President Macron highlighted “the six keys to sovereignty that are essential for success.”<sup>8</sup>

The first key addresses aspects of security, more precisely, the fight against terrorism, cybersecurity, and defense. He encouraged the establishment of a common intervention force and a common defense budget. In addition, he called for a common doctrine for action as well as a European Intelligence Academy and a common civil protection force.<sup>9</sup> The first steps toward establishing a common security and defense policy have already been taken: 25 of the 28 members of the European Union established the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), initiated for the first time in September 2017<sup>10</sup> and launched in December 2017.<sup>11</sup> A European Public

Republic, pp.1–26. Retrieved from

[https://www.diplomatie.g.ouv.fr/IMG/pdf/english\\_version\\_transcript\\_-\\_initiative\\_for\\_europe\\_-\\_speech\\_by\\_the\\_president\\_of\\_the\\_french\\_republic\\_cle8de628.pdf](https://www.diplomatie.g.ouv.fr/IMG/pdf/english_version_transcript_-_initiative_for_europe_-_speech_by_the_president_of_the_french_republic_cle8de628.pdf)  
(11/24/20).

6 Macron 2017b: 4.

7 Macron 2017b: 4.

8 Macron 2017b: 4.

9 Cf. Macron 2017b: 4–5.

10 Cf. European Union External Action (2017): Permanent Structured Cooperation on defence could be launched by end 2017. Retrieved from [https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/31832/permanent-structured-cooperation-defence-could-be-launched-end-2017\\_en](https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/31832/permanent-structured-cooperation-defence-could-be-launched-end-2017_en) (24/11/20).

Prosecutor's Office was also established at the same time. By August 2018, 22 members of the European Union were cooperating with the new common security approach.<sup>12</sup>

Another key to sovereignty emphasized by Macron is the long-lasting challenge posed by migration that binds Europe to the Middle East as well as to Africa. This makes it necessary to construct “a common area for borders, asylum and migrations”<sup>13</sup> as well as integration. The challenge Germany was facing at this time was crucial to preventing significant domestic political instability. He also addressed foreign policy by focusing on a partnership with Africa based on education, health, and energy transition. Germany's Grand Coalition supports cooperation with Africa and an Africa Strategy was framed in its Coalition Agreement of 2018.<sup>14</sup> The next key according to Macron is an ecological transition, mainly in the energy and agriculture sectors. His goal is to have a shared European energy market with a fair carbon price.<sup>15</sup> The fifth key concerns digital technology and seeks to make Europe a digital continent. Europe has to lead the digital transformation with radical innovations, which will also have an impact on the transformation of European economies and societies.<sup>16</sup> The final key regards Europe's economic, industrial, and monetary power, with the goal of becoming a strong and powerful eurozone and a European Economic and Monetary Union. A long-term economic and political strategy is vital to make Europe a competitive economic power.<sup>17</sup> Although Macron details six keys to sovereignty in his speech, an additional, seventh key suggests itself in the area of culture and

11 Cf. Council of the European Union (2017): Council Decision Establishing Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) and determining the list of Participating Member States. Retrieved from <http://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/32000/st14866en17.pdf> (24/11/20).

12 Cf. Official Journal of the European Union (2018): Commission Decision (EU) 2018/1103 of 7 August 2018 confirming the participation of Malta in the enhanced cooperation on the establishment of the European Public Prosecutor's Office. Retrieved from <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/dec/2018/1103/oj> (24/11/20).

13 Macron 2017b: 6.

14 Cf. Macron 2017b: 7.

15 Cf. Macron 2017b: 7–10.

16 Cf. Macron 2017b: 10–12.

17 Cf. Macron 2017b: 13–14.

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knowledge, which Macron mentions as the two elements that hold Europe together. He proposes a communal life that values culture, education, research, and science. Thus, he favors a multilingual Europe and European universities that are the “drivers of educational innovation and the quest for excellence.”<sup>18</sup>

### ***Diverse Reactions to the Initiative for Europe***

Although the Initiative for Europe would seem to be a highly ambitious and forward-looking initiative for Europe worthy of support, on at least most points, it nevertheless failed to garner the support it needed to become the cornerstone for a strong and united Europe. The responses to the speech have been cautious at best. Although the reactions of the EU and Italy, for example, were positive and supportive, those of many European conservatives and the member states of Central Europe were deeply skeptical and dismissive. Even reviews in the French press were critical. However, Macron continued to cherish his idea and continued to push for his concept of Europe on different occasions, for example, during his speech at the European Parliament in April 2018.<sup>19</sup> In addition to the keys to sovereignty and his vision for Europe's future, it was of great importance to President Macron to appeal to Germany to establish “a new partnership”<sup>20</sup> for the renewal of the Élysée Treaty. A renewed and strengthened partnership between these two leading countries would be the driving power behind the Initiative for Europe.

Germany's reactions were divided from the beginning, however, and were certainly not as enthusiastic as had been hoped for. Although Germany shares this ambition of a united and sovereign Europe with its partner France, it failed to support Macron's visions right away. On the one hand, there were difficulties stemming from coalition negotiations after the

18 Macron 2017b: 17.

19 European Parliament Press Releases (2018): Macron defends the idea of European sovereignty. Retrieved from <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20180411IPR01517/macron-defends-the-idea-of-european-sovereignty> (11/24/20).

20 Macron 2017b: 23.

federal elections in September 2017, just 2 days before Macron's speech. Furthermore, Germany's political future had been ambiguous for some time. On the other hand, the rebellion by Bavarian conservatives that Germany's Chancellor Angela Merkel had to face shortly after the formation of the Grand Coalition brought many difficulties to the government's make-up. Although both countries insist on the importance of the French-German partnership, vast differences remain between the two governments' visions. Nevertheless, the most important issues in the coalition agreement of the German Grand Coalition as regards to Europe – altogether it refers to Europe 298 times – closely match Macron's demands. Thus, Germany was and is willing to support most of Macron's ideas about close cooperation with France and the aims of Europe, namely, “solidarity and democracy,” “competing powers and investments,” “prospects and justice,” and “freedom and global responsibility” in the coalition agreement (2018). Indeed the Coalition Agreement states that “[f]or Germany, a strong and united Europe is the best guarantor of a good future in peace, freedom and prosperity.”<sup>21</sup> Only in June 2018 did the cabinets of Germany and France come together in Meseberg, Germany, to shape a Franco–German declaration that formed the groundwork for a new “Élysée Treaty” that planned to be finalized by the end of 2018. It sought to anchor European cooperation in a strong bilateral relation, “with the ambition to foster their economic, social and fiscal convergence, to develop new tools for their cross-border cooperation and to renew their commitment to support and facilitate the learning of the language of the partner.”<sup>22</sup> With the Meseberg declaration – titled “Renewing Europe's Promises of Security

21 Bundesregierung (2018): Ein neuer Aufbruch für Europa. Eine neue Dynamik für Deutschland. Ein neuer Zusammenhalt für unser Land. Koalitionsvertrag zwischen CDU, CSU und SPD. 19. Legislaturperiode, I. 93–94. Retrieved from [https://www.bundesregierung.de/Content/DE/\\_Anlagen/2018/03/2018-03-14-koalitionsvertrag.pdf;jsessionid=87F25216A9B8BD6381C0E73EC8E8156B.s7t2?\\_\\_blob=publicationFile&v=6](https://www.bundesregierung.de/Content/DE/_Anlagen/2018/03/2018-03-14-koalitionsvertrag.pdf;jsessionid=87F25216A9B8BD6381C0E73EC8E8156B.s7t2?__blob=publicationFile&v=6) (11/24/20).

22 Presse- und Informationsamt der Bundesregierung (2018): Erklärung von Meseberg. Retrieved from <https://www.bundesregierung.de/Content/DE/Pressemitteilungen/BPA/2018/06/2018-06-19-erklaerung-meseberg.html> (11/24/20)



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and Prosperity” – the leaders and ministers of both countries presented a catalog of reforms to shape Europe's future, incorporating aspects of Macron's speech, such as foreign and economic policies, a Migration Agenda, taxation, and climate. Both parties also agreed on a budget for the eurozone to be funded by national contributions as well as European resources.

In the area of research, innovation, and higher education, Germany and France agreed, among other things, “[t]o work to quickly set up the first ‘European universities,’ initially consisting in bottom-up networks of universities across the EU.”<sup>23</sup> Before the Franco-German agreement, EU leaders had already outlined an Initiative for European Universities at the 2017 Gothenburg Summit and were proceeding according to Macron's idea of building a European university network. Initially, the initiative intended to “... strengthen strategic partnerships across the EU between higher education institutions and encourage the emergence by 2024 of some twenty ‘European Universities,’ ... which will enable students to obtain a degree by combining studies in several EU countries and contribute to the international competitiveness of European universities,”<sup>24</sup> to quote the European Commission on the European Universities Initiative.

### ***Diverse Concepts of European Universities***

However, the French president intended to build independent universities with a newly conceived concept of European standards-universities with a European degree that would be acknowledged by every other European university and in all countries of the continent. What is developing, instead, are networks of various universities located throughout Europe. In addition to uniting Europe on an educational platform and thereby strengthening European identity, “[t]he aim behind this initiative,” of the European

23 Presse- und Informationsamt der Bundesregierung (2018): Erklärung von Meseberg. Retrieved from <https://www.bundesregierung.de/Content/DE/Pressemitteilungen/BPA/2018/06/2018-06-19-erklaerung-meseberg.html> (11/24/20)

24 European Commission (2017): European Universities Initiative. Retrieved from [https://ec.europa.eu/education/european-universities-initiative\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/education/european-universities-initiative_en) (11/24/20).

Commission, is to bring together a new generation of creative Europeans who are able to cooperate in different languages, across borders and disciplines, to address the big societal challenges and skill shortages that Europe faces. This initiative must be a game changer in higher education. Building on excellent examples such as Erasmus Mundus, Maria Skłodowska-Curie Actions and the European Institute of Innovation & Technology, Europe must make a leap forward. Driven by high quality, these European Universities would attract the best students, teachers and researchers, making use of the most innovative pedagogies and digital technologies. They would act as role models for other higher education institutions, progressively increasing the international competitiveness of European higher education.<sup>25</sup>

By 2024, the expectation is that 20 of these university networks be established. Although the European University Network was not directly proposed by the French president, Macron did inspire European higher education to think creatively about new models of cooperation and collaboration.

By fall 2018, 1 year after Macron's initial speech, various institutions had already published concept papers on their idea of the European University Initiative,<sup>26</sup> presenting their individual positions on European Universities as well as new suggestions and recommendations. Most of the papers agreed on aspects such as funding or the need for strong and common structures, with “clear strategic objectives and committed leadership.”<sup>27</sup> On

25 European Commission (2017): European Universities Initiative. Retrieved from [https://ec.europa.eu/education/european-universities-initiative\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/education/european-universities-initiative_en) (11/24/20).

26 For example, the Network of Universities from the Capitals of Europe (UNICA), conférence des présidents d'université (cpu), the European Consortium of Innovative Universities (ECIU), the European University Foundation (EUF), the EuroTech Universities, the German Rectors' Conference, the Norwegian Centre for International Cooperation in Education (SIU), the Guild of European Research-Intensive Universities, Universities of Applied Sciences for Europe (UAS4Europe), the European Campus (EUCOR), the University of the Greater Region (UniGR). Cf. European Commission (2017): European Universities Initiative. Retrieved from [https://ec.europa.eu/education/european-universities-initiative\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/education/european-universities-initiative_en) (11/24/20).

27 The Guild (2018): Shaping European Universities of the Future. The Guild's recommendations for the European University Initiative, p. 2. Retrieved from

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the basis of the United Nations Agenda 2030 and the fourth of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals,<sup>28</sup> most of the position papers follow and promote the idea of lifelong learning, which is essential in our fast-changing world in which humans increasingly compete with machines and constantly developing technologies.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, it is “essential for the competitiveness of the knowledge-based economy. This applies to all levels of education and training and concerns all stages of life as well as the different forms of learning.”<sup>30</sup> This should also include the development of “critical thinking among students, starting at Bachelor level”<sup>31</sup> as the Conférence des présidents d'université promotes. According to the majority of the concept papers, the basis of the European Universities cooperation model should be a knowledge triangle – research, education, and innovation – which functions as a bridge among these three fields.<sup>32</sup> More than just strengthening the links among research, education, and

[https://ec.europa.eu/education/sites/education/files/the\\_guild\\_position\\_paper\\_on\\_european\\_universities\\_initiative.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/education/sites/education/files/the_guild_position_paper_on_european_universities_initiative.pdf) (11/24/20).

- 28 Cf. United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (2018): Quality Education: Why it Matters. Retrieved from <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Goal-4.pdf> (11/24/20).
- 29 Cf., for example, Taddei, François (2018): Europe as a campus to allow every European citizen to become a lifelong student, p. 1. Retrieved from [https://ec.europa.eu/education/sites/education/files/crri\\_position\\_paper\\_on\\_european\\_universities\\_initiative.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/education/sites/education/files/crri_position_paper_on_european_universities_initiative.pdf) (11/24/20).
- 30 Conférence des présidents d'université (2018): European Universities CPU Proposal, p. 2. Retrieved from [https://ec.europa.eu/education/sites/education/files/cpu\\_on\\_european\\_universities\\_initiative.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/education/sites/education/files/cpu_on_european_universities_initiative.pdf) (11/24/20).
- 31 Conférence des présidents d'université (2018): European Universities CPU Proposal, p. 1. Retrieved from [https://ec.europa.eu/education/sites/education/files/cpu\\_on\\_european\\_universities\\_initiative.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/education/sites/education/files/cpu_on_european_universities_initiative.pdf) (11/24/20).
- 32 Cf. among others HRK German Rector's Conference (2018): Developing “European Universities” as Excellence Networks of Universities, p. 1. Retrieved from [https://ec.europa.eu/education/sites/education/files/hrk\\_concept\\_paper\\_on\\_european\\_universities\\_initiative.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/education/sites/education/files/hrk_concept_paper_on_european_universities_initiative.pdf) (10/09/18, website expired) and The Guild (2018): Shaping European Universities of the Future. The Guild's recommendations for the European University Initiative, p. 5. Retrieved from <https://www.the-guild.eu/publications/position-papers/guild-policy-paper-on-eun.pdf> (11/24/20).

innovation,<sup>33</sup> these networks should also aim to promote “European integration in the areas of science, culture and society.”<sup>34</sup>

Universities interested in applying are asked to take this into account, although a balance between the three pillars is not necessarily stipulated.<sup>35</sup> That said, the primary intention of this initiative is to facilitate student, researcher, and staff mobility, as well as to establish new understandings and mechanisms to deliver high quality programs through close collaboration among research, education, and administration within Europe. Students of the European Universities should be able to study in multiple locations, in a comprehensive curriculum taught by European professors, and receive a recognized European degree. Cultural diversity and European multilingualism are other important goals. Thus, this project is planned to be framed within the Erasmus+ program that is designed to increase both the quality and quantity of exchanges. This alliance would consist of at least four to six universities from EU member states, though geographical balance has also been recommended in order “to ensure that all EU member states are represented in these future initiatives.”<sup>36</sup> As mentioned previously, there will be provisions for funding the European Universities program within the Erasmus+ budget, but because the initiative is heavily supported by the EU, financial funding by the European

33 Cf. conférence des présidents d'université (2018): European Universities CPU Proposal, p. 1. Retrieved from [https://ec.europa.eu/education/sites/education/files/cpu\\_on\\_european\\_universities\\_initiative.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/education/sites/education/files/cpu_on_european_universities_initiative.pdf) (10/09/18, website expired).

34 Eucor (2018): Concept paper. Universités Européennes, p. 2. Retrieved from [https://ec.europa.eu/education/sites/education/files/eucor\\_concept\\_paper\\_on\\_european\\_universities\\_initiative.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/education/sites/education/files/eucor_concept_paper_on_european_universities_initiative.pdf) (10/08/18, website expired). See also HRK German Rector's Conference (2018): Developing “European Universities” as Excellence Networks of Universities, p. 2. Retrieved from [https://ec.europa.eu/education/sites/education/files/hrk\\_concept\\_paper\\_on\\_european\\_universities\\_initiative.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/education/sites/education/files/hrk_concept_paper_on_european_universities_initiative.pdf) (10/09/18, website expired).

35 Cf. European University Foundation (2018): Position Paper on European Universities, p. 4. Retrieved from [http://uni-foundation.eu/system/files/position\\_paper\\_on\\_european\\_universities.pdf](http://uni-foundation.eu/system/files/position_paper_on_european_universities.pdf) (09/28/18, website expired).

36 European University Foundation (2018): Position Paper on European Universities, p. 4. Retrieved from [http://uni-foundation.eu/system/files/position\\_paper\\_on\\_european\\_universities.pdf](http://uni-foundation.eu/system/files/position_paper_on_european_universities.pdf) (09/28/18, website expired).

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Commission has already been arranged as well. EU member states will also be encouraged to support the European University Alliance financially.<sup>37</sup>

### ***Diverse Challenges that Could be Faced – A Selection***

Taking the Viadrina European University in Frankfurt Oder, Germany, as a first example of a European higher education network, we can identify some of the difficulties that might occur in such a multilateral, cross-border university network. The Viadrina European University was founded in 1991, and since then a significant number of its students come from Poland or East Europe; that is, the multinational and multicultural student body is already successfully interacting. In 1996, the university established a close cooperative relationship with the Polish Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznan when both universities decided to mutually operate the Collegium Polonicum.<sup>38</sup> In 2013, they considered extending their cooperation by planning a joint academic unit with a joint program for digital studies located in Poznan.<sup>39</sup> This suggests that the two universities were foreseeing even then what the French president would enthusiastically initiate 4 years later. Shortly after the concept was drawn up, however, the director of Viadrina resigned in the face of strong resistance to the plans. The university staff members were concerned about their salary, and the idea of digitalization met with opposition.<sup>40</sup> These objections seem unfounded but were nevertheless decisive factors for the cancellation of the project. Although the plan of a jointly operating faculty was revived years later,

37 European Commission (2017): European Universities Initiative. Retrieved from [https://ec.europa.eu/education/european-universities-initiative\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/education/european-universities-initiative_en) (10/01/18, website expired).

38 Cf. Collegium Polonicum (2018): Über uns. Retrieved from [http://www.cp.edu.pl/de/o\\_nas/index.html](http://www.cp.edu.pl/de/o_nas/index.html) (09/28/18).

39 Cf. Burchard, Amory: Macrons Plan für 20 europäische Universitäten. Über die Oder nach Europa? In: Der Tagesspiegel (01/08/2018). Retrieved from <https://www.tagesspiegel.de/wissen/macrons-plan-fuer-20-europaeische-universitaeten-ueber-die-oder-nach-europa/20820844.html> (10/01/18).

40 Cf. Burchard, Amory: Macrons Plan für 20 europäische Universitäten. Über die Oder nach Europa? In: Der Tagesspiegel (01/08/2018). Retrieved from <https://www.tagesspiegel.de/wissen/macrons-plan-fuer-20-europaeische-universitaeten-ueber-die-oder-nach-europa/20820844.html> (10/01/18).

there is still criticism of this idea and of the plan to establish a European University Alliance of 20 educational networks by 2024. The former president of Viadrina, for example, states that university structures are highly linked to national mechanisms.<sup>41</sup> Further, they are bound to a national education system and national university policies. These restrictions would need to be loosened because, in the context of a European University Alliance, mutual strategic concepts and common guidelines would be necessary. Particularly with regard to incipient and strengthening nationalization trends, it would be important that social attitudes be removed from national thinking to enable open, trustful European perspectives and that the communication within the European community be improved, in terms of both ability and openness. In 2020, the Viadrina European University applied, together with the University of Lille/France, Malmö University/Sweden, the University of Minho/Portugal, Babeş-Bolyai University/Romania, the University of Wroclaw/Poland, and Mykolas Romeris University/Lithuania for the status of European University, as InklusU: The European University for Inclusiveness. The proposal was selected.<sup>42</sup>

In the Position Paper of the University of the Greater Region (UniGR),<sup>43</sup> we also found some components or challenges for the future European Universities worthy of consideration:

- *An integrated development strategy*: The quality of the partnership is defined by its ability to develop common capacity in teaching (including lifelong learning), research, and innovation by focusing

41 Cf. Burchard, Amory: Macrons Plan für 20 europäische Universitäten. Über die Oder nach Europa? In: Der Tagesspiegel (01/08/2018). Retrieved from <https://www.tagesspiegel.de/wissen/macrons-plan-fuer-20-europaeische-universitaeten-ueber-die-oder-nach-europa/20820844.html> (10/01/18).

42 InklusU: The European University for Inclusiveness (2020): About us. Retrieved from <https://www.inclusu.eu/about-us> (11/24/20).

43 The Greater Region comprises Saarland and Rhineland-Palatinate in Germany, the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg, the French region of Lorraine and Belgian Wallonia with its French- and German-speaking communities. It consists of six universities: the University of Luxembourg, Saarland University, the University of Liège, the University of Lorraine, the University of Kaiserslautern, and Trier University.

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on disciplines with high development potential for universities and their territories.

- *The establishment of effective governance:* The counterpart of an integrated strategy is the establishment of cooperation structures – or even common legal structures – involving the relevant decision-making and operational bodies of partner universities.
- *The development of mobility* for all university audiences (students, teachers, researchers, and administrative staff) must be the cornerstone of the joint strategy.
- *The multiplication of joint plurilingual study programs.*
- *The development of innovative teaching and learning methods* (including virtual mobility).
- *The question of critical size:* Beyond the issue of the quality of cooperation and the choice of truly promising areas of cooperation for institutions, one difficulty in creating genuine “European universities” is in ensuring the participation of a sufficient number of universities in the consortium, as well as a sufficient number of students, teachers, and researchers. The collaboration dynamic should have a trigger effect on the consortium as a whole.
- *A single financial instrument* (with one-stop shopping) funded by training (Erasmus+), research (FP9), and structural (regional policy) funds to structure the partnerships. This would complement existing funding for final beneficiaries.
- *A sustainable financing system:* The relatively short duration of existing financing (generally 3 or 4 years) is not compatible with the time needed to structure the partnership, on the one hand, and federate it around a common strategy, on the other hand.
- *The recognition of cooperation structures* (cross-border association, European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC), etc.) in funding programs (e.g., mentioning membership of the university network in the Erasmus+ charter). This includes the creation of financial instruments dedicated to these cooperation structures; recognition of joint degrees as European University degrees; the establishment of systems to facilitate the creation of joint

professorships; and the simplification of the system for the recognition of diplomas (internal to the European University).

- *The introduction of genuine European diplomas.*<sup>44</sup>

Shortly after Macron's speech, the first of several expected cross-border networks was established. The “4EU” alliance between Sorbonne/France, Heidelberg/Germany, Charles/Czech Republic, and Warsaw/Poland was formalized in Heidelberg in March of 2018.<sup>45</sup> However, it should be mentioned that this network had already been in preparation for 2 years and is based on existing academic relations. Therefore, the alliance cannot be seen as having been created through Macron's initiative. Nevertheless, the heads of the four universities emphasized that they would approve of this initiative as a pilot project for the planned network of 20 European universities.

In this new 4EU alliance, the so-called EUCOR or The European Campus, had already been established in 2015 through a cooperative network of five universities: the Universities of Basel/Switzerland, Freiburg/Germany, Haute-Alsace/France, Strasbourg/France, and the Karlsruhe Institute for Technology/Germany. Following Macron's speech, the representatives of these five universities came together in April 2018 to sign a memorandum of declaration that states the intention to extend the European Campus to the European University program with a focus on a close and balanced connection between research and education. For the successful execution of this project, they emphasized the need for a shared commitment of the five universities, in addition to commitments from the regional and national levels, as well as from the European Union.<sup>46</sup>

44 University of the Greater Region – UniGR: Position Paper “European University“ (2018), pp. 3–4. Retrieved from [http://ec.europa.eu/education/sites/education/files/unigr\\_position\\_paper\\_on\\_european\\_universities\\_initiative.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/education/sites/education/files/unigr_position_paper_on_european_universities_initiative.pdf) (11/24/20, website expired).

45 Charles University (et al.) (2018): Press Release. The Formation of the European University Alliance “4EU.” Retrieved from <http://en.uw.edu.pl/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/4eu-press-release.pdf> (11/24/20).

46 Cf. Eucor (2018): Auf dem Weg zur Europäischen Universität. Forschung und Lehre im trinationalen Universitätsverbund Eucor – The European Campus. Retrieved from



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An even older, and probably the first strategic, European university network is the so-called U4, established in 2008 by Ghent University/Belgium, the University of Göttingen/Germany, the University of Groningen/Netherlands, and Uppsala University/Sweden with the aim “[t]o strengthen the international position of the individual institutions through intensive cooperation in Education, Research and University Management.”<sup>47</sup> These universities also have already expressed their interest in applying for the status of a European University.

In April 2018, six universities from six countries in the European Union – Freie Universität Berlin/Germany, Università di Bologna/Italy, KU Leuven/Belgium, Universidad Complutense de Madrid/Spain, Uniwersytet Jagielloński/Poland, and Université Paris Panthéon-Sorbonne/France) – met to escalate their collaboration. This consortium plans to apply for the establishment of a European University as well.<sup>48</sup>

Last, but not least, in May 2018, Maastricht University/The Netherlands and six other young European universities agreed on a proposal to form an alliance as part of the European University initiative. Apart from Maastricht University, the Young Universities for the Future of Europe (YUFE) alliance consists of six universities from the Young European Research Universities Network (YERUN): the University of Antwerp/Belgium, the University of Bremen/Germany, the University of

[https://www.eucor-uni.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/DE\\_duzSPECIAL\\_AufDemWegZurEuropaeischenUniversitaet.pdf](https://www.eucor-uni.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/DE_duzSPECIAL_AufDemWegZurEuropaeischenUniversitaet.pdf) (11/25/20). Cf. Eucor (2018): Concept paper. Universités Européennes. Retrieved from [https://ec.europa.eu/education/sites/education/files/eucor\\_concept\\_paper\\_on\\_european\\_universities\\_initiative.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/education/sites/education/files/eucor_concept_paper_on_european_universities_initiative.pdf) (10/08/18, website expired).

47 Georg-August-Universität Göttingen (n.y.): U4 Network. Retrieved from <https://www.uni-goettingen.de/en/200350.html> (10/03/18).

48 Freie Universität Berlin (2018): Toward a European University Alliance. Retrieved from [https://www.fu-berlin.de/en/presse/informationen/fup/2018/fup\\_18\\_075-allianz-universitaeten-europa/index.html](https://www.fu-berlin.de/en/presse/informationen/fup/2018/fup_18_075-allianz-universitaeten-europa/index.html) (10/01/18).

Rome Tor Vergata/Italy, the University of Eastern Finland/Finland, the University Carlos III of Madrid/Spain, and the University of Essex (UK).<sup>49</sup>

### ***What has Happened Since?***

Only 1 year after the speech, several universities in Europe that had already cemented an alliance or had partnered up before had applied to the EU. Their motivation and commitment were evident right from the beginning. Erasmus+, the EU's program for promoting education and mobility, became the key line responsible for implementing European Universities. Although Macron's idea originally intended there to be 24 models of one European campus with one degree etc., now “[t]he term ‘universities’ should be understood in the broadest sense of all kinds of higher education institutions.”<sup>50</sup> On the EU's fact sheet on European Universities, its ideal version – although more realizable than the original idea – is still described as a “European inter-university ‘campus’,”<sup>51</sup> where students, researchers, and staff are supposed to “enjoy seamless mobility”<sup>52</sup> and do research, study, teach, and train in “transdisciplinary and transnational teams”<sup>53</sup> and where “students can design their own flexible curricula.”<sup>54</sup> In reality, this means that European Universities are alliances of universities within Europe or those countries that have the Erasmus University Charter, such

49 Maastricht University (2018): UM leads Young Universities for the Future of Europe alliance. Retrieved from <https://www.maastrichtuniversity.nl/news/um-leads-young-universities-future-europe-alliance> (10/01/18).

50 European Commission. European Universities. Erasmus +. Retrieved from: [https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/programme-guide/part-b/three-key-actions/key-action-2/european-universities\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/programme-guide/part-b/three-key-actions/key-action-2/european-universities_en) (01/11/21).

51 European Commission. European Universities. Erasmus+. Retrieved from: <https://ec.europa.eu/education/sites/education/files/document-library-docs/european-universities-initiative-factsheet.pdf> (07/30/20).

52 European Commission. European Universities. Erasmus+. Retrieved from: <https://ec.europa.eu/education/sites/education/files/document-library-docs/european-universities-initiative-factsheet.pdf> (07/30/20).

53 European Commission. European Universities. Erasmus+. Retrieved from: <https://ec.europa.eu/education/sites/education/files/document-library-docs/european-universities-initiative-factsheet.pdf> (07/30/20).

54 European Commission. European Universities. Erasmus+. Retrieved from: <https://ec.europa.eu/education/sites/education/files/document-library-docs/european-universities-initiative-factsheet.pdf> (07/30/20).

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as universities in Turkey, which is not part of the EU. “[H]igher education institutions, student organisations, Member States and the Commission”<sup>55</sup> found a reasonable and feasible way to implement the idea of European Universities, while the main intention and thus the long-term goal is still supposed to be the same: “The aim of this initiative is to bring together a new generation of creative Europeans able to cooperate across languages, borders and disciplines to address societal challenges and skills shortages faced in Europe”<sup>56</sup> and in more detail,

“European Universities” have an ambitious mandate aimed to *trigger unprecedented levels of institutionalized cooperation between higher education institutions, making it systemic, structural and sustainable.*

More specifically “European Universities” aim to establish:

- A shared, integrated, *long-term joint strategy* for education with, where possible, links to research and innovation and society at large
- A *European higher education inter-university “campus”* offering curricula where students doctoral candidates and staff can experience mobility at all study levels
- *European knowledge-creating teams* addressing together societal challenges in a multidisciplinary approach.

“European Universities” should act as *models of good practice* to further increase the quality, international competitiveness and attractiveness of European higher education. The action supports higher education institutions in *going beyond existing higher education cooperation models*, and gradually achieving the long-term ambitious vision for “European Universities.”<sup>57</sup>

55 European Commission: European Universities Initiative. Retrieved from: [https://ec.europa.eu/education/education-in-the-eu/european-education-area/european-universities-initiative\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/education/education-in-the-eu/european-education-area/european-universities-initiative_en) (07/29/20).

56 European Commission: European Universities Initiative. Retrieved from: [https://ec.europa.eu/education/education-in-the-eu/european-education-area/european-universities-initiative\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/education/education-in-the-eu/european-education-area/european-universities-initiative_en) (07/29/20).

57 EACEA: European Universities. Retrieved from: [https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/erasmus-plus/actions/key-action-2-european-universities\\_en](https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/erasmus-plus/actions/key-action-2-european-universities_en) (07/29/20). [Emphasis in original].

Moreover, “European Universities will also contribute to the sustainable economic development of the regions where they are located, as their students will work closely with companies, municipal authorities, academics and researchers to find solutions to the challenges their regions are facing.”<sup>58</sup>

The main focus of the initiative shifted from educating and “making” Europeans, as well as strengthening the idea of Europe, to fostering university networks and promoting resulting synergies, with the former being more of a long-run goal.<sup>59</sup> These alliances are intended to become “the universities of the future, promoting *European values* and identity.”<sup>60</sup>

### ***The Status Quo and the Status of Neurotech<sup>EU</sup>***

In response to the first call for proposals at the beginning of 2019, 54 applications were received. Of those, which were evaluated by a board of independent experts appointed by the European Commission, “17 European Universities involving 114 higher education institutions from 24 Member States were selected”<sup>61</sup> – five more than initially expected. Each alliance was supposed to be granted up to €5 million over 3 years to establish its inter-university campus. The first call acted more as a pilot phase to explore and test different versions of European Universities as well as foster the potential of universities within Europe. Although the seed funding granted to these alliances and inter-university campuses is rather low in relation to the administrative effort required to get the network running, “the concept of the European Universities attracted applications from 54 alliances involving more than 300 higher education institutions

58 European Commission (06/26/19): Press Release. First 17, European Universities‘ selected: a major step towards building a European Education Area. Retrieved from: [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP\\_19\\_3389](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_19_3389)(08/12/20).

59 Cf. DAAD Brussels: European Universities. Retrieved from: <https://www.daad-brussels.eu/en/eu-higher-education-policy/european-universities/> (07/29/20).

60 European Commission: Education and Training. European Universities Initiative. Retrieved from: [https://ec.europa.eu/education/education-in-the-eu/european-education-area/european-universities-initiative\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/education/education-in-the-eu/european-education-area/european-universities-initiative_en) (07/29/20).

61 European Commission (06/26/19): Press Release. First 17 ,European Universities‘ selected: a major step towards building a European Education Area. Retrieved from: [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP\\_19\\_3389](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_19_3389)(08/12/20).

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from 28 Member States and other Erasmus+ Programme Countries.”<sup>62</sup> A year later, the alliances resulting from the 2019 call are financially supported by Erasmus+ as well as Horizon 2020 programs with a budget up to €287 million; that is, these alliances receive up to €5 million from the Erasmus+ budget plus up to an additional €2 million from the Horizon 2020 program.<sup>63</sup> By closely linking education and research, European Universities are not limited to boosting the European education area but to also strengthening the European research landscape.

“The 41 European University alliances will test different models of the concept of European Universities and examine its potential to transform higher education.”<sup>64</sup> The latest European University alliances are not exclusively comprehensive inter-university campuses covering all disciplines but are also networks focusing on one area, including film and media arts (FILMEU), sustainability (INVEST), and the brain and technology (Neurotech<sup>EU</sup>), of which the University of Bonn is a part of.<sup>65</sup> Together with Radboud University/The Netherlands (the network's COO), Boğaziçi University/Turkey, Iuliu Hațieganu University of Medicine and Pharmacy/Romania, Karolinska Institutet/Sweden, Miguel Hernandez University of Elche/Spain, the University of Debrecen/Hungary, and the University of Oxford (UK), the University of Bonn/Germany forms Neurotech<sup>EU</sup>, the European University of Brain and Technology. In its mission statement the geographically balanced network states:

62 European Commission (06/26/19): Press Release. First 17 ‘European Universities’ selected: a major step towards building a European Education Area. Retrieved from: [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP\\_19\\_3389](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_19_3389)(08/24/20).

63 Cf. European Commission (07/09/2020): Press Release. 24 new European Universities reinforce the European Education Area. Retrieved from: [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip\\_20\\_1264](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_20_1264)(08/24/20).

“Under the next long-term EU budget for 2021-2027, the Commission proposed to roll out European Universities under the Erasmus programme, in synergy with Horizon Europe and other EU instruments.” (ibid.)

64 European Commission: Education and Training. European Universities Initiative. Retrieved from: [https://ec.europa.eu/education/education-in-the-eu/european-education-area/european-universities-initiative\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/education/education-in-the-eu/european-education-area/european-universities-initiative_en) (08/24/20).

65 Cf. European Commission (07/09/20): Annex Selected European Universities – 2nd Call. Retrieved from: [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip\\_20\\_1264](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_20_1264) (08/24/20).

Neuroscience shows great promise to become an applied science, to provide brain-centered or brain-inspired solutions that could benefit society and kindle a new economy in Europe. The European University of Brain and Technology (NeurotechEU) aims to be the backbone of this new vision by bringing together eight leading universities across the four corners of Europe, 250+ associates, including previously funded European Universities, partner research institutions, companies, societal stakeholders, cities, and (non) governmental organizations to implement a comprehensive training program for all segments of society and in all regions of Europe. We will educate students across the three cycles (Bachelor, Master, Doctoral), promote lifelong learning and train the next-generation multidisciplinary scientists and engineers, provide them with direct access to cutting-edge infrastructure for fundamental, translational and applied research in a large variety of mother disciplines to help Europe address this unmet challenge.<sup>66</sup>

To reach these goals, the Neurotech<sup>EU</sup> team came up with eight work packages that correspond to an area of responsibility of each university: management and coordination (WP1), quality control and assurance (WP2), a think tank (WP3), education and research (WP4), technological innovation (WP5), societal innovation (WP6), diversity, multilingualism, and multiculturalism (WP7), as well as sustainability and dissemination (WP8).<sup>67</sup> The alliance covers the three academic missions of higher education – research, teaching and learning, and societal impact/outreach – pursued within a long-term action plan that currently reaches 2040. The overall mission also focuses on critical issues that are expected to maintain their importance in the future, including digitalization, diversity, and sustainability. More than 1,000 people attended the online kick-off event in December 2020, and many more followed via video stream. It is a promising project with the pioneering mission to “[b]uild a trans-European

66 NeurotechEU – Mission Statement (internal document) 2019: 1.

67 NeurotechEU (2020): Organization. Retrieved from [https://theneurotech.eu/organization/\(01/14/21\)](https://theneurotech.eu/organization/(01/14/21)).

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network of excellence in brain research and technologies to increase the competitiveness of European education, research, economy and society.”<sup>68</sup>

### ***The Long and Short of European Universities***

Within 2 years, Macron's idea of 20 European Universities by 2025 developed into 41 European University alliances in regions throughout Europe as well as in Erasmus+ countries. The initiatives have different strategic objectives and focus on different academic areas but are united by the common goal of fostering academic quality and innovation, promoting diversity, and educating a new generation of open-minded youth committed to a shared European spirit. Although Macron's vision did not get launched as foreseen, France did inspire European higher education to come together and to create an unprecedented union. This development is a unique opportunity for European higher education to progress, interact, and amplify its impact.

68 NeurotechEU (2020): Our Mission. Retrieved from <https://theneurotech.eu/mission> (12/08/20).





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ISSN 1435-3288

ISBN 978-3-946195-09-2