How are European University alliances contributing to Dutch Higher Education

1. Introduction

European University Alliances (EUIs) are potential key levers for modernising and strengthening Dutch higher education. They can create systemic, diverse, cross-border education, research, and regional development collaborations. We call for Dutch policymakers and institutions to support, align, and fund these alliances—ultimately preparing the Dutch Higher Education sector for the post-2027 phase in which European and national resources for such alliances may be more structurally integrated and jointly supported.

1. **Purpose and Context**

- The European University Initiative (EUI) launched by the European Commission intends to spur systemic transformation in EU higher education. It is currently in its 2nd round to be extended until the new Multiannual Financial Framework (MMF) is driving from 2027 onwards. In the upcoming MMF, new mechanisms for funding, replacing the current project-based financing, may be agreed upon between the EU member states, including national support and funding.
- The Dutch Ministry of Education supports the initiative financially, exploring how it can contribute to the purpose and value of the national higher education system.
- The Netherlands, home to 14 research universities and 36 universities of applied sciences, has enthusiastically embraced the European University alliances approach (most funded and some a seal of excellence), recognising their ability to raise the quality of education, research, and innovation.
- A tension exists around alliances' financial and organisational sustainability beyond the project approach and the call for tangible results from stakeholders, both at the EU and national levels.

That's why Dutch research universities (and universities of applied sciences) embracing the EUI are clarifying the value they see in the initiative to future-proof innovation of the national Higher Education system. Based on commonly agreed missions of Dutch universities, we summarise three matching innovation areas: education, research and regional development.

2. **Education: Toward a More Flexible and Collaborative Future**

- **Innovative Programs and Mobility**: Alliance-driven "brain circulation" (study and staff exchange) fosters multidisciplinary or interdisciplinary, flexible learning opportunities. Students can integrate online, blended, or on-campus courses from multiple institutions—even within a single semester—thereby gaining broader perspectives and skills.

- **European Degree and Accreditation**: A proposed "European Degree" (ED) blueprint demands harmonised accreditation and mutual recognition of degrees. Dutch universities see this as an opportunity to maintain the international appeal of their programs while encouraging targeted legal reforms at home to eliminate administrative barriers.

- **Life-Long Learning (LLL)**: As professional skill demands continue to evolve, modular short courses and micro-credentials can be shared across alliances. Dutch institutions already run pilots with Edubadges and Eduwallet, pushing LLL onto a more mainstream footing.

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3. **Research Collaboration: Leveraging Networks and Fostering Talent**

- Alliances link researchers from different disciplines and countries, helping them form consortiums that can chase competitive European funding (e.g., Horizon Europe).
- Early-career researchers, including PhD candidates, benefit from the expanded mentoring, joint supervision, and mobility. They pave the way for Dutch institutions to remain attractive talent incubators while feeding into Europe's research infrastructure.
- The research–education nexus drives incorporating new research insights directly into the classroom and fosters interdisciplinary culture.

4. **Regional Development: Extending Impact Beyond University Walls**

- The European Commission pushes "regional innovation" so that economic and social benefits are felt locally, not just in leading metropolises.
- Dutch universities, already active in regional partnerships, can link these efforts with partners across alliances—potentially attracting more funding (e.g., Interreg) and supporting workforce development, especially in border regions.
- Such cross-border collaboration may help retain talent, create more jobs, and stimulate local SMEs—while reducing the "brain drain."

Call to Action: What do the universities need from the Dutch Government to pursue

Overall, we are optimistic about the power of alliances to strengthen Dutch higher education, but we acknowledge operational challenges around legal, financial, and administrative barriers. The vision is promising: a flexible, pan-European ecosystem where Dutch institutions gain from structured, multi-institutional programs, internationally shared research infrastructures, and more prosperous regional collaboration. Yet the success of this vision hinges on whether the Netherlands, with other key member-states, can direct the European Commission, backed by the Union of Skills frame, to seize the opportunity to mainstream alliance-based innovations—rather than letting them languish in pilot status. In concrete terms, the Dutch universities think of:

Align National Policies: The Ministries of Education (OCW) and Economic Affairs (EZ) need shared strategies to address "macrodoelmatigheid" (optimal deployment of educational programs) of Bachelor and Master programmes beyond the current national perspective.

Invest, Simplify, and Mainstream: Adapting existing accreditation frameworks, providing flexible funding arrangements, and bringing EU and Dutch resources together will be critical.

Champion in engaging European and global talent: The Netherlands has a strong track record of welcoming international students and faculty. The alliances can help keep that funnel sustainable and beneficial by sharing international student and staff programme experience with other countries. So, internationalisation is redefined to benefit the Dutch economy and society.

In our view, the Netherlands should double down on these initiatives, not merely as a follower but as a core driver, shaping the policies around the European Degree, micro-credentialing, and cross-border research networks. By championing these alliance models, Dutch universities can avoid getting stuck in a reactive stance. The most considerable risk is failing to provide sustained funding and policy support.

Let us take a proactive stand: If Dutch policymakers and university leaders commit to these alliances as integral to the country's innovation agenda—rather than short-term experiments—they can position the Dutch higher education system at the forefront of a genuinely European educational paradigm.

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