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European University Network Initiative- Input by the Norwegian Centre for International Cooperation in Education (SIU)

The Norwegian Centre for international Cooperation in Education (SIU) welcomes the European University Network Initiative. The initiative has the potential to facilitate seamless mobility and cooperation between European universities, and strengthen the quality, relevance and competitiveness of European universities, as well as strengthen the links between education, research and innovation. However, for the initiative to reach its potential, it is crucial that it is developed in a way that supports these objectives and that it remains relevant and attractive for higher education institutions, including the academic staff.

As Norway's agency for international cooperation in education and the Norwegian National Agency for Erasmus+, SIU has substantial experience in managing educational programmes both at national, Nordic and European levels. Linking research and education is a key priority at national level, where we also co-manage certain international programmes in internationalisation of research and education, with the Research Council of Norway. Based on our experience from a wide scope of programmes we have the following recommendations for the set-up of European University Networks:

- SIU believes the action should be placed within **the Erasmus+ framework and encompass all programme countries**. There is a need for a visible and attractive action within the education area and the action could strengthen the Erasmus+ brand. Furthermore, integrating the programme within the larger Erasmus+ framework supports synergies between actions, as opposed to fragmentation of EU funding instruments.



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- Researchers/teachers¹ are key to linking education and research, and the action needs to be set up in a way which makes it attractive and relevant for them. We therefore believe that **cooperation within a thematic area** should be the basis for the networks. Researchers will cooperate with the partners relevant for their field, and we find it unlikely, and not necessarily desirable, that a network established centrally at institutional level will influence the partnerships of research groups or educational programmes across all fields and disciplines within a network. Thematic area in this context is meant to have a wider scope than a single discipline or faculty at a university. As a premise, we believe the field should be **multidisciplinary**, and reflect an area of strategic importance of the universities involved to ensure significant impact on the institutions as such, and not only a limited number of students and researchers.
- Researchers/teachers are key to breaking down barriers to student mobility and ensuring recognition. It is therefore crucial that the action is made relevant and attractive for higher education teachers/researchers. Seamless mobility between institutions requires close cooperation at study programme level to ensure that the relevant learning outcomes for the students and the quality of the courses are in line with the requirements of the sending institutions. Cooperation between the staff offering these courses is essential to secure trust between institutions.
- While the cooperation should be based on one or more thematic areas, we underline that **institutional commitment and willingness** to cooperate within the network is essential. The networks should involve both academic and administrative staff, as well as the institutional leadership.
- While the cooperation should be based on specific thematic areas and existing cooperation between researchers/teachers, we believe that **the call should be open** (unlike the KICs).
- While securing links between research and education, we argue that the **impact of the new actions should lie mainly in the field of education**. In order to support the competitiveness of higher education we believe that it is crucial to have a visible and attractive action to support these objectives.

Criteria for European University Networks

- As the networks will be available to a limited number of institutions, and the objectives are very ambitious, the Commission could consider requiring existing cooperation between partners within Horizon 2020, Erasmus Mundus JMD, or Erasmus+ Key Action 2 as a prerequisite for applying. Proven results from previous cooperation would strengthen the potential impact of the networks.
- The projects should involve universities in at least three programme countries.
- There should be a restriction on the number of applications per institution.
- The projects should be focused within a thematic area, but include multidisciplinary cooperation.

¹ In order to strengthen synergies between education and research, researchers should be the teachers in this context. This is already the case in Norwegian higher education.

- The **duration of the projects should be as long as possible** within the framework of the financial framework. As a very minimum, the projects should have duration of 3 years, with the possible extension of 2 more years.
- **Quality should be the determining factor** in awarding the networks, as this is essential to ensure the recognition and relevance of the action, and to ensure strategic commitment at leadership level. While we agree that the Erasmus+ programme as such should be inclusive, we believe that an action that finances around 20 networks of 4-6 universities will by definition not be inclusive and it is therefore important to ensure transparent and fair award.
- Still, while maintaining quality and excellence as the determining factor for awarding networks, we would support mechanisms that support a wide geographic scope of the networks. The experience from Jean Monnet could serve as a model in this regard, as the actions support excellence as well as ensure a geographic distribution of awarded projects.
- The four award criteria in Erasmus+ should apply to the networks. However, in order to ensure impact beyond the participating universities, emphasis must be placed on the dissemination of results.

Activities within the networks

- While research and education should be mutually reinforcing, SIU believes research activities should not be funded as such. This will ensure an added value compared to the KICs, as well as contribute to reaching more ambitious objectives in the field of education than is currently the case for the KICs. Still, the networks could provide a platform for securing additional research or education funding.
- Longer term mobility should be financed by the participating institutions' Key Action 1 budgets. National Agencies should grant sufficient funding to the participating institutions, and the institutions should prioritise mobility linked to the European University Networks. Shorter term mobility of students and staff, as well as blended mobility and intensive study programmes could be financed by the networks.
- There is also potential for synergies with other funding mechanisms such as the structural funds, Horizon 2020 and other Erasmus+ actions. In addition there is a potential for synergies with the EEA and Norway grants, for instance in financing mobility within certain networks. Synergies with complementary funding mechanism could deepen and strengthen cooperation within the networks.
- The projects should be open and flexible for activities that contribute to the overall objectives of the call. Typically, activities would include developing and implementing new learning and teaching methods (like new curricula, digital teaching and assessment tools, student-centred learning, as well as case-based teaching and learning) and cooperation with non-academic partners. A specific emphasis should be placed on the involvement of students in research activities, co-creation and joint development of solutions for challenging issues (students, researchers and/or practitioners).

Funding

- In order to achieve the overall objectives, and to ensure the attractiveness of the action, funding must be substantial. This is also key for lifting the status of education activities compared to research.
- In order to achieve the ambitions of the actions, there should be significantly more funding than for instance Capacity Building projects or Knowledge Alliances. 3-5 million euros could be appropriate funding for a three-year period, provided that KA 1 funding for mobility is provided in addition.
- The contributions to unit costs for Erasmus+ are disproportionately low, with the daily costs covering approximately 2-3 work hours (depending on the staff involved). Therefore all Erasmus+ budget categories should be made available to the networks, including travel and subsistence, exceptional costs and project management and implementation.
- There should be a substantial lump sum for project management and implementation to compensate for low contributions to unit costs.

Dissemination and mainstreaming

- In setting up the action a network of National Contact Points should be established, within the National Agency structure. Each NA should be invited to appoint a national contact point for this particular action. The network should mirror the NCP network and the minimal standards established under Horizon 2020. Such a network would strengthen the inclusiveness of the action by facilitating access to guidance for all potential applicants, and by sharing results and best practices in all programme countries.
- Finally, we underline that as the networks will only include a limited number of institutions, mechanisms to strengthen the links between the research and innovation, and the education programmes should be strengthened independently of this initiative. In December 2017 Norway published a non-paper on this specific issue.

Lessons learned from programme management at national level

- At national level SIU has had positive experience with making existing research cooperation a criterion for obtaining funding. SIU cooperates with the Research Council of Norway in the management of **INTPART** and **UTFORSK**. Both programmes are based on international cooperation with prioritised partner countries. INTPART mainly involves multilateral cooperation, while UTFORSK is mainly bilateral.
- In its first call UTFORSK had a requirement that applicants had received funding by the Research Council of Norway (RCN). INTPART as an excellence initiative has also required that the applicant institution has received funding from specific research and innovation programmes, managed by RCN, Innovation Norway, or international programmes such as Horizon 2020. The idea is that projects should be based on already peer-reviewed scientific projects.
- In INTPART there is a restriction on how many application each institution can submit. This mechanism ensures institutional commitment.
- Typical activities includes a) mobility of students, researchers, managers or administrative staff, b) workshops, seminars and conferences, c) intensive programme, field courses etc., d)

curricula development, joint courses, study programmes or degrees, d) preparing and developing research cooperation, e) guest lecturers, joint teaching and supervising of students, as well as other activities that involves international cooperation in research and education

- Projects are evaluated based on their relevance to the objectives of developing excellent research and education in Norway, their long-term strategic importance, and the commitment at institutional level to the partnerships. In addition projects are evaluated on partnership and cooperation arrangement, project design and implementation, dissemination and impact, as well as quality of research and education, and the link between the two.
- A review of UTFORSK shows that partnerships have been productive in most respects and accomplished good results throughout the project period. The programme has stimulated the expansion of research partnerships to the field of education, which has resulted in new courses, revised curricula, joint supervision and new teaching methods. A high number of students have travelled for the purpose of education through the partnerships. UTFORSK has also allowed research collaborations to extend their time frame and, therefore, also improve their output in the realm of research. This has enabled the majority of partnerships to strengthen their collaboration and find new ways of collaborating in the future.
- SIU believes the programmes have been particularly successful in recruiting high level research groups for cooperation in education. Several of the research groups have not previously been involved in cooperation in education.
- A Norwegian governmental initiative coordinated by SIU, The **Centres of Excellence in Education (SFU)**, was established in 2010. SFU is awarded to academic communities that have already demonstrated excellent quality of innovative practices in education and that have plans for further development and innovation. One of the important requirements the centres have to meet is that they must disseminate their results of knowledge.
- The Centres of Excellence are awarded up to close to 800 000 euros for a five year period, with the possibility of extension for another five years. Calls are biennial.
- External reviews have concluded that the centres have had a great impact on the quality and innovation in education, within the centres and beyond by disseminating best practices. They have also contributed to the emphasis and status of education. Both the duration, as well as a significant financial contribution has been considered as key success factors.
- We have extensive experience in funding university networks through Nordic programmes, such as, Nordplus and Nordic Masters. A good example from the Nordic region is the network between five technical universities, called Nordic Five Tech, www.nordicfivetech.org. The Nordic five tech network cooperates on student and faculty mobility, joint study programmes, joint research projects and peer reviews of curricula and teaching resources