

Policy Learning Lab 1

Policy Dialogue and Engagement

6 June 2025

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The first Policy Learning Lab (PLL) provided a timely platform for European Universities alliances and higher education stakeholders to reflect on their evolving role in shaping European policy debates. The session gathered Alliances operating at different stages of policy engagement and representatives from four European stakeholder organisations.

Discussions reaffirmed that while Alliances are increasingly active contributors to European, national and regional higher education policy, their engagement approaches, capacities, and priorities vary widely. National contexts, internal structures, and the diversity of member universities impact priority setting, the overall approach to advocacy as well as the coordination of common positions.

Stakeholder organisations provided complementary insights:

- The Guild stressed the need of defining clear advocacy priorities and embracing the diversity of perspectives within and across Alliances as a collective strength.
- EURASHE urged alliances to protect space for universities of applied sciences in future European initiatives highlighting the risk of smaller or practice-oriented institutions being overlooked in ambitious policy frameworks.
- ESU stressed the need for structured student participation in Alliances alongside capacity-building for student representatives.
- EUA highlighted the importance of aligning alliance activities with sector-wide priorities cautioning against overburdening alliances as the sole drivers of higher education reform.

The session concluded by reaffirming that diversity of voice matters: with 65 Alliances operating within diverse national and institutional contexts, embracing this plurality is essential for credible, representative advocacy. Alliances were encouraged to manage this diversity as a strategic asset, ensuring a coherent, inclusive, and impactful policy voice for the European Universities initiative.

1. INTRODUCTION

The 1st PLL organised in the framework of FOREU4ALL Working Package 3 “Policy Dialogue” was held online on 6 June 2025. The session gathered around 80 participants from 48 European University alliances, alongside four sector representatives.

This inaugural PLL provided an open space for alliances to exchange on how they engage in policy work at both European and national levels, share good practices, and discuss priorities and challenges. This report summarises the key takeaways, reflections, and suggested next steps emerging from the contribution of guest speakers representing these stakeholder organisations and the discussions in the breakout sessions moderated by five members of the WP3 and contributions from other participants.

2. STAKEHOLDER PERSPECTIVES

This PLL featured valuable contributions from four key European stakeholder organisations — The Guild of European Research-Intensive Universities ([The Guild](#)), European Association for the Applied Sciences in Higher Education ([EURASHE](#)), European Students’ Union ([ESU](#)), and European University Association ([EUA](#)) — offering sector-wide perspectives on Alliances engagement in European policy processes.

a. The Guild

Jan Palmowski stressed that while advocacy often begins without a clear roadmap, it’s important to quickly define a unique value proposition. Among his key messages:

- **Clarity of purpose and process is essential.** Developing policy positions should be transparent and inclusive, ensuring that the diversity of member universities is reflected and respected.

- **Consistency in messaging matters.** Universities and their Alliances must align internal and external communication to avoid sending mixed messages to policymakers.
- **Engagement requires strategic focus.** It is therefore considered strategic to select a small number of key topics, where meaningful influence is possible and informed by credible, evidence-based input.
- **Diversity within networks and alliances should be seen as an asset.** Alliances were encouraged to present their different perspectives as a position of strength rather than a challenge to unity.

b. EURASHE

Jakub Grodecki advocates for recognising the specific mission of applied science universities — including lifelong learning, short-cycle education, micro-credentials, and regional innovation ecosystems — within both the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and the European Universities initiative. Among his key messages:

- Applied science universities often operate with limited resources and face capacity challenges in engaging with policy initiatives; there's a need to reduce barriers to participation for regional and smaller institutions.
- Alliances should be promoted as tools for regional engagement and dual education, strengthening the role of applied science universities in their local ecosystems.

c. European Students' Union (ESU)

Lana Par shared the students' perspective on Alliance policy engagement. ESU represents 20 million students and shapes European higher education policy through consultations with European institutions. Among her key messages:

- The student representation is complex due to different national systems, and ESU is working with national unions and Alliance student representatives to align positions.
- ESU focuses on capacity building and networking for student bodies in Alliances.
- The need for strong, structured student participation alongside institutional policy engagement in shaping European higher education.

d. European University Association (EUA)

Michael Gaebel provided a broader view of how Alliances fit within the European higher education sector and its evolving policy agenda. Among his key messages:

- EUA's dual role in amplifying both the collective interests of its members and individual institutional voices.
- Strong support for the European Universities initiative, seeing Alliances as important pilots for institutional cooperation and reform — while cautioning against expecting them to solve all higher education challenges alone.
- Many policy issues affect the entire university sector, so policy development should remain inclusive of the broader academic community, with a focus on ensuring alignment between Alliances' activities and wider sectoral policies, and coordinating institutional and Alliance advocacy positions.
- Alliances should actively engage with national rectors' conferences and participate in EUA's consultations to strengthen the collective voice of higher education in future policy debates.

3- Key messages from Breakout sessions' discussion

a. Policy Engagement: A Widespread but Uneven Practice

A recurring message was the widespread recognition of the importance of engaging in policy dialogue. However, Alliances operate at different stages of development and through diverse approaches:

- Some Alliances are actively engaged at both European and national levels, while others are still primarily active regionally.
- Some Alliances have dedicated policy officer roles which ensure the link among the Alliances priorities and the policy developments, while in others, these responsibilities have evolved over time based on operational needs.

- A number of Alliances have established policy or advocacy working groups within their structures or have an advocacy strategy at Alliance level. For these Alliances, policy advocacy is part of their DNA, with activities like regular rectors' meetings, joint responses to consultations, and thematic working groups.
- When resources are limited, Alliances often use deliverables within their core Erasmus+ projects (e.g. recommendations papers) as tools for policy advocacy.
- Some Alliances have engaged in advocacy through their regional offices in Brussels or annual visits and joint position papers, while several are reflecting on whether or how to formalise this work.
- Certain universities within Alliances tend to delegate policy representation/advocacy responsibilities to existing national or European networks, limiting Alliances' own visibility and Alliances' collective voice.
- The diversity within Alliances — with universities having different national contexts, priorities, and policy frameworks — may impact the development of common positions.
- Despite these variations, there was broad agreement that Alliances have a growing role in European higher education policy debates and that internal engagement and coordination remain a shared challenge.

b. Coordination Mechanisms and Policy Engagement at National Level

Participants discussed how their Alliances and member universities engage with policy stakeholders at national level. In some countries, structured coordination mechanisms have been established. For example, Spain has developed a formal organisation that brings together 55 universities participating in 53 alliances, ensuring regular dialogue with the Ministry of Higher Education, the Rectors' Conference, and national contact points. In other countries, universities involved in Alliances coordinate through informal communities of practice. Although less formalised than the Spanish system, these networks still facilitate regular engagement with the Ministry of Higher Education. Several participants underlined that such national coordination structures play a crucial role in amplifying the collective voice of Alliances and in bridging European and national policy agendas.

c. Priorities and Common Challenges

When asked about priorities for the coming year, three main topics emerged:

- **Investment Pathway and Future Funding:** There was consensus on the urgent need to discuss and influence the future of funding for European University alliances. Participants called for a sustainable, holistic, and predictable funding framework, particularly in view of the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), to ensure the long-term vision of the initiative.
- **Mapping National Structures and Topics:** Participants proposed creating a shared mapping of national coordination structures and identifying current policy priorities at national and Alliance levels.
- **Coordination between University and Alliance Policy Work:** A recurring challenge is how to ensure coherence between policy engagement conducted by individual universities and by Alliances collectively. Participants stressed the importance of keeping strategic decision-makers involved and avoiding fragmented messages.

Additionally, several priority policy topics for 2025 were highlighted:

- European Degree Label development, with Alliances adopting different internal positions.
- Talent attraction policies for researchers and students, link with the Union of Skills initiatives.
- Emphasising the R&I dimension in future Alliance calls and programme designs.

4. CONCLUSION

This first PLL confirmed both the importance and complexity of engaging in multi-level policy work for Alliances. While they are already contributing to policy debates further efforts are needed to enhance internal coordination, align national and European agendas, and collectively advocate for the future sustainability of the initiative.

A key takeaway was the recognition that diversity of voice matters: with 65 Alliances, each with its own structure, priorities, and within several national contexts, it is both a strength and a challenge to navigate these differences while seeking common positions. This diversity must be acknowledged and strategically managed to ensure a coherent, inclusive, and impactful policy voice for the education sector.

The discussions provided a strong foundation for building future exchanges, mutual learning opportunities, and joint advocacy efforts through FOREU4All.

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