

Policy Learning Lab 3

Policy Learning Lab Series
on Internationalisation
Launch Webinar –
Alliances Without Borders:
Connecting European
Values with Regional and
Global Engagement

• 17 June 2026

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Executive Summary

The Launch Webinar of the FOREU4ALL Policy Learning Lab series on Internationalisation of European Universities Alliances established a high-level strategic platform to explore the evolving role of European Universities Alliances as global geopolitical actors. Moving beyond internal European integration, the session focused on how Alliances translate EU priorities, such as the Global Gateway, enlargement strategies, and science diplomacy, into impactful international partnerships.

The session concluded that Alliances represent a unique, transformational vehicle for EU's geopolitical priorities regarding international cooperation in higher education and R&I. However, due to fragmented funding opportunities, there is a persistent "strategy-implementation gap." Leveraging Alliances' full potential will require structural shifts in the post-2027 Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), including streamlined funding streams and the expansion of full membership models to accession states and other associated partners.

1. Introduction and Policy Context

Organized within the FOREU4ALL framework of Policy Learning Labs focused on key policy topics related to European Universities Alliances, this launch webinar marked the introduction of a new thematic series focused on the internal dimension of European Universities Alliances and their role in contributing to EU's global agenda. The overall aim of the FOREU4ALL Policy Learning Labs is to foster open, high-level policy dialogue between Alliances, higher education stakeholders, and policymakers at regional, national, and European levels and to identify possible novel ways of collaboration and mutual learning.

Aside from the launch webinar, this series will be complemented by five thematic deep-dive sessions focusing on the UK, Switzerland, Ukraine, the Western Balkans, and cooperation with partners outside the European continent (Choose Europe, Global

Gateway, Mediterranean University Initiative, EU-ASEAN) and will conclude with an on-site workshop.

Strategic Objectives

The specific objectives guiding the launch webinar and the broader series include:

- **Geopolitical Positioning:** Positioning European Universities Alliances as strategic geopolitical actors in advancing the EU's external engagement through science, education, and innovation, with a focus on values-based cooperation.
- **Policy Alignment:** Translating EU internationalisation priorities into action and highlighting the contribution of Alliances towards the EU's broader global political ambitions and policy priorities.
- **Instrument Co-creation:** Co-creating scalable, reusable instruments for strengthening regional and global collaboration and building international partnerships.
- **Structural Dialogue:** Engaging key stakeholders and policymakers in a structured dialogue to inform future policy development, strengthen multi-level coordination, and ensure that Alliance-driven approaches are embedded in the next generation of EU frameworks.

The targeted policy frameworks include, but are not limited to, Erasmus+, FP10, Global Gateway, Global Europe, EU-AU Innovation Agenda, EU-CELAC collaboration strategy, Science Diplomacy, "Choose Europe", and the Mediterranean University Initiative.

2. Setting the Scene: From European Integration to Global Engagement

Magdalena Sikorska (Secretary General EUNICE) and Selma Porobic (YUFE Alliance), Chairs of the Topical Group for Internationalisation and Global Outreach, presented

firsthand data tracking the shift of Alliances from internal European consolidation to global outreach.

Survey Methodology and Strategic Landscape

Building on data collected since 2021 across more than 60 Alliances, a targeted survey was conducted among 18 foundational Alliances to assess their non-EU strategy portfolios. Their findings include:

- **Strategic Maturity:** Roughly 50% of surveyed Alliances have a formalized non-EU strategy, while the remaining half are actively planning one or instead focusing on localized dissemination and capacity-building frameworks.
- **Geographical Aspirations:** High strategic density was identified in Eastern Europe (specifically Ukraine), North America, Latin America, Sub-Saharan Africa, Southeast Asia, and the Western Balkans.

Core Drivers and Modalities of Collaboration

The survey identified two distinct philosophical paradigms driving global cooperation:

- **Europeanization:** Focusing on exporting the "European University" brand, attracting international talent, and promoting core EU values.
- **Globalization & SDGs:** Fostering long-term capacity building, joint R&I and technology initiatives, and research rooted in Sustainable Development Goals (notably SDG 4 on Quality Education and SDG 16 on Peace and Justice).

Primary funded activities remain heavily concentrated in staff and student mobilities (including virtual and blended formats), short-term educational initiatives (summer schools, hackathons), open science research integration, and institutional network cooperation.

Operational Hurdles

Based on the survey findings, the transition from transactional to transformational global partnerships is severely restricted by structural barriers. These include:

- A pervasive lack of clarity regarding non-EU institutional frameworks.

- Fragmented funding architectures and sustainability gaps (e.g., short-term Erasmus+ cycles).
- Legal and administrative friction for joint degrees, exacerbated for Alliances lacking a legal entity.
- Uncertain co-funding priorities among various National Agencies.

3. Internationalization as an Enlargement Tool: Focus on Ukraine

Sabine Menu (EPICUR liaison officer in Brussels), Chair of the Topical Group for the Cooperation with Ukraine, demonstrated how Alliances function as organic drivers for EU enlargement and academic resilience. Coordinating an informal network of 50 Alliances alongside Svitlana Shitikova (Erasmus+ Office of Ukraine), the group aligns its actions with recent high-level mandates, including the May 2026 EU-Ukraine High-Level Dialogue and the European Parliament's resolution on value-based initiatives.

Data shows that since March 2022, 80% of European higher education institutions have deployed solidarity actions. Within the Alliance framework, this includes more than 50 Alliances that have formalized cooperation with Ukrainian universities as associated partners. Supported initially by bottom-up initiatives and targeted funding from some national agencies, these networks focus on:

- **Academic and Economic Resilience:** Developing joint research in defense, natural resources, and credit-recognition compliance.
- **Institutional Transformation:** Preparing Ukrainian higher education systems for EU accession through specific European tools and initiatives, such as the European Degree Label.

Menu emphasized that while these bottom-up structures are highly agile, they are hitting their legal limits, since Alliances require structured financial frameworks rather than temporary solidarity grants to sustain these deep, systemic integrations.

4. Policy Panel: Multi-Level Coordination and Future Priorities

A high-level roundtable discussion featured representatives from three distinct Directorates-General of the European Commission, revealing a unified vision to leverage Alliances as core instruments of EU soft power and science diplomacy.

European Commission Directorate-General	Core Priorities & Strategic Alignment	Future Vision & Funding Synergies
DG EAC <i>Filip van Depoele, Head of Unit, International Cooperation - EAC.C.3</i>	• Systemic Reform: Preparing enlargement states for a 30+ member union by 2030; aligning South Mediterranean systems via the Pact for the Mediterranean. • Values & Diplomacy: Showcasing academic freedom and institutional autonomy. • Competitiveness: Attracting 350,000 global students annually to the EU by 2030.	• MFF Interventions: Advocating for a structural "injection" of Global Europe funds directly into Erasmus+ to finance dedicated international Alliance modules. • Consolidated Mobility: Merging KA131 and KA171 into a single action combining intra-EU and global mobility. • Full Membership Expansion: Working to expand the Western Balkan funding model to allow full

		partnership integration for Moldova and Ukraine.
DG RTD <i>Carole Mancel Blanchard, Head of Unit, International Cooperation - Europe and Americas - RTD.03</i>	• Open & Safe R&I: Implementing the Global Approach to Research & Innovation strategy to ensure secure, values-based international co-operation. • Science Diplomacy: Utilizing the new EU Framework for Science Diplomacy to open non-governmental avenues via structured University Alliances. • Expanding Association: Managing a portfolio of 22 associated countries (including recent integrations of Canada, New Korea, New Zealand, Australia, and ongoing negotiations with India).	• Structured Entry Points: Utilizing Alliances as a streamlined vehicle for highly developed partners (e.g., Canada, UK) to enter Horizon Europe consortia. • Centers of Excellence: Leveraging Alliance expertise to help Ukrainian universities build modern research infrastructures under wartime conditions. • Multilateral Strategy Co-creation: Inviting Alliances to actively co-design upcoming regional implementation plans (e.g., the Latin American AI and health agenda).

DG INTPA <i>Annica Floren, Acting Head of Unit, Youth, Education and Research, Culture - INTPA.G.3</i>	• Human Capital Investment: Over €2 billion committed to tertiary/upper-secondary education in the current MFF, focusing on the Global Gateway Strategy. • Geopolitical Demands: Shifting from general system-strengthening to a demand-driven model linking skills directly to private sector employment, green/digital transitions, and added local value. • Youth Empowerment: Enhancing youth voices as strategic agents of change through the Youth Action Plan.	• Targeted Capital Infrastructure: Encouraging Alliances to apply for dedicated university network calls under the Study and Research in Africa initiative (launching late 2026/2027). • Investment Hub Integration: Urging Alliances to embed skills, research, and technology transfer directly into the core infrastructure pipelines of the Global Gateway by connecting with national Team Europe focal points.
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5. Open Discussion and External Perspective

The Transatlantic and Expert View

Ian Rowlands (Professor, University of Waterloo) provided an external analysis of the EUI landscape based on empirical research conducted across 14 Alliances. Rowlands lauded the EUI as a global agenda-setter but cautioned against structural over-optimism:

- **The Granularity of Data:** Rowlands noted that institutional-level indicators (like global rankings or size) frequently obscure structural friction. Complementarity and joint student community success are driven entirely by granular, discipline-level alignment.
- **Evolutionary Realism:** Alliances must recognize that global engagement is a non-linear, relational phase that follows internal consolidation.
- **Friction with Non-EU Systems:** Significant structural barriers remain across the Atlantic, including mismatched student tuition fee models, divergent data governance rules, and administrative entry costs for Horizon Europe. He advised Alliances to deploy intentional brokerage and low-risk, small-scale initial projects to build trust and set the ground for long-term partnerships.

Key Takeaways from Audience Exchange

The 20-minute open dialogue at the end of the session emphasised important operational challenges and systemic constraints shared by participating Alliances:

- **The Co-Funding and Double-Funding Paradox:** The first intervention challenged a major policy contradiction. Alliances are constantly pushed to secure private and national co-funding. However, when attempting to merge these streams, they are routinely blocked by institutional auditors warning against double-funding rules under Erasmus+.
 - *Commission Response (Ioana Dewandeler):* The Commission acknowledged the limitations of project-based Erasmus+ grants. Ongoing MFF discussions are focused on designing a post-2027 funding model that moves away from rigid project structures toward a more holistic model, simplifying accountability while streamlining multi-source funding.
- **The Attractiveness of Joint Degrees:** Another participant asked whether complex joint degrees spanning 3–4 European institutions are genuinely

attractive to North American markets compared to traditional single-campus mobilities.

- *Expert Input (Ian Rowlands):* While student mobility remains highly popular, complex joint degrees run into immediate structural and high tuition-fee conflicts for partners outside Europe. Alliances must approach joint degrees with ambitious goals but clear operational realism.
- **The Multilateral Structural Asymmetry:** Another participant highlighted that current Erasmus+ rules force non-EU partners to interface via individual bilateral agreements with specific National Agencies. This completely undermines the ability of an Alliance to execute a unified, multilateral global strategy. Furthermore, the strict separation between Erasmus+ (higher education) and Horizon Europe (research and innovation) restricts natural collaboration with the Global South and other regions outside of Europe, where education and research are inherently linked.
 - *Commission Response (Ioana Dewandeler / Filip van Depoele):* The Commission is actively exploring a structural merger of the respective portfolios to create a unified, flexible international module. By securing an expected financial injection from Global Europe into the next Erasmus+ programme generation, the framework aims to remove legacy barriers, giving Alliances the flexibility to engage international partners as strategic entities rather than isolated project add-ons.

6. Conclusion and Next Steps

The launch webinar confirmed that European Universities Alliances have been evolving beyond internal pilots into fully realized global cooperation platforms. They offer a unique, ready-made infrastructure capable of executing complex international partnerships, encourage capacity-building, and promote science diplomacy and strategic policy agendas worldwide.

However, to bridge the gap between their strategic ambitions and operational realities, the post-2027 financial and legal framework must be adapted. Securing permanent, flexible funding injections from Global Europe, simplifying co-funding regulations, and opening full membership paths for accession states and other strategic partners are critical steps to ensure that Alliances can successfully drive Europe's geopolitical higher education agenda and contribute to its global policy ambitions.

Looking ahead, **5 thematic deep-dive sessions** will look at this topic more in-depth and showcase concrete case studies and localised strategies for building international partnerships with:

1. The United Kingdom
2. Switzerland
3. Ukraine
4. The Western Balkans
5. Partners outside the European continent (Choose Europe, Global Gateway, the Mediterranean University Initiative, EU-ASEAN cooperation)

This whole thematic series will then culminate in a comprehensive, **on-site workshop** designed to co-create scalable and reusable collaboration instruments and tangible toolkits to help Alliances build their internationalisation strategies and strengthen their role as key actors for implementing the EU's global agenda priorities.

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