



TCA | Fourth Franco-Dutch strategic dialogue on European Universities Alliances

Report

This report presents a condensed synthesis of the key discussions, insights and recommendations emerging from the Fourth Franco-Dutch Strategic Dialogue on European Universities Alliances, held in The Hague on 24 March 2026. The event brought together a broad range of stakeholders, including representatives from European Universities Alliances, national ministries, the European Commission, quality assurance bodies, representatives of the projects FOREU4ALL, FUTURE4Alliances and higher education institutions. The dialogue provided an important moment to reflect on nearly a decade of development of the alliances' initiative, assess its impact, and formulate shared ambitions for the future in the context of ongoing European policy and funding discussions.

Plenary discussions

During the Strategic Dialogue, participants highlighted the fact that the European Universities Alliances initiative has evolved into a central pillar of the European Union's strategy for transforming higher education. The participants indicated that the alliances are widely recognised not simply as a funding mechanism, but as a systemic effort to reshape the European higher education landscape. Alliances foster deep institutional cooperation, requiring sustained commitment, significant resources and organisational change. They contribute directly to broader European priorities such as competitiveness, sustainability, digital transformation and strategic autonomy, and are increasingly seen as essential actors within both the European Higher Education Area and the European Research Area.

Participants highlighted that alliances are already driving meaningful institutional transformation. They have helped to break down traditional silos within universities, strengthening collaboration between academic and administrative staff and encouraging alignment across institutional levels. Higher education institutions are becoming more interconnected, shifting away from isolated models towards collaborative ecosystems. In doing so, alliances also reinforce shared European values rooted in the Bologna Process and promote a culture of cooperation and mutual learning. At the same time, sustaining this transformation remains a key challenge, particularly in light of evolving political priorities and financial uncertainty.

The diversity of institutions participating in alliances emerged as a major strength. Universities of different sizes, profiles and missions contribute complementary expertise and perspectives. Smaller and specialized institutions, which were initially uncertain about their role, have found significant added value through access to shared knowledge, opportunities for strategic alignment and participation in international networks. This diversity enriches the European higher education system and supports inclusivity.

A strong emphasis was placed on the importance of interdisciplinarity, particularly through the integration of arts and humanities with science and technology disciplines. Participants stressed that addressing complex societal

challenges requires not only technical expertise, but also creativity, ethical reflection and critical thinking. The concept of STEAM illustrates the need for a holistic educational approach in which different disciplines are not treated as separate domains but as interconnected fields.

The higher education institutions indicated that another structural issue concerns the separation between education and research within current European funding frameworks. Participants noted that the division between programmes such as Erasmus+ and Horizon Europe creates fragmentation and limits the ability of alliances to fully integrate teaching, research and societal engagement. The participants feel that strengthening the connection between these domains is considered crucial for supporting innovation and enabling Europe to respond effectively to emerging fields and global challenges.

Funding and long-term sustainability were among the most pressing concerns discussed. While European funding has played a crucial role in establishing alliances, it is understood that this support is designed as seed funding and may not continue indefinitely. Because of the impending uncertainty, the institutions within the alliances should therefore encourage each other to diversify their funding sources and reduce dependence on European programmes. A combination of European, national and institutional funding will be necessary to ensure stability according to the alliances. Embedding alliance activities into national funding frameworks and institutional strategies is seen as particularly important.

Carousel sessions

Joint programmes in the alliances

The discussions on joint programmes highlighted both their potential and their complexity. Joint programmes are seen as powerful tools for fostering internationalisation, enhancing collaboration and aligning education with labour market needs. However, they are resource-intensive, require complex governance arrangements and face regulatory challenges across national systems. Participants emphasised that joint programmes should not be considered a universal solution for all students or institutions. Alternatives such as internationalisation at home also play an important role.

To support the development of joint programmes, participants recommended adapting Erasmus+ funding mechanisms, creating shared models and guidance, strengthening collaboration with industry, and improving communication around the European Degree Label. Careful planning, realistic timelines and close alignment between academic and legal frameworks are essential for success.

Funding and sustainability

The session on funding reinforced the need according to participants for a diversified and strategic approach. At the European level, future funding mechanisms remain uncertain, although there is a clear willingness to continue supporting alliances. Participants proposed several possible models, including more integrated funding instruments, co-funded partnerships and modular approaches combining baseline support with targeted funding for specific priorities. At the alliance level, options such as membership fees or shared funding pools were discussed. And according to the participating alliances, greater alignment between alliance participation and core funding structures is needed at both national and institutional levels. .

A recurring theme across discussions was the importance of clarity of purpose. Alliances must clearly define their strategic objectives, identify their core activities and determine the level of investment required to sustain them. This self-understanding is essential for navigating financial uncertainty and making informed decisions about future development.

European University Alliances and the Union of Skills

The discussion on the Union of Skills highlighted the innovative contributions of alliances in areas such as micro-credentials, lifelong learning and challenge-based education. However, these initiatives are often implemented within systems that are not yet adapted to support them. Within the alliances and the individual institutions, it was felt that for the Union of Skills to become a reality, educational models must become more flexible and integrated, infrastructure for lifelong learning must be strengthened, and policymakers must demonstrate the willingness to support systemic change.

The institutions also stressed that the concept of skills must be broadened. Beyond technical competences, greater emphasis is needed on soft skills, civic engagement, intercultural understanding and the arts. These elements are essential for preparing individuals to navigate a rapidly changing world. While collaboration with industry is important, the alliances felt that universities must retain their autonomy and avoid becoming solely demand driven.

Closing remarks

The closing reflections underscored the importance of collaboration as both a process and an outcome. From a student perspective, alliances create meaningful opportunities, enhance mobility and foster intercultural understanding. Diversity is seen not as a barrier, but as a source of strength that enables more effective collaboration and innovation. From an institutional perspective, alliances are increasingly becoming embedded as structural elements of the European higher education system.

Looking ahead, participants expressed the shared ambition for alliances to become a natural and integral part of the European landscape by 2040. Achieving this vision will require sustained commitment, continued policy support and the ability to translate experimentation into lasting structural change.

In conclusion, the participants felt that the European Universities Alliances initiative has already demonstrated its transformative potential. It has strengthened cooperation, accelerated institutional change and contributed to a more integrated European higher education system. However, its long-term success will depend on different aspects according to participants, such as securing sustainable funding, improving the integration of research and education, aligning policies across levels, and maintaining a strong commitment to inclusivity and interdisciplinarity. As such, the initiative represents not only a policy innovation, but a foundational step towards a more resilient and globally competitive European higher education system.

Annexes

- [Programme of the TCA | Fourth Franco-Dutch strategic dialogue on European Universities Alliances](#)
- [Document 'All you must know about the European Degree'](#)
- [Assessment report of the French Ministry of Higher Education and Research \(MESRE\) on the transformative role of European Universities](#)

