



EUROPEAN COMMISSION

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Dear President,

The Commission would like to thank the Bundesrat for its Opinion on the higher education package: the Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on a European strategy for universities {COM(2022) 16 final} and the proposal for a Council Recommendation on building bridges for effective European higher education cooperation {COM(2022) 17 final}.

To succeed, the European strategy for universities requires an alignment of policy priorities and investments at European Union, national, regional and institutional levels. Implementation of this strategy will require closer cooperation with and between Member States, universities and other stakeholders. Together, we can leverage the strong and unique basis of Europe's higher education sector and bring its missions – education, research, and innovation at the service of society – closer together.

For this reason, the Commission welcomes the adoption on 5 April of the ambitious Council Conclusions on the European strategy and the related Council Recommendation.

The Commission confirms that, in all its actions resulting from the higher education package, the division of competences between the Member States and the European level, as well as the principle of subsidiarity and institutional autonomy, will be fully respected.

While seeking to take transnational cooperation to a new level of intensity and scope and to develop a genuinely European dimension in the higher education sector, built on shared values, four flagship initiatives have been proposed: the European Universities rollout, institutionalised cooperation instruments, a joint European degree label, and the European Student Card initiative. The Commission values very much the opinion of the Bundesrat on these flagship initiatives, as well as on all other points raised.

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President of the Bundesrat
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First, on the European Universities initiative, the Commission will indeed provide sustainable funding to the European Universities alliances via Erasmus+, complemented by the Horizon Europe programme and other European Union instruments. Different models of European Universities alliances are being tested, respecting the diversity of the higher education landscape in Europe. This diversity is a strength, as it allows for choice and for creativity and synergy through mobility and cooperation.

Second, the Commission will also examine the need for and feasibility of institutionalised cooperation instruments, such as a possible legal status for alliances of higher education institutions. As stated in the Council Conclusions, the aim is to give alliances, on a voluntary basis, the latitude to act together, make common strategic decisions, experiment joint recruitment, design joint curricula or pool resources and human, technical, data, education, research and innovation capacities. This is not aimed at replacing any legal status that higher education institutions may have at national level. The aim is to provide a complementary status, on a voluntary basis, to facilitate deeper transnational cooperation. It will not be obligatory, and not be a pre-condition to get access to European funding.

Thirdly, the Commission will explore common criteria that could lead to a potential European label for joint programmes. The Commission will build on this, as it continues to work together with Member States and stakeholders. Based on the results of an Erasmus+ pilot launched in June, next possible steps will be explored. This will happen, naturally, together and in agreement with the Council and be based on co-created European criteria, in accordance with the existing instruments of the Bologna Process, at national, regional or institutional level, and on a voluntary basis.

Lastly, the Commission will progressively promote the scaling up of the European Student Card initiative. It is ambitious to interconnect 5 000 different IT systems from all higher education institutions in Europe, but it will save time and money, and reduce the administrative burden for students and institutions. It is needed with the new level of ambition for learning mobility. The Commission is providing more time for higher education institutions. A new centralised Service Desk has been put in place on 1 April 2022 to provide further support to higher education institutions when connecting to and exchanging digitally via the network.

The Commission will duly consult with Member States and the higher education sector stakeholders on these initiatives. In the case of Germany, representatives of the Länder are also included in the consultation process.

The Commission hopes that these clarifications address the issues raised by the Bundesrat and looks forward to continuing our political dialogue in the future.

Yours faithfully,

*Margaritis Schinas
Member of the Commission*