

More Diversity, Better European Universities: Participation of Universities of Applied Sciences

Today, the European Commission has published the second Erasmus+ pilot call on the European Universities which is one of the key policy initiatives that will make the European Education Area a reality. EURASHE views that the European Universities initiative constitutes an excellent opportunity to significantly improve the European Higher Education by increasing the mobility of students and staff, and fostering the quality, inclusiveness and competitiveness of our Higher Education Institutions, including their research and innovation activities. Despite our joint efforts with the European Commission to consult and raise the awareness of Universities of Applied Sciences (UAS) and other Professional Higher Education (PHE) institutions, a number of them remained initially doubtful about the opportunities and were underrepresented during the first pilot call.

EURASHE, representing more than 650 universities of applied sciences and PHE institutions, views that the European universities initiative allows to show a diverse understanding of excellence within European higher education and provides a space to reflect specific strengths and features of universities of applied sciences – their close links to the world of work, in particular small and medium size enterprises, public institutions and civic society organisations within their regional community.

UAS play an important social role in providing access to higher education for students from less traditional, disadvantaged target groups. They focus strongly on making learning and teaching relevant for their target groups and ecosystems. UAS also focus on applied research, designed and implemented in close collaboration with external stakeholders. This constitutes an eminent position for serving further innovation and development of European societies and the regions across Europe. Yet, such profile makes it more difficult for UAS to engage in internationalisation, European cross-border co-operation, long-term students' engagement and, in many cases, for mobility of students of different background, age and living conditions. The call leads us, therefore, to a need of rethinking relevant and feasible approaches for achievement of the set targets. In various European countries professional higher education faces more regulations and restrictions in comparison to traditional universities, including limitations of scope of provided qualification levels, quality assurance arrangements and funding conditions.

Against this background, we appreciate the constant efforts of the European Commission to take into account the specificities of UAS and other PHE institutions and to address properly certain issues that have emerged on the occasion of the first call, in particular:

- Take a full advantage of the diversity of European higher education
- Consider all higher education qualification levels, while taking into account the limits of national regulations for UAS and other PHE institutions in this aspect
- Take into account the difficulties the UAS may face regarding the requested students' participation and engagement in the Alliances due to the shorter period of time students spend in UAS in comparison with traditional universities
- Clarify the doubts about the sustainability of the Alliances and the realisation of the common long-term strategies beyond the funding period
- Consider the specific profile of UAS students that could impact the desirable mobility.

We call on the respective national, regional and local authorities to consider providing a suitable financial and logistic support to UAS and other smaller institutions for the preparation of the Alliances' proposals and for helping ensure their sustainability after the end of the EU funding. We also invite the competent authorities to identify and remove, within the respective national and regional regulations, existing barriers for the implementation of the European Universities initiatives, in particular in relation with the mobility of students and teaching staff, and the completion of the European Education Area.

Working in close collaboration with the European Commission, EURASHE will continue to promote the European Universities initiative and to encourage and facilitate the participation of UAS and other PHE institutions, providing them with relevant information and tailored support through individual consultations and dedicated events. We will also try to learn from the experience of successful, but also less successful alliances and translate it into a relevant contribution to the European policy making, in particular in relation with issues such as recognition, quality assurance, strengthening capacities for true cross-border European co-operation.