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Navigating Higher Education: Let EURASHE be your lighthouse

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This presentation is in three parts:

1. My words of welcome
2. My message
3. Your homework

1. PART ONE: MY WELCOME

A warm welcome to this event! It is always good to be with EURASHE. Welcome to Brussels, my hometown by now, a wonderful mosaic of cultures and politics that somehow functions. Brussels is a mess - but it's our mess!

Welcome to the waterfront, welcome to Le Phare du Kanaal, the lighthouse on the canal. I worked two years for the inland waterways in DG MOVE (European Commission), and I know that there are no lighthouses on canals. They are on the seaside, not on canals! So, the whole concept of this place is surreal, like Belgian art: *Ceci n'est pas une pipe* – this is not a lighthouse. Things are not always what they seem, bear this in mind!

2. PART TWO: MY MESSAGE

My message goes with the season: RELAX. ANYTHING GOES. Stop worrying, enjoy the holidays, and continue the good work afterwards. I will illustrate this reassuring message by pointing at three dossiers we are supposed to work on day and night:

1. European Universities
2. European Degrees
3. Micro-credentials

When you hear about these three topics, RELAX. Because:

- European Universities – **you are** (each of you)
- European Degrees – **you do** (dozens of them)
- Micro-credentials – **you have** (hundreds)

Let's take a closer look.

European Universities

In [last Friday's press release](#) the European Commission describes the positive outcomes expected from European Universities. Read them closely and you will realise that, to a large extent, you are all working on this already, locally and in partnership, in an alliance or not, 'sealed' or not, selected or not:

"The European Universities alliances bring together a new generation of Europeans and allow them to study and work in different European countries, in different languages, and across sectors and academic disciplines. Students can obtain a high-level degree by combining studies in several European countries, contributing to the international attractiveness and competitiveness of Europe's higher education. These alliances also bring innovation to Europe's regions by allowing students to work together with academics, researchers, enterprises, cities, authorities, and civil society organisations."

Extract from the European Commission Press Release, 28 June 2024

When you are located in Europe, you are a European University: in terms of content, in the things you do, and, I dare to suggest, in legal terms.

In content terms: The learning you provide and the research you undertake is comparative (how can it be done otherwise?). Books and data, theories, practices and examples, students and staff come from all over the place, in varying percentage. You aim to be a thriving knowledge and innovation hub in your region, at the centre of concentric and Olympic circles of stakeholders and partnerships. **You are a European (even global) knowledge creator, innovator, educator and validator** (of students achievement, of third party qualifications you recognise).

In legal terms: Your university enjoys formal recognition across Europe – imperfect as it may be – thanks to **national licencing and accreditation** and the **non-discrimination principle laid down** in the **EU Treaty, confirmed and specified in the Lisbon Recognition Convention** and more recently in an extendable multilateral agreement between the Baltic and Benelux countries.

So, **RELAX, you are a European University!** You are part of the **transformation family**. No one can kick you out and no one intends to, certainly not the European Commission. You maintain access to all policies and programmes. The [Central European University](#) and [European Humanities University](#) are painful exceptions of repression, but they also keep transforming enthusiastically. You can all thrive, follow your agendas and develop further in whatever constellation you choose.

Having said that, European Universities are fascinating experiments. Their claim is that through institutional cooperation they will give a strong push to integration and innovation in higher education. The alliances are invited to **pool and scale innovations** on an unprecedented scale and set examples for others to follow. Next to the 64 selected and funded alliances, there are 9 alliances

with a Seal of Excellence, without dedicated funding, but with similar ambitions. Not to mention the 30 or so consortia that did not make it this time but continue to be 'European' in their own right.

A dedicated mega project (**FOR-EU4ALL** – FORum of European Universities) was selected alongside 14 new alliances to pull it all together and to assist in the sharing of benefits among the 64 alliances and with the higher education sector as a whole.

The European Universities' exercise costs 1.1 billion in direct Erasmus+ grant support and a multitude of that sum through national and institutional input. Money helps to make the world go round but, inevitably, also incentivises bureaucracy. **New structures are not the purpose**, of course, but they can **provide useful hooks for action if they are sufficiently light and take account of the decentral nature of academia**.

Let's see if the European University Initiative will **help the 560+ alliance partners to excel**, that is: (a) to position themselves on the map (the easiest part); and (b) to benchmark and test innovations (always good) and (c) make these innovations land in programmes and departments (a real a challenge), and (d) genuinely integrate core university missions and services (marginal so far).

Let's see also how the **9 Seals of Excellence** will manage the spontaneous policy experiment of being the '**control group**' that enjoys formal recognition (the Seal) but does not receive dedicated Erasmus+ funding and has equal competitive access to other funding sources, notably under Erasmus+, Horizon Europe and the Structural Funds.

The future will tell – that is **empirical research**, I hope, will tell – **which type of cooperation, what mix** of instruments (bilateral, multilateral, homogenous, heterogenous, institutional, departmental) **brings the best results**: to you in terms of organisational development, to your students and staff in terms of careers and competence gain, and to your stakeholders in terms of innovation gain.

European Degrees: How to be relaxed about them

Most local degrees fulfil, today already, most of the criteria for a European Degree as proposed in the Commission [Staff Working Document](#) accompanying the Commission's Communication on a [blueprint for a European Degree](#), e.g. learning outcomes, credits, student and staff mobility, international collaboration on parts.

In content terms: If you take two steps backwards (or look downwards from the moon), you see hundreds of thousands of Erasmus students every year graduating after completing study pathways that, materially speaking, do not differ from a multiple or joint degree. **So, job done! Bravo! Let's be proud of what we have achieved**, congratulate ourselves, and thank the EC/EU for the Erasmus+ programme!

In legal terms: I dare to suggest that all your local degrees are European Degrees, because – as with your university – **your degrees enjoy formal recognition across Europe** – imperfect as it may be – thanks to **national licencing and accreditation** and the **non-discrimination principle laid down** in the **EU Treaty, confirmed and specified in the Lisbon Recognition Convention** and more recently in an extendable multilateral agreement between the Baltic and Benelux countries.

Having said that, the promotion of a European Degree is a smart idea: for scaling, for marketing (inside and outside Europe), and, most importantly, **for upgrading innovative pedagogical practices**. The Erasmus Mundus flagship programme has shown the way. European Degrees can be an effective tool, under the condition that:

- the upcoming **guidelines** will be **clear, open and light**: g. as concerns degree of 'jointness'.
- **accreditation happens only once**, i.e. as most joint programmes are using input from already nationally accredited mother institutions or programmes, there is **no need to add a 'European approach'** to accreditation.
- **we let partners decide** the mode and intensity of jointness, e.g. hub and spoke, hop-on/hop off, hybrid, etc.
- **we let students vote** with their feet and mouses (in real time)

In life (in our life) there are *label*/believers and *degree* believers. I am a *label*/believer, because I would like to scale the quality upgrade caused by of European degrees to as many programmes and learners and possible, instead of waiting until the 10 hurdles¹ for a formal European Degree are taken. If we wait for that, we will all be retired for a long time when the first European Degrees will be issued!

Third example of relaxation: Micro-credentials

Maybe this is the area with the lowest hanging fruit. The area where 'anything goes'. Why are micro-credentials so easy, relatively easy, to implement? Because your degree programmes are composed of parts (modules) that fulfil all the 'standard EU elements' in the [2022 Recommendation of the Council of the European Union](#), e.g. learning outcomes, ECTS, quality assurance, certificates (e.g. Erasmus+ transcript of records, one million are issued each year). **So job done! Bravo!**

Of course, not all your modules are, at present, easily accessible to students from other programmes at home or elsewhere, let alone to non-degree students, but **you can open up your programmes step-by-step, starting with low-hanging fruit** (e.g. online courses, optional courses, courses in English), moving slowly towards targets like 20-30-40% a few years from now. Offline modules/micro-credentials in your own language are fine too! Anything goes!

Newness is not a criterion. If you want to produce a brand-new module, leading to a brand-new certificate, and do so with five partners, by all means go ahead, but **newness and jointness are not quality requirements per se**. An existing, adapted or transformed locally delivered module can serve its purpose just as well, although it is good practice to check what others are doing.

Nor should all micro-credentials have direct relevance to the labour market. That is a sponsor requirement, not an intrinsic requirement. The best Director I had in the European Commission studied Old Norse and that turned out to be a very useful competence in our profession, where so many Norwegian colleagues play an appreciated and active part!

¹ European Commission [Staff Working Document](#), p.68.

Of course, **practice-based learning and labour-market relevance are strong selling points** for EURASHE members, and you are wise to stick to that.

And RELAX: actual admission to a micro-credential will continue to depend on available places, linguistic capacity, fee payment, visas, residence permits, and other formal requirements.

3. PART THREE: YOUR HOMEWORK

Here are three ideas for you to work on from September onwards:

3.1. Co-evaluate staff nominations and fight brain drain

When nominations and promotions are unfair, the best staff will leave. I saw that when I worked on ERA staff issues in DG Research & Innovation. Talent is equally spread in Europe, but the best universities are not. Hence the ongoing brain drain. **Here are two steps to mitigate brain drain** and promote geographical cohesion:

Step 1: Stick to your national and institutional nomination decisions by all means but **involve an international jury** to weigh the candidates. Publish results online or make them accessible in a more discrete manner. The very existence of such public weightings will create a whole new dynamic of its own, towards more fairness, better reputation and making your institution more attractive.

Step 2: Create a pool of European staff. Start with two nominations per institution per year: one academic and one senior staff. Give them a fancy title: Alliance Professor, University Professor, Alliance Librarian and top-up their salaries or facilities with European means. A big chunk of the European Universities' €1.1 billion should go there, in my view. After all, 'It's the people, stupid'. The Structural Funds can come in as well.

3.2. Comprehensive 'two-click' course catalogues: share innovations, empower learners

Make your **entire** learning offer easily accessible in a comprehensive user-friendly 'two-click' course catalogue. A comprehensive course catalogue is the proof of the pudding. **The course catalogue is what publications are for researchers: without it, you do not exist as an institution or an alliance.**

The very existence of a comprehensive course catalogue will create a whole new dynamic of its own and allow for **fascinating comparisons** (AI-supported, Tuning-supported) by students, lifelong learners, and other interested parties (e.g. course designers, employers) of the relevance of learning outcomes and methods used for teaching, learning, and assessment. I suggest making comprehensive course catalogues a **principal requirement** for alliance funding extension, a few years from now, as a comprehensive course catalogue tells the jury far more than the whole Part B of the Application Form.

3.3. Make recognition degree-specific, hence semi-automatic

Recognition is imperfect. Make it perfect by making it degree-specific. Start by publishing a gradually growing list of specific qualifications (micro-credentials, degrees) of other institutions that you

trust, and mention in that list the ECTS credit waiver value you could potentially award for those third-party qualifications towards one or more of your own specific programmes in case of mobility (degree mobility, or credit mobility like in Erasmus+).

Start with just a few third-party qualifications (modules/micro-credentials, foundation degrees, bachelors) and let it grow. The very existence of such a public database (two clicks away from your home page, not five) will create a whole new dynamic of its own: **you put yourself on the map as a reliable partner, you create recognition predictability** in your region and abroad (unilateral – mutual recognition is not required but welcome).

The judgements you – your staff – will give will concur over time within **natural leagues** of like-minded institutions. Your institution will **grow in its role of respected validator** at its level (local and global) of programmes, qualifications and candidate competences. **You can do this exercise within and outside formal partnerships, but no need to wait for alliance or government approval. Start in September.**

And RELAX: actual admission to a programme will continue to depend on available places, linguistic capacity, fee payment, visas, residence permits, and other formal requirements.

In the end, it is all about competence gain and innovation gain. Our objective should be to **upgrade the competences of the population** in our respective catchment areas. Competence gain, well measured, determines the productivity of our workers (innovation gain) and the general well-being of citizens.

I wish you a most relaxing summer, every success after, and, whatever direction you choose, **let EURASHE be your lighthouse!**