

PROPOSALS OF THE CONFERENCE OF FRENCH UNIVERSITY PRESIDENTS IN THE CONTEXT OF THE FRENCH PRESIDENCY OF THE EUROPEAN UNION

French higher education institutions have been actively involved in the two pilot calls for European universities alliances and have submitted high-quality applications, as evidenced by the selection of 32 of them.

While yet more institutions eagerly await a new call from the Commission this coming Fall, this total places France at the forefront of the EU alongside Germany.

The French Presidency of the European Union provides a unique opportunity of building on this momentum and promoting an ambitious vision of the future of Europe.

In order to achieve this, universities must be put at the heart of the Presidency through a twofold ambition:

- *Going global: the SDGs, which have become a major concern of students throughout Europe, call for unprecedented collective global action. Universities must set themselves clear objectives in that respect over the next 5, 10 and 30 years, especially as far as research is concerned.*
- *Monitoring the future of students in Europe through the 'knowledge square': this will require the mobilisation of all actors in the fields of education, research, and innovation as well as the active involvement of civil society.*

Universities in Europe can fully contribute to these two objectives through the development of student and staff mobility, the creation of joint laboratories, the implementation of European degrees, and the networking of the various territorial ecosystems of the different member institutions.

The French Rectors' conference (CPU) puts forward three sets of measures based on the three main notions around which the French Presidency of the European Union will be built: « Puissance », « Appartenance » and « Relance ».

1. « Puissance »: Rethinking European scientific diplomacy¹

Making Europe "stronger on the international scene" and bringing "new impetus to Europe's democracy" are two of the main objectives stated by the Von der Leyen Commission.

¹ Universities in general are rarely involved in science diplomacy actions as highlighted by the S4D4C (Using Science for/in Diplomacy for Addressing Global Challenges) project funded under Horizon 2020.

In this strategy, greater reliance must be placed on the soft power of universities by drawing on two of their major assets: their students and their R&I capacities.

A. Empowering European youth through universities: after two years of crisis, the needs for a renewed future which young people throughout Europe have voiced must be clearly addressed by turning Europe into a shared horizon that will be reached through the mediation of universities.

The forthcoming French Presidency of the European Union provides a unique opportunity to put students at the heart of this process, and make them active actors of higher education, research and innovation in Europe.

In particular, representatives sitting on the student bodies of European universities alliances are a real force: they are meant to become true ambassadors of the European project.

Achieving this will necessitate to involve them in the official events of the Presidency, including the Forum for the Future of Universities in Europe of course, but also the European Space and Copernicus 2.0 Forum the Conference on Disruptive Innovation and the Convention on Civic Engagement in the Missions of Horizon Europe.

B. Above all, an event dedicated specifically to students, such as the launch of a "European Students' Assembly", should be initiated. CPU, together with the Unite! universities alliance, have taken the lead in this project aiming at bringing together all the student representatives from the 41 alliances.

Such an event, which would be opened by President Macron, would carry even more weight if it were organised in a symbolic place such as the European parliament in Strasbourg, in the wake of a plenary session for instance.

One of the chief aims of this event would be to gather and implement ideas about a new "European student identity", in keeping with the deployment of the European student card.

Although student mobility remains the basis for bolstering European citizenship and identity, the fast rise of new digital usages provides an opportunity of redesigning the notion of mobility, founded specifically on shared common values and aiming at accelerating the twin green and digital transitions.

C. As regards the research > innovation > training continuum, giving European universities alliances access to the pan-European research and technology infrastructures will be key in order to develop and strengthen their societal impact, and thus further skills and job creation.

It is well known that research and technology infrastructures are a powerful vector of scientific diplomacy, particularly towards EU 13 countries, which would thus benefit from the European Commission's desire to open up European universities to a geographically more diverse range of institutions.

CPU recommends the launch of a specific call about research and innovation infrastructures for European universities.

2. « Appartenance »: Implementing the SDGs through the creation of a European degree

Moving jointly towards a European degree by 2025 ought to be an unwavering commitment of the EC and Member States.

For the sake of students in Europe, effective recognition of this degree by employers across the continent would send a strong, positive signal, and would shed light on some of the new avenues opened up by our various European partners in the field of qualifications.

A. However, it is not merely a matter of giving the same courses in partner universities, but also of:

- aiming first and foremost at the development of new skills, and thus at the recognition of the employability of students on the European labour market;
- taking into consideration the aspirations of young people, by integrating into university curricula the issues of sustainable development, environmental and digital transitions, and more generally of the European Green Deal.
- developing multidisciplinary research-led expertise with a view to improving the employability of students, who are key actors in these matters, as evidenced by the student COP2s, the Charter of Grenoble or the actions of RESES (Student Network for a United and Green Society).

B. Moving towards a European degree also provides an opportunity to evolve a more unified administrative environment. For universities, the French Presidency provides an opportunity to go beyond "border adjustments" between higher education systems.

While preserving the freedom and diversity of institutional structuring models is of the essence, the French model must be increasingly aligned with the criteria and indicators of autonomy established by EUA (European University Association). This is a capital issue for the universities in our country.

15 years after the LRU (Law on the Rights and Obligations of Universities) was passed, the action of French universities remains too often constrained compared to that of our European counterparts. In the field of higher education and research, autonomy is a major indicator of academic freedom and the functioning of democracy.

3. « Relance »: Universities as enablers of ecosystem interaction

The already-existing European universities alliances can contribute to the implementation of the European and national recovery plans, as they are specifically intended to build, by 2025, « inter-university » campuses based on « excellence in learning, teaching, research and innovation » and « covering a broad geographic scope across all parts of Europe. »

These campuses can be both an achievement per se and a driver of recovery, organising cooperation with businesses, local communities, public authorities, NGOs and citizens at large.

Universities can be a bridge between all these stakeholders so as to accelerate the interconnection of innovation and research ecosystems, for example through the sharing of objectives linked to regional smart specialisation strategies.

Europe can be the driving force behind these ecosystems by encouraging universities to:

A. Devise a "Territorial Pact for Research, Innovation and Skills" between the partner institutions of European universities alliances, aiming at involving players in research, training, and innovation (be it technological, societal or educational), the economic and industrial sector, civil society and local authorities.

B. Establish networks of ad hoc research instruments (e.g. joint research laboratories) between the partner institutions of European universities alliances. The ecosystem thus created by the linkage of remote university sites will be able to serve each of the territories in which the member institutions are based, but also to highlight the specifically European added value brought about by this new initiative in the context of the recovery.