



# Norwegian comment to the European strategy for universities and the Council Recommendation on building bridges for effective European higher education cooperation – April 2022

Letter | Date: 27/04/2022 | [Ministry of Education and Research](#)

(<http://www.regjeringen.no/en/dep/kd/id586/>)

Norway welcomes the Commission Communication and the Council Conclusion on a European strategy for universities, and the Council Recommendation on building bridges for effective European higher education cooperation. Overall, these initiatives aimed at strengthening transnational cooperation have been met with positive response by Norwegian stakeholders. The EU and Norway enjoy a particularly close and longstanding cooperation within higher education, research and innovation, based on the EEA Agreement. As an EEA EFTA State Norway takes strong interest in contributing to further policy development and actions aimed at strengthening European higher education institutions and promoting transnational cooperation, both at political and at officials level, in dialogue with the Commission, the EU Member States, and where relevant also other European and international partners, including EHEA members.

Effective European higher education cooperation has been on the European agenda for decades. Together, we have achieved substantial progress, for instance through the Bologna process, but obstacles still remain. Norway sees the strategy and the Council Recommendation as ambitious, and as notable steps to bring this important work further. We strongly welcome the opportunities thus provided for further dialogue between Member States, Associated Countries, and the Commission, and for exploration of new or strengthened measures to promote deeper and more long-term and flexible transnational cooperation. At the same time, it is necessary to keep in mind respect for the principles of subsidiarity, institutional autonomy, and academic freedom, as well as the diversity of higher education institutions in Europe.

Norway also supports joint efforts aimed at strengthening the European dimension in higher education, research and innovation as well as the synergies between them, responding to recovery and the green and digital transitions, promoting Europe's global role and leadership and deepening the sense of European belonging based on common values. Bearing in mind the central role of higher education in the "knowledge square", we would welcome even more emphasis on the synergies between higher education, research and innovation as well as lifelong learning and labour market relevance in future discussions.

With regards to enhancing European cooperation, Norway would like to present some input to the further discussions and possible implementation of key initiatives.

## **The European Universities Initiative**

Norway fully supports the European University Initiative and the upscaling to 60 European Universities by mid-2024. Several Norwegian universities participate in this initiative, including one university (the University of Oslo) as coordinator of one of the alliances. Norwegian higher education institutions are pleased with this possibility to widen and deepen their cooperation with European partners, and Norway strongly believes this initiative will be a game changer for closer collaboration between European higher education institutions. European universities can be in the forefront in developing a common, long-term, structural, sustainable and systemic cooperation on education, research, and innovation, and in reaching the joint objectives. Experiences from European Universities can moreover help identify existing national barriers to closer cooperation between higher education institutions.

Norway sees the diversity of European higher education as an asset. In the further development of the European Universities, it is necessary to safeguard and foster both the diversity of the sector as such, and the diversity of different transnational alliances of higher education institutions. The autonomy of higher education institutions, including their ability to choose between a variety of modes of cooperation, needs to be respected at all levels and times.

Although the European University Initiative has been a success so far, we should avoid the temptation of overloading these alliances with too many tasks and purposes. The alliances must have time to develop professionally. Quality should always be the main principle for future development.

We also need to take into account that not all higher education institutions will or can be part of the European University Initiative. Experiences and policies developed under the auspices of the European Universities Initiative could serve as a model for co-operation between higher education institutions that are not part of the initiative. Experiences and insight gained should be transferable in such a way that they could be widely used among other types of alliances as well. In order for this to be the case, we believe it is important that the models developed do not require elements such as legal requirements reserved exclusively for these alliances. In other words, any legal instrument developed through the European University Initiative should be conceived in a way that makes it possible to use by other alliances and networks.