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From:	General Secretariat of the Council
To:	Delegations
Subject:	Draft Council Conclusions on European Universities initiative - Bridging higher education, research, innovation and society: paving the way for a new dimension in European higher education
	- Presidency text

Delegations will find attached the Presidency text on the above mentioned topic with a view to the informal videoconference of the members of the Education Committee on 10 February 2021.

Delegations are kindly invited to send their written comments to ana.mateus@dges.gov.pt; jrc@reper-portugal.be; sarah.fernandes@dges.gov.pt; pedro.esteves@dges.gov.pt; fma@reper-portugal.be and to the Secretariat (eycs@consilium.europa.eu) by 19 February 2021 (cob).

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Draft Council Conclusions on European Universities initiative - Bridging higher education, research, innovation and society: paving the way for a new dimension in European higher education

THE COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION,

RECALLING the political background to this issue as set out in the Annex to these conclusions,

HIGHLIGHTING THAT:

1. the European Council Conclusions of 14 December 2017 called on the Member States, the Council and the European Commission to take work forward on strengthening strategic partnerships between higher education institutions across the EU and encouraging the emergence by 2024 of some twenty 'European Universities', consisting of bottom-up networks of higher education institutions across the EU which will enable students to obtain a degree by combining studies in several EU countries and contribute to the international competitiveness of 'European Universities',

2. in its Conclusions of 28 June 2018, the European Council called for cooperation between research, innovation and education to be encouraged, including through the European Universities initiative,

3. the Council Conclusions of 22 May 2018 on moving towards a vision of a European Education Area further acknowledged the flagship role that the 'European Universities' could play in the creation of a European Education Area as a whole,

4. the Council Resolution of 8 November 2019 on further developing the European Education Area to support future-oriented education and training systems endorsed the further development of the European Universities initiative considering that this could be a game-changing step forward in cross-institutional cooperation by offering various inspirational visions, models and themes for interaction to support the future development of the European Education Area in accordance with the changing needs of society,

5. in the first ever joint policy debate held on 8 November 2019, ministers of finance and education stressed the need to step up effective and efficient investment in education and training, skills and competences, in terms of quality, quantity, inclusiveness and equity,

6. the Council Resolution of 27 February 2020 further acknowledged investment in education and training as the most powerful investment that can be made in people and in the future and its social and economic returns for individuals, employers and society as a whole,

7. in the Council Conclusions of 1 December 2020 on the New European Research Area, the Council stressed the need for stronger synergies and interconnections between the European Research Area and the higher education related elements of the European Education Area, and identified institutional transformations, research careers, science education, training, international cooperation and knowledge circulation as possible areas of further cooperation,

8. [PLACEHOLDER: 19 February 2021 Resolution on EEA]

AWARE THAT:

9. Higher education policies are primarily decided at the level of the individual Member-states, in accordance with the subsidiarity principle.

10. Higher education institutions are autonomous and academic freedom is central to their existence.

11. European higher education institutions are rich in diversity in terms of their history, organisational structures, fields of study and the regions in which they are located and to which they are connected.

12. 'European Universities' are open to partners from all types of higher education institutions and cover a broad geographic scope across Europe.

13. 'European Universities' will play an essential role in achieving the ambitious vision of an innovative and globally competitive European Education Area and European Research Area, by helping to boost the inclusive and excellence dimension of higher education, allowing for seamless and ambitious transnational cooperation between higher education institutions in Europe, and inspire the upcoming Higher Education Transformation Agenda.

14. 'European Universities' are instrumental in resetting education, training and research for the digital age, within the Digital Education Action Plan (2021-2027), the European Education Area and the new European Research Area, by helping to develop virtual and face-to-face European inter-university campuses. In so doing, this initiative will boost research, help to implement innovative models of digital higher education and Open Science and therefore foster a high performing digital education and research ecosystem, which has become increasingly important in current times.

15. 'European Universities' are foreseen in the European Skills Agenda as a relevant key to ensure that people have the right skills for jobs, in particular within the full rollout of the European Universities initiative under the Erasmus+ programme 2021-2027 and Horizon Europe and throughout the setting of standards for the transformation of higher education institutions across the European Education Area and the European Research Area, also making lifelong learning and talent circulation a reality.

NOTES THAT:

16. After two Erasmus+ calls for proposals, complemented by Horizon 2020 support, 41 'European Universities' involving more than 280 higher education institutions across Europe are now working towards their shared vision and institutional transformation, aiming at a structural, systemic and sustainable impact on education and training, research and innovation.

17. The first phase covered around 5% of all higher education institutions in the European Union and programme countries of Erasmus+, striving for an inclusive and equitable coverage in order to achieve the initiative's goals, especially the promotion of European values and the strengthening of the European identity.

18. The selection criteria are based on inclusion and excellence in learning and teaching, research, innovation, knowledge transfer and geographical balance, within the first two calls, since European cohesion, inclusion and competitiveness are amongst the objectives of the 'European Universities'. The selection results and ambitious vision of each 'European University' prove that the geographical balance added quality to the 'European Universities'.

19. Higher education institutions have proved to be resilient in managing the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, but it has also revealed weaknesses regarding equitable access, support for staff, researchers and students (in particular vulnerable students), mobile early career researchers and digital capacity. A survey of the 'European Universities' showed that being a member of a 'European University' helped them to navigate the crisis and will allow them to recover faster by pooling their resources and strengths together.

20. European labour markets are transforming rapidly, especially influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic and the digital transitions, and flexible learning opportunities are needed at all stages of life and across disciplines and sectors.

WELCOMES:

21.   The fact that the European higher education community has taken up the initiative so enthusiastically and thereby has enabled the swift and sound progress already reached.

22.   The full rollout of the European Universities initiative under the Erasmus+ programme 2021-2027 and the envisaged synergies with Horizon Europe in order to, where appropriate, complement the Programme's support for the European Universities initiative as part of developing new joint and integrated long-term and sustainable strategies on education and training, research and innovation, as well as increasingly foster the integration of education, training and research, in particular in higher education institutions.

23.   The 'European Universities' strive for a completely new quality and ambitious level of deeper cooperation between higher education institutions across Europe, while exploiting synergies with other existing successful cooperation models like knowledge alliances, Knowledge and Innovation Communities of the European Institute of Technology (KICs-EIT), Marie Skłodowska Curie Actions (MSCAs) or strategic partnerships within national and European programmes.

ACKNOWLEDGES THAT:

24.   The European Universities initiative aims to contribute to a more united, stronger, digital and green Europe, open to the wider world by increasing the resilience, geographical and social inclusiveness, performance, attractiveness and international competitiveness of European higher education institutions.

25.   'European Universities' contribute to a new quality of transnational cooperation through interinstitutional strategies that combine teaching, learning, research, innovation and knowledge transfer into the economy and the society at large.

26. 'European Universities' can be important vehicles for transforming teaching and learning by developing innovative methods. They are also important platforms for further developing the research dimensions within higher education institutions that need to invest in research-based learning, as well as stable, flexible and attractive research and teaching careers.

27. In line with the vision for a European Education Area and its achievements by 2025, the new European Research Area and the upcoming Higher Education Transformation Agenda, the European Universities initiative should be guided to:

a) Promote a common European vision and including fundamental academic values contributing to a strengthened European identity for a new generation of citizens, equipping them with the necessary skills and competences to be able to cooperate and co-create knowledge within different European and global cultures, in different languages, and across borders, sectors and academic disciplines.

b) Establish European inter-university campuses, based on inclusion and excellence in teaching, learning, research and innovation, covering a broad geographic scope across all parts of Europe.

c) Contribute to shared, integrated long-term education and training, research and innovation strategies, as well as service to society, in order to boost the quality, attractiveness and competitiveness of European higher education institutions and to strengthen the knowledge square. Higher education institutions pool together online and physical resources, courses, expertise, staff, data and infrastructure to leverage their strengths and become more resilient.

d)   Foster 'European Universities' as "testbeds" for teaching and research, including dissemination of open observation, monitoring and reporting systems for teaching and research careers; improved tenure track systems and strengthened career management and diversification; and adoption of open science principles and practices, such as open access publishing, knowledge and data sharing, as well as open collaboration.

e)   Promote the adoption of the "European Charter for Researchers" and "Code of Conduct", oriented to foster European research career development practices, applied to multiple career paths.

f)   Improve recruitment, rewarding and assessment systems of teachers and researchers towards a better recognition and balance between educational, research, managerial and entrepreneurial achievements thus fostering true European practices for recruitment and career development.

g)   Address societal challenges and skills needs in Europe by working in partnership and building European knowledge-creating, transdisciplinary and transnational teams of students and academics, together with researchers, businesses, regional actors and civil society actors. In cooperation with their surrounding innovation ecosystems, higher education institutions prepare students, graduates and early career researchers to take the opportunities offered and become agents of change for the twin green and digital transformations.

h)   Encourage the full use of the EU's excellent research and innovation capacity in the higher education and research sectors, supporting a new generation of highly skilled and competitive European researchers, increased research excellence and reinforced knowledge transfer and innovation capacity in Europe, for example through closer links with the MSCAs under Horizon Europe.

i)	Make lifelong learning a reality in higher education, inter alia through the increased use of micro-credentials, by introducing innovative and student-centred pedagogies, jointly delivered across European inter-university campuses, where a diverse student body can build flexible learning paths at all levels of their studies and career. Micro-credentials can help to complement full degree programmes by widening learning opportunities and making the learning experience more flexible and modular, while ensuring agreed quality standards; and open access to higher education and engage adults, with or without a higher education degree, promoting reskilling and upskilling through flexible alternatives.

j)	Embed physical, blended and/or virtual mobility in the curricula, in line with the quality standards in Europe and in Member States, and practical and/or work-based experience by external mentors to foster an entrepreneurial mind-set and develop civic engagement.

k)	Create new and more inclusive learning environments that reach out to disadvantaged and non-traditional learners and contribute to strengthening the social dimension of European higher education systems.

l)	Embed areas for transformation in research and innovation, notably developing a common research and innovation agenda and sharing of research infrastructures to create critical mass, strengthening human capital, reinforcing cooperation with non-academic actors in surrounding innovation ecosystems, mainstreaming of outreach to citizens and society, and engaging in reform and modernisation of research assessment systems.

m)	Establish ever stronger alliances in which joint enrolment of students and joint recruitment of academics and researchers becomes the norm and enable their education and research careers to develop in a flexible way within the alliance.

n) Move towards mainstreaming education in sustainable development across all levels and disciplines, and in making STEM fields more attractive, including to women.

o) Act as role models for European higher education transformation, for the implementation of the Bologna key commitments, including automatic recognition of qualifications and learning periods abroad, and as a bridge between the European Education Area and the European Research Area.

p) Pave the way to accelerate the transformation of all European higher education institutions towards the universities of the future, hence strengthening their competitiveness in the international context and the global race for talents.

INVITES THE MEMBER STATES, WITH DUE REGARD TO INSTITUTIONAL AUTONOMY, ACADEMIC FREEDOM AND IN ACCORDANCE WITH NATIONAL CIRCUMSTANCES, TO:

28. Fully use the potential of all available regional, national and EU funding mechanisms, including the new opportunities under the Recovery and Resilience Facility, European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF), and the InvestEU, towards strengthening the links between education and training, research, and innovation, as well as capacity building for regions with lower levels of research and innovation, thereby ultimately reducing the innovation gap with a geographically balanced participation of higher education institutions in future alliances.

29. Work together to remove remaining legal and administrative obstacles towards more compatible higher education systems, and deeper strategic alliances of higher education institutions, building on the extensive work that has already been developed through the European Education Area, the Bologna Process and the European Higher Education Area, by investing in measures such as the European Student Card Initiative, automatic mutual recognition of degrees and diplomas and mobility periods within study programmes, including by digital means, quality assurance of programmes and institutions, accreditation of joint programmes, joint recruitment, and the possible creation of a European Degree.

30. Find co-funding mechanisms for higher education institutions engaged in 'European Universities', through specific funding programmes, specific strategic funds or based on their basic and performance-based funding.

31. Adapt national legislation to enable the use of European approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes, reinforcing institutional linkages and procedures between evaluation, accreditation, and quality assurance agencies, to find modalities of mutual recognition and to encourage joint accreditation of degrees and diplomas, as well as to simplify the accreditation by members of the EQAR quality assurance agency.

32. Adapt national legislation towards a European approach to micro-credentials oriented to help widen learning opportunities and strengthen the role of higher education institutions in lifelong learning, as well as to guarantee a larger take-up of micro-credentials to serve social, economic and pedagogical innovation in higher education.

INVITES THE COMMISSION AND THE MEMBER STATES IN LINE WITH THEIR RESPECTIVE COMPETENCES AND WITH DUE REGARD TO THE SUBSIDIARITY PRINCIPLE, TO:

33. Keep fostering the establishment of flexible, diverse, geographically balanced and sustainable models of alliances, linked to local ecosystems, providing space for innovation and creativity, and the development of good practices for cooperation can be inspiring to other higher education institutions.

34. Support the 'European Universities', whilst respecting their institutional autonomy, to create the capacity and appropriate environments for fostering balanced and consistent modern infrastructures and career paths in all partners.

35. Create closer synergies between the European Education Area, the European Research Area and the European Higher Education Area. The 'European Universities' can be instrumental for developing important bridges with their research and challenge-based teaching approaches.

36. Consider sustainable funding for the 'European Universities', so that they are able to deliver on their ambitious long-term strategy, which requires structural and institutional changes. To reach the initiative´s very ambitious goals, a significantly higher funding per alliance will be necessary.

37. Support the 'European Universities' in reaching the ambitious target of 50% mobile students, administrative staff, teachers and researchers, focusing on balanced physical, virtual or blended mobility schemes and brain circulation.

38. Ensure that the initiative is inclusion and excellence based, open to all types of higher education institutions and to all students irrespective of their socio-economic background, promoting the use of common and shared infrastructures, equipment and facilities.

39. Organise continuous exchanges between the European Commission, Member States, the 'European Universities' and the ad-hoc expert group composed of experts from the Member States to discuss and tackle existing barriers to cooperation, develop solutions and put them in place. The 'European Universities' should be enabled to share their good practices and experiences with higher education institutions across Europe.

40. Encourage higher education institutions to embrace the values, principles and modernisation actions of the upcoming Higher Education Transformation Agenda, as a key initiative between the European Education Area and the new European Research Area.

41. Support a sustainable cooperation between higher education institutions at European level that allows realising the objectives of both the European Education Area and the new European Research Area and strengthen the competitiveness of 'European Universities' in the international context and the global race for talent.

INVITES THE COMMISSION, IN LINE WITH ITS COMPETENCES AND WITH DUE REGARD TO THE SUBSIDIARITY PRINCIPLE, TO:

42. Evaluate, in close cooperation with Member States and 'European Universities', the first phase of the European Universities initiative to identify barriers, shortcomings, challenges and possible solutions and a view of further development of the 'European Universities' and the rollout of their full and ambitious potential and to report back to the Council on an annual basis.

43. Guide the development of 'European Universities' as "testbeds" for interoperability and promotion of cooperation between Member States regarding European research and teaching career development practices.

44. Consider recommendations for 'European Universities' to follow a stepwise approach to joint recruitment schemes for teachers and researchers, towards effective and balanced brain circulation across Europe.

45. Within the context of the upcoming Higher Education Transformation Agenda and the European Education Area and in full respect of the national higher education systems, develop clear proposals, hand in hand with the relevant higher education authorities, and relevant stakeholders, to help remove existing legal or technical barriers for cross border cooperation at the European level, so the 'European Universities' can live up to their full potential, leverage their strengths and jointly deliver transformative higher education, for example, by exploring the possibility of developing a European Degree by promoting further European cooperation on quality assurance and automatic recognition in higher education, and by exploring the necessity and the feasibility of a legal statute for alliances of higher education institutions such as the 'European Universities';

46. Foster the development and use of new pedagogies and simplified administrative procedures by investing in digital infrastructures.

47. Examine how EU programmes, funds and financial instruments will be able to support the 'European Universities' in a simplified and streamlined manner with a sound budget aimed to sustainability on a competitive basis and for an extended period, while fostering related synergies. Taking the different funding opportunities and target groups of EU-programmes into account, ways should be explored of how to make them available to the 'European Universities'.

48. Maintain the successful bottom-up approach in the Erasmus+ programme 2021-2027, giving all types of higher education institutions the opportunity to develop ambitious 'European Universities', testing different models for cooperation and being thematically open.

49. Encourage 'European Universities' to make best use of policies and initiatives that support them to become more innovative and entrepreneurial, such as HEInnovate, and promote collaboration with the KICs-EIT.

50. Continue close cooperation with Member States in the co-creation and further development of the 'European Universities', namely through the Erasmus+ Programme Committee and the ad-hoc expert group.

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POLITICAL BACKGROUND

1. Council conclusions on a renewed European Agenda for higher education (20 November 2017)

2. Conclusions of the European Council (14 December 2017)

3. Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on the Digital Education Action Plan (17 January 2018)

4. Council Conclusions on moving towards a vision of a European Education Area (22 May 2018)

5. Conclusions of the European Council (28 June 2018)

6. Council Recommendation on promoting automatic mutual recognition of higher education and upper secondary education and training qualifications and the outcomes of learning periods aboard (26 November 2018)

7. Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the European Council, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on Coordinated Plan on Artificial Intelligence (7 December 2018)

8. Council conclusions on the future of a highly digitised Europe beyond 2020: 'Boosting digital and economic competitiveness across the Union and digital cohesion' (7 June 2019)

9. Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the European Council, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions - 'The European Green Deal' (11 December 2019)

10. Council Conclusions on the key role of lifelong learning policies in empowering societies to address the technological and green transition in support of inclusive and sustainable growth (8 November 2019)

11. Council conclusions Towards an ever more sustainable Union by 2030 (9 April 2019)

12. European Council: The New Strategic Agenda 2019-2024 (20 June 2019)

13. Council Resolution on further developing the European Education Area to support future-oriented education and training systems (8 November 2019)

14. Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the European Council, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions 'A strong Social Europe for just Transition' (14 January 2020)

15. Council Resolution on education and training in the European Semester: ensuring informed debates on reforms and investments (27 February 2020)

16. Council conclusions on countering the COVID-19 crisis in education and training (26 June 2020)

17. Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on "European Skills Agenda for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience" (1 July 2020)

18. Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on Digital Education Action Plan 2021-2027 – Resetting education and training for the digital age (30 September 2020)

19. Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on achieving the European Education Area by 2025 (30 September 2020)

20. Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on A new ERA for Research and Innovation (1 October 2020)

21. Council Conclusions on digital education in Europe's knowledge societies (24 November 2020)

22. Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions - Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion 2021-2027 (24 November 2020)

23. PLACEHOLDER: 19 February 2021 Resolution on EEA

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