



Network of Universities
from the Capitals of Europe



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Report on ESN's Erasmus Generation Meeting

Seville, 11-14 April 2024

Conclusions from UNICA's participation in the panel
"Be part of the co-creation process of the European
University Initiatives"



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Summary

In April 2024, UNICA attended ESN's Erasmus Generation Meeting in Seville, Europe's biggest student conference where the Erasmus Generation meets to learn and discuss the future of mobility in Europe and beyond. This report presents the highlights of the panel discussion on the co-creation of the European University Alliances, in which UNICA participated as a speaker.

Takeaways:

- While alliances and university networks share common goals, they maintain distinct objectives and approaches. Collaboration is crucial for advancing the European Education area;
- UNICA Network assumes an umbrella role, prioritising the observation of emerging trends resulting from initiative implementation, rather than direct involvement in implementation itself;
- Networks such as UNICA, extending beyond EU borders geographically, play a vital role in ensuring the inclusion of diverse voices in the European higher education area.

The Erasmus Generation Meeting in Seville

The European Student Network held its annual Erasmus Generation Meeting in Seville, Spain between 11th and 14th of April. Erasmus Student Network (ESN) is one of the biggest student associations in Europe being established 16th October 1989 and legally registered in 1990. The Network is known for supporting and developing student exchange opportunities.

ESN are present in more than 1,000 Higher Education Institutions over 45 countries and the network is constantly developing and expanding. ESN involves approximately 40,000 young people offering its services to around 350,000 international students every year.

The Erasmus Generation Meeting (EGM) is the biggest student conference in Europe and is where the Erasmus Generation meets to learn and discuss the future of mobility in Europe and beyond.

The theme of this year's edition was the future of mobility - Erasmus+ programme 2021-2027. The topics addressed at the conference were closely connected to digitalisation, environmental sustainability, inclusion, and democratic participation.

This year was a momentous occasion for the EGM, with 1600 attendees and 65 volunteers, making it the largest ever student event in Europe. The event is additionally impressive as, apart from a handful of staff, the event is put on by a large team of ESN student volunteers who allowed the event to run smoothly and professionally.

UNICA at the EGM 2024

UNICA was delighted to be invited to attend the EGM this year as a guest. This invitation resulted from the Network's increased focus on student engagement for our member universities. This commitment was crystallised when UNICA was delighted to sign a Memorandum of Understanding between ESN and UNICA at the inaugural UNICA Days conference in Brussels on 29th February 2024.

UNICA was invited to speak at the panel discussion "Be part of the co-creation process of the European University Initiatives". The panel aimed to provide a comprehensive exploration of the challenges, opportunities, and aspirations influencing the future of European universities to participants of the EGM. Along with Brian Talty, UNICA's Advocacy and Policy Officer, the panel included Melih Oezkardes of ENHANCE Alliance, Daniel Santos, Vice Rector at Oviedo University and INGENIUM Alliance, Rocío Martínez de Pablos of Ulysseus Alliance, and Philipp Höhne, President of ESN Berlin.

UNICA outlined its role as that of a Network being an umbrella organisation for Alliances, a role that assists alliances and universities to foster collaboration and networking within higher education. UNICA highlighted the historical context, noting that entities like UNICA emerged in response to the imperative to collaborate and leverage distinct university profiles, particularly during the late 80s and early 90s. This collaboration serves as a bedrock for advancing shared objectives within the higher education landscape.

A key distinction underscored during the discussion was between the advocacy and policy endeavours of such alliances, which may vary from their core objectives. UNICA, drawing from its inception in 1990, acknowledged its keen awareness of the evolving

higher education policy landscape, recognising the transformative force that university alliances represent. UNICA highlighted their extensive history of cultivating relationships with external partners as a critical strength, positioning them as a significant player in the higher education community.

With a global engagement perspective, UNICA emphasised its unique positioning beyond EU borders, facilitating diverse voices' inclusion in European higher education dialogues. Within the context of the European Universities Initiative, UNICA outlined its strategy of providing collaborative practical and oversight opportunities to internal and external dynamics of the initiative, particularly considering the substantial participation of its member universities.

In terms of narrative focus, UNICA's role in identifying emergent narratives within the initiative and facilitating platforms for stakeholder engagement was mentioned. Rather than directly engaging in implementation processes, UNICA aims to address shared challenges like alliance fatigue and amplifying common objectives such as tackling urban challenges across multiple alliances and the network.

Recognising the diversity among consortia, UNICA stressed the importance of tailored approaches that align with each alliance's unique profile and member needs. Emphasising a collaborative mindset, it was reiterated that the collective goal of enhancing European higher education and promoting inclusive internationalisation, countering the notion of competition within the European higher education area.

Finally, in acknowledging the challenge of direct student outreach, UNICA expressed its commitment to engaging with students through representative bodies advocating for their interests, thus emphasising the cooperative nature of European higher education, contrary to any perception of competition. UNICA recently backed this commitment up with the aforementioned new Memorandum of Understanding.

The second part of the panel discussion involved questions from the audience, with enquiries coming from ESN members who are active in Ukraine, Greece, Finland, Spain, and Germany. The questions ranged from where students should be placed in governance regimes of alliances, what types of student bodies are most practical for strong student engagement, how alliance alumni with expertise can be harnessed by alliances, what alliances can do for students from conflict zones, and what role Networks can have with student organisations like ESN.

Regarding most of these questions, UNICA's long tradition of knowledge sharing was highlighted. Additionally it was highlighted that UNICA now more than ever incorporates student representatives into decision-making processes. Student perspectives shape strategies, policies, and initiatives due to their majority presence in universities.

A difficulty was addressed in student tenure at universities typically being 3 to 5 years, thus realistic expectations and timeframes for student involvement are necessary. Engagement strategies must adapt to evolving student needs, including consideration of innovative approaches like alumni networks and mentorship programs. Additionally, student engagement is a collective effort within the European higher education area, acknowledging challenges in student transition to professional life.

Conclusion

Universities benefit from structured plans and engagement strategies. Strong student boards with local task forces can address problems and propose solutions effectively. Understanding student desires and concerns is crucial for successful and sustainable alliances. University leadership support is essential for effective student engagement within alliances. Capacity-building for staff, including dedicated student engagement officers, enhances dialogue between students and universities and recognition and support for individuals passionate about student engagement are vital. Emphasising the importance of international student engagement and the need for further exploration in this area.

The European Student Network's Erasmus Generation Meeting held in Seville from 11th to 14th April 2024 marked a significant event in the landscape of student engagement and higher education collaboration. UNICA's emphasis on collaborative efforts and tailored approaches underscored the importance of fostering inclusive internationalisation and advancing shared objectives within the higher education landscape. Furthermore, the recognition of student voices and the commitment to adapting engagement strategies to evolving needs highlighted the cooperative nature of European higher education.

As the conference concluded, it left a clear message of the vital role that student engagement plays in shaping the future of higher education. Through continued collaboration and dialogue, the Erasmus Generation remains at the forefront of driving positive change in Europe and beyond.



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