

The role of university networks in the context of the European Universities Alliances

Conference Report from the
UNICA Days in Brussels 2025

March 2025



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UNICA DAYS

2025 BRUSSELS

+100
PARTICIPANTS

56 INSTITUTIONS

28 COUNTRIES

30
SPEAKERS

6
SESSIONS



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INTRODUCTION

The UNICA Days, launched in 2024, mark a significant milestone in the UNICA network's ongoing efforts to contribute to the future of Europe's Higher Education and Research. This flagship event is designed to bring together, in Brussels, the entire UNICA community, along with key stakeholders, governing decision bodies, experts, and peer organizations from across the sector, offering a dynamic platform for deep engagement, collaboration, and forward-thinking discussions. The second edition of the UNICA Days was held on 26 and 28 February 2025, gathering several members of the UNICA community at the University Foundation, where the UNICA office is based.

This year's theme, "**The role of university networks in the context of the European Universities alliances**", brought together Rectors, Vice-Rectors, Heads of International Offices from UNICA member universities, as well as our partner organizations, representatives of both university networks and European Universities alliances, and overall policy makers, to debate the role of long-standing university networks in relation to the EU's flagship initiative, the European Universities alliances.

BRIDGING NETWORKS AND ALLIANCES: UNDERSTANDING THE UNICA DAYS' THEME

The theme emerged naturally from the many formal and informal conversations within our organization, dating back even to the early discussions on alliances as a concept. The truth is, just like every aspect of the constantly evolving European Higher Education landscape, traditional networks based on informal collaboration must, from time to time, also critically reflect on their role - even those with decades of experience, many of which have been active since the late 1980s and early 1990s. With the revolutionary EU's flagship initiative, the European Universities Alliances, a self and sector wide reflection emerged as crucial. These alliances aim to create a unified and competitive European Education Area by promoting seamless mobility, transnational Education, and joint Research programs.

While networks and alliances share common objectives and, at times, appear to operate in overlapping spaces, their fundamental nature and roles differ significantly. University

networks have traditionally focused on advocacy, policy engagement, and capacity-building, whereas alliances operate within more structured and goal-driven frameworks. In this context, university networks serve as critical enablers and amplifiers of the European Universities alliances' ambitions, fostering collaboration, facilitating dialogue, and ensuring that the broader Higher Education community remains engaged in shaping the future of European academia.

In particular, the first day of the UNICA Days 2025 was an opportunity for different actors to explore the different avenues of collaboration between networks and alliances, including Research, Education, and institutional development. In an exercise more centred on the profile of the UNICA members (European capital-based institutions), the second day offered a fresh perspective on two topics that have been central to the network since its inception: technological advancements and the relationship between universities and their cities. The former centered around the multifaceted implications of digitalization in Higher Education, especially in light of the promising yet challenging opportunities offered by Artificial Intelligence. The latter session focused on the community-driven mission of universities and the potential for urban universities to address both global and local challenges.

FROM INSIGHTS TO ACTION: A REPORT TO BUILD ON

This short report captures the main ideas from each of the sessions of the UNICA Days 2025, which we hope will serve as the foundation for further engagement between networks, universities alliances, stakeholders, and policy makers. In the *Conclusions* chapter, we present a workable course of action to build on the insights and outcomes of these days.

Last but not least, we would like to thank all those who contributed to the success of this event. Gathering our community to better reflect on the role of each player in the Higher Education ecology really highlighted the complementary nature of our work, allowing for a clear vision of the path forward in UNICA's identity and a renewed commitment to join forces in the collective work ahead. We remain committed to Sharing, Learning, Adding Value - during the UNICA Days and every day.

1. SESSION 1

EUROPEAN UNIVERSITIES ALLIANCES - STATE OF PLAY

UNICA Days 2025 started with a welcome by UNICA's President, **Sorin COSTREIE** that retraced the 35 years of UNICA, highlighting key moments in the history of the network and shedding light on how the Higher Education sector has changed, underlining the need for universities to work more closely and face unpredictable challenges. Locating Universities Alliances within the broader landscape of a competitiveness principle adopted by the European Commission in the framework of Mario Draghi's Report ("The Future of European Competitiveness") and the Commission's "Competitiveness Compass", Prof. Costreie resorted to the analogy "from atomic entities to molecular superstructures" developed in his latest article¹ to illustrate how networks and alliances were necessary means for cooperation, which, in the context of Higher Education institutions (HEI), could strengthen the fabric of its ties. "**Education is defence**" was Prof. Costreie's reply to the current state of (global) affairs.

In a set of video communications specifically prepared for these UNICA Days by the representatives of the bodies of EU Institutions, **Roxana MÎNZATU**, Executive Vice-President of the European Commission for Social Rights and Skills, Quality Jobs and Preparedness, addressed the **importance of attracting talents, reinforcing skills, and bridging gaps** between Higher Education, Research and Innovation, and business in the context of fierce global competition. She highlighted that Higher Education will be a key part of the upcoming Union of Skills and Preparedness Strategy, as **universities act as an ideal bridge between academia and the business sector** and are crucial to Europe's competitiveness and future prosperity. She emphasized the significance of the European Degree in shaping the future of Europe's Higher Education and giving true meaning to the fifth freedom of circulation in the Single Market. Reinforcing the European Universities alliances and prioritizing the Centre of Vocational Excellence will be a major focus for her mandate. To achieve these objectives, a more ambitious budget for Erasmus+ is planned for the next programming period, aimed at efficiency and

¹ Saso, Luciano & Costreie, Sorin & Iucu, Romiță & Carțiș, Alexandru. (2024). The innovative role of European Universities Alliances in the European Higher Education Area. 2024. 23-47.

impact. Mînzatu concluded that "**We need to invest in people and skills for the future of Europe**".

Laurence FARRENG, Member of the European Parliament and of the Culture and Education Committee, highlighted that **Erasmus+, as the pillar of Education and employability in Europe**, is the most powerful tool to equip people with skills, and enabling students, professors and researchers to think and work together. She mentioned that the European Universities alliance initiative represents a big success, but the **path to the future of this initiative remains blurred** and there is a need to strengthen the dynamics of cooperation between the actors involved.

Victor NEGRESCU, Vice-President of the European Parliament, followed in the addresses by stating that **UNICA shows that Europe can develop by investing more in Education**, and in the same line he pointed at Education, skills and innovation as priorities for the next Multi Financial Framework (MFF). While **universities play a big role in developing local ecosystems** and making Europe stronger, a clearer partnership between the European institutions and universities needs to be shaped to strengthen cooperation and exchanges.

This year's UNICA Days received **Olga WESSELS**, the coordinator of FOR-EU4All, as keynote speaker. This network of over 60 alliances is often referred to as "the alliance of alliances", because it fosters collaboration and exchange of best practices within alliances and across the broader European Higher Education sector. Highlighting the role of **alliances as "ice breakers"** that should not wait for policymakers to pave the way but instead take the initiative to **foster innovation and cooperation**, Wessels stressed the need for energy, commitment, and a long-term vision to create a competitive Europe. She also mentioned the importance of **interacting with networks** for their history of creating sandboxes and nurturing the ground for policy and advocacy. Wessels concluded by stressing that sustainable support across all university missions is necessary to unlock the transformative potential of alliances and called for a **stronger link between Education and Research in Europe**.

As the audience was invited to participate, an open discussion unfolded in the attempt to clarify the correlative ontology of "alliances" and "networks".

The complementary nature of the different groups was made obvious by the fact that alliances are a more **top-down approach**, as they emerged through the initiative of the European Commission and thereby funding was conditional upon pre-established priorities and political goals and maybe subject to economic and political contingencies, whereas networks emerged from a **bottom-up** organic approach that is closer to the idea of a (labour) “union” of Universities, which - in that sense - enjoy relative independence – namely to voice concerns and establish priorities before government representatives and decision-making bodies. However, the **reductive aspect of dichotomies** surfaced and became apparent as debates delved into such exercise. The European University Association was given as an example of a third genus - neither a network nor an alliance – but rather a **representative association** of European universities. In contrast, it is also true that some groups play more of a supporting role to the stakeholders and are not as focused on the advocacy aspect, for example.

As it was suggested by **Liviu MATEI** (Head of the School of Education, Communication & Society, King’s College London), since, in the face of more complex structures², we find ourselves in the pursuit of some type of (epistemic) order, it should be taken as premise that labels are not to be the starting point for any attempt at describing the underlying reality. Rather, we should engage in a type of ethnography to capture the nature of these Higher Education organizations and understand how they relate to each other and derive normative conclusions from it.

This discussion was further developed in the following panel (see below) where it was noted that, for instance, in what regards to the determinant role **funding** plays in the alliances, and even though this is indeed still an open question that may influence their **effectiveness and durability**, Universities are always relatively independent under national law to choose to join forces in various forms.

² “... a useful metaphor is to compare universities to atomic entities that traditionally engaged in occasional collaborations without deep integration. Through alliances we witness a shift from atomic arrangements to molecular combinations. The stronger bonds enable universities within alliances to create more substantial, collective impacts across education, research and civic engagement.” in Saso, Luciano & Costreie, Sorin & Iucu, Romiță & Carțiș, Alexandru. (2024). The innovative role of European Universities Alliances in the European Higher Education Area. 2024. 23-47.

2. SESSION 2

UNIVERSITIES NETWORKS AND ALLIANCES: EXPLORING FUTURE PATHWAYS FOR COOPERATION

The session brought together several key figures from various educational organizations to discuss the **benefits and challenges of university alliances**. The panellists emphasized the potential of alliances as opportunities for deeper cooperation in Research and specific activities, contrasting them with the broader policy focus of existing networks. They discussed the dispersed and often insufficient funding for alliances and highlighted the need for **a clearer vision on their future** in the European scenario.

The panelists also explored the **similarities and differences between alliances and networks**. As the objective of both types of structures seem to be the shared aim at improving Higher Education and Research, their mission, however, is carried out differently varying upon forms of **governance** and **funding**.

FORMATION

Where the formation of networks can be seen as more organic and that of alliances as being more formal, this aspect was disputed during the discussion based on the following arguments:

- a) Networks do have formal/formalized procedures.
v.g.: **Katrien MAES**, Special Initiatives Ambassador Engagement & Impact at LERU (League of European Research Universities) noted that the network operates on very formal grounds as deliberations are approved by consensus which requires all member universities to be on the same foot.

- a) Alliances can result from organic processes.
v.g.: **Sorin COSTREIE**, bearing experience as both president of UNICA Network's Steering Committee and active participant in CIVIS - Europe's Civic University Alliance, noted that it was the allied institutions decision to come together for the formation of CIVIS, rejecting the idea that the source of funding could be constraining, and noting that Universities are always relatively independent under

national law to choose to join forces in various forms, as an expression of universities' freedom which is to be observed and protected at all levels (alliances included).



Ivanka POPOVIC warned that the formation of alliances should not resemble a popularity contest, as the creation of a two-tier league is divisive and excludent. Working with non-allied universities helps to nurture, not just diversity, but also independence, as the funding incentives for the alliances may end, but academic work is to be continued.

FUNDING

Whereas networks usually rely on their members' subscription fees (even if resorting to EU grants to fund specific projects, their work is not made conditional upon it), only 20% of the budget submitted in alliances applications is expected to be self-funded³, and even this percentage can be conditional upon variations of national co-funding. As *national contributions remain heterogenous in scale, modalities and timeline*, this usually creates *imbalances between members of alliances, risking its cohesion*. *EU based funding is what allows to go beyond national disparities*⁴. However, the panel noted that – even speaking to the success of the flagship initiative, Alliances are **not sufficiently funded**, and **funding is dispersed through many sources**, sometimes not transferable or shareable within the Alliance's members, which poses some uncertainty onto their future.



*The mindset of alliances is conditioned by how to get funding at some point, whereas a **long-term scenario would be preferable in terms of articulation of strategies at all levels** (national budgets negotiation within a long-term strategy).*

Anders HAGFELT

Chair of the Board of Directors of The Guild of European Research-Intensive Universities and Vice-Chancellor of Upsalla University

³ European Commission, Report on the outcomes and transformational potential of the European Universities initiative, 2025.

⁴ "Without Erasmus+ as main funding source, the European Universities initiative will not be able to deploy its full potential in future, considering the somewhat uneven and limited national/regional funding sources available for transnational cooperation at the scale prompted by the alliances.", in European Commission, Report on the outcomes and transformational potential of the European Universities initiative, 2025, page 123.

Noting that networks seem better positioned to **avoid conflicts of interest** in this sense, panellists also made sure to mention that universities in general enjoy a certain level of autonomy and the alliances *still operate in such framework*, as when rectors convene (being that in networks, alliances or associations), national priorities are also present and considered.

OBJECT / SCOPE

Although the initial idea (as presented by Macron's speech at the Sorbonne in 2017) seemed to be the formation of **one single University to operate at the European level**, none of the alliances were created with that intent or structure. In fact, it was mentioned among panellists that even the category of the "alliance" was negotiated to make evident that they were **not filling the role of networks**.

In this sense, the scope of networks may be deemed as broader, as they seem better suited to carrying out policy work with **more visibility, providing room for engagement from the bottom**, including the teaching and administrative staff onboard (and not just researchers). Alliances, on their hand, allow for deeper thematic collaboration and intensive work, leading to stronger bonds, as their work unfolds at a **different pace**. As smaller groups formed for specific purposes (namely Research activities) that allow for deeper cooperation, alliances require **intensive work to become established, which in turn results in a deeper bonding**.

They concluded that while alliances are an experimental approach with potential, as they engage teaching staff and fostering cooperation, **networks remain crucial for their stability and long-term impact on the Higher Education landscape**, focusing on advocacy and policy implementation. As an example, Prof. Popovic mentioned how the European Green Deal road map did not even mention Universities - and networks had to lobby for it. She believes **FP10 could be the next topic to focus on**.



Alliances NEED networks for policy implementation as well and should communicate their needs for that purpose.

Ludovic THILLY

Chair, Coimbra Group of universities and FOREU4ALL

When considering whether alliances should have a role in policy as well, it was mentioned that it would be useful first to see where networks and alliances **agendas align**, as the creation of redundancies in the allocation of human resources was consensually pointed as one of the biggest challenges, along with funding.



*The **multiplication of structures leads to fatigue**, and we need to be able to explain clearly why it is important to engage and what are the priorities. In sum, motivation, communication, explanation are key words.*

Dag Rune OLSEN

President of Yerun and Rector of the Arctic University of Norway

Given the **societal purpose of universities** and other long-term economic concerns, it was recommended that **trade-offs should be avoided**, suggesting that we should question to what extent the narrative of the “economic impact of universities” should be followed.

3. SESSION 3

EUROPEAN DEGREES AND MULTIPLE DEGREES IN THE EUROPEAN HIGHER EDUCATION AREA

Featuring diverse perspectives from key stakeholders, the main goal of this panel was to explore the feasibility, challenges, and benefits of the European Degree and multiple degree programs within the European Education Area, addressing recognition, quality assurance, and institutional strategies.

From an **INSTITUTIONAL PERSPECTIVE**, the panelists noted that the European Degree concept requires clarity, namely in its scope. It seems to be a bold proposal for increasing integration and reforming academic culture, contributing to overcoming challenges in international accreditation and to the materialization of the 5th freedom in the Single Market.



*What's new about the European Degree is that **it is a third chance within the Bologna process, to reach the objectives set**. It's not just a replica of joint degrees, it's a **new challenge, a new concept**. It's a **vote of trust in our institutions and the added value, the identity, has to be determined**. We need to reform academic culture in general and the European Degree could induce momentum for this social renovation.*

Ksenija VIDMAR HORVAT

Vice-Rector for study and student affairs, University of Ljubljana

Nevertheless, it is precisely the demanding level of institutional integration and cooperation that makes its implementation harder, since the question of sovereignty needs to be asked: as the European Degree also means **that member-states waive some of their sovereignty, the issue becomes - not so much a technical one, but rather - one of political importance**. Additionally, a lot of uncertainties are reported, especially regarding “who should do what” and who's going to take on the **administrative load** of implementing the European Degree within the member-states and Higher Education institutions.

TWO-SPEED EUROPE RISK: A concern was raised that the high level of integration required by the European Degree could create disparities between institutions and countries in their capacity to participate.

Simone Lepore, Policy Intern at the Erasmus Student Network (ESN) noted that it is important for institutions and organizations to **advocate together for solutions tailored to their needs before the respective member-states.**

Since the European Degree is a necessity of the Single Market, and not just of the students and the universities, supporting the European Degree does not necessarily mean being part of the pilot programs, but rather asking, within the universities, **how to better accompany the students in developing their skills and ready them for the labor market.**

MARKET VALUE: While some employers could value the European Degree, others remain unconcerned or focused on more specific skills that could be addressed by micro-credentials initiatives. Proactive marketing and better communication with employers are crucial for impact. **INTERDISCIPLINARITY:** The European Degree offers a potential catalyst for fostering interdisciplinary approaches within Higher Education. The role of micro-credentials in addressing employer needs was highlighted as laying grounds for more **FLEXIBLE PATHWAYS.**

From the **STUDENTS PERSPECTIVE**, the European Degree's institutional implementation should involve the students in top-down and bottom-up approaches at the multilateral level of European Higher Education decision-making, so they can contribute to solving issues and shaping solutions that affect them.

In this sense, some structural aspects need to be accounted for:

- The impact of fast-paced mobility in the student's life and in the social and academic tissue is not yet fully comprehended as **mobilities are still reserved for an elite.**
- Since 75% of students in Europe are not involved in internationalization, the **students elected in governance bodies are more focused on local issues,**

making urgent the need for student representation and engagement needs strengthening.

- **The housing market is not ready for the level of mobility and the scale of what is foreseen for the ED.** Are the institutions ready to help and guide students with housing and make sure the European Degree is possible?
- **Inclusion is fundamental in these new initiatives to make sure that everyone gets the same opportunities.**

The panel expressed overall positive expectations for the European Degree's potential, recognizing that it won't solve all challenges facing European Higher Education but offers valuable opportunities if implemented effectively and inclusively, with strong collaboration and communication. In this context, **the European Degree needs to be explained to stakeholders as an opportunity to bring Education back at the center of EU preoccupations, to strengthen European Higher Education.** By opening our institutional perspective and approach to the European Degree, we should seize that opportunity.

4. SESSION 4

RESEARCH WITHIN THE EUROPEAN UNIVERSITIES ALLIANCES

The alliances have been mostly funded by the Erasmus+ programme and thus had mainly educational objectives. However, Research is a fundamental mission of universities, and many alliances have already created important projects funded by Horizon Europe and other schemes. This panel meant to tackle the role of alliances in advancing joint Research initiatives, fostering interdisciplinary collaboration, and securing funding within the European Research Area in the context of the great **funding and general policy divide between Education and R&I** in order to extract some recommendations for both policymakers and practitioners.

Pieter BALLON introduced this session reminding the audience of how Research and innovation (R&I) are generally acknowledged by the EU and Universities as key for societal development and, thereby, how **funding should be increased** as the Alliances are more and more experimenting on how to fund and increase R&I in their activities.

Before the panel's discussion, **Vinciane GAILLARD**, Acting Director for Research and Innovation, European University Association (EUA) and **Simon PICKARD**, Network Director, Science|Business were asked to "set the scene" and they elaborated on some of the questions pending currently in the sector, namely stating how **universities' missions are intertwined**, and how the question on how to separate or include Research components into the Alliances' (mostly educational) initiatives became urgent as the European Union starts to accumulate influence in an area that was not - and formally still is not - of its competence. In this context, the **differentiation in the sources of funding** raises concerns about the alliances' purposes and the creation of tiers: "*is it about integration of services or leadership?*" asked Simon Pickard.

Additionally, R&I are not seen as separate matters, as that would imply additional funding costs. However, Vinciane Gaillard noted that any separation should be seen as within a continuum or a spectrum – but that (i) such approach is still not part of the discourse and (ii) **Alliances don't see themselves as policy makers, but rather as labs or sandboxes**

that report to policy makers. In this framework, the long-term sustainability of Alliances is still an open question.

As the panelists included representatives from CIVIC, FORTHEM and YUFE, they were asked about the **experience and purpose of alliances in the face of policy discourse.** Namely, how would they integrate Research into their alliances missions and what would that look like, as intuitively it would seem to mean, mostly, the sharing of services.

Panelists noted that alliances played a determinant role as **test beds for meeting SDGs,** but that there is a **lack of integration of different mission of universities** and it was difficult getting researchers involved, as it is the Research itself that granted them funding – and not so much the structure within which the Research is carried out, since, as it is known, alliances funding is limited. In the status quo, they asserted, it is up to the alliances' governance to find a way to side their educational vocation and Research component together. Nevertheless, the fact that a plethora of funding instruments is unevenly distributed on a territorial basis adds **administrative and regulatory obstacles** to the funding question.

Since **Research is more internationalized than Education,** the role of alliances didn't seem to represent great improvement, generating less expectation and excitement within the sector of Research and adding membership fees to the universities burden. Whereas **being part of an alliance can be competitive advantage to attract funding,** as the partnership in itself – the fact that the applicant is in contact with other partnered institutions – makes proposals more robust, for Research intensive universities, the added value of alliances was seen mostly in the sharing of infrastructure and inventory and in linking young researchers and streamlining the joint supervision of PhDs. The catch here seemed to be that **while the funding divide persists,** Alliances are only benefitting PhD students if Research is not seen as a job – but it was mostly consensual that PhD students are young professionals.

Notwithstanding, a red flag was also raised noting the weight that large alliances represented by Research intensity universities bared in influencing the discourse around the alliances – which do not have to be interested in carrying out Research. The fact that some alliances are focused on the educational mission should be valued and accounted for as an adequate mission as, again, **diversity is to be fostered and protected.**

If it is true that some alliances find themselves having to engage in an **artificial exercise of separating Research from Education**, having to look for sources of funding to restore the balance between both, the **third mission** of Universities should also weight in the mix, and the structure of the alliances has increased the levels of engagement with business, cities, networks etc. as they created mutual support laying enough evidence to support the claim that members of Universities Alliances are benefitted.

The panel closed returning to the question of the **sustainability of alliances** and their situation in terms of EU funding. As the application of science seems to be favored over fundamental Research, resorting to multinational alliances could be a way of gaining momentum for the Research side of the alliance, which should align its KPIs with the educational purposes.

The panel seemed to waive the idea that there should be different alliances for Research, as if detached from the educational mission of universities. Instead of operating as “cartels”, alliances should focus on diversifying their composition to allow for collaborative approaches.



There's never just one way – diversity is a key word across alliances as well. Malleable as they go, their model cannot be set in stone. Creativity will be needed.

Vinciane GAILLARD

Acting Director for Research and Innovation, European University Association (EUA)

5. SESSION

INNOVATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION: THE ROLE OF NEW TECHNOLOGIES

This session explored the multifaceted implications of digitalization in Higher Education, examining both its potential benefits and the challenges of implementation. The discussion balanced technological advancements with pedagogical considerations, emphasizing the importance of a human-centred approach.

To open the discussion, we were lucky enough to have **Evelien RENDERS**, President at EUNIS - European University Information Systems⁵ and an Advisor at SURF⁶, presenting on the topic of **educational interoperability** as key to the application of IT solutions in European Higher Education in a way that is protective both the user and the institution's **identity**. In this regard, Evelien highlighted how it was important to account for the **joint perspectives of users' needs** in the process of digitalization to ensure inclusion and efficiency.

Indeed, since large-scale digital transformation projects in Higher Education are complex and require careful planning and consideration, a **needs assessment** is crucial before implementing any new technology.

Even though students ride the wave quickly and have a shorter learning curve, significant challenges exist in areas such as teacher digital literacy, data security, and maintaining inclusivity, so effective digitalization requires collaboration and coordination among all stakeholders: students, faculty, administrators, IT staff, and governance bodies.

Open communication and preparation are critical: the implementation of new tools always requires some initial investment and can always be administratively disruptive, requiring **collective rationalization** to make the best of start-up costs.

⁵ A network that brings together those who are responsible for the management, development and the policy for Information Technology in Higher Education in Europe.

⁶ A cooperative association of Dutch educational and research institutions in which the members combine their strengths to acquire or develop the best possible digital services, and to encourage knowledge sharing through continuous innovation.



Taking the time to talk to people, explaining the changes, preparing for what is to come is fundamental.

Boštjan MARKOLI

Vice-Rector for Internationalization and Quality, University of Ljubljana

Evelien RENDERS

President, EUNIS network and Advisor to SURF

The rapid pace of technological development makes it difficult to keep up and necessitates **ongoing adaptation** and **critical evaluation** of new technologies. Legal and safety perspectives are also to be considered and here interoperability is key to ensure seamless integration and data exchange. Successful implementation hinges on addressing the behavioral and pedagogical changes required for effective learning. A **value-driven approach ("why" before "how")** is crucial.



We need to progress by starting with the values – why are we doing this and is there a tool to use? And not the other way around.

Evelien Renders

President, EUNIS network and Advisor at SURF

The panelists offered practical examples of ongoing projects that aim at integrating technology into academic daily life. Among them, **Dimitar ILIEV** presented DARIAH-EU⁷, a Research infrastructure consortium that provides a network to stakeholders of Research and Higher Education regarding digitalization and a platform of dissemination for the results of the Research undertaken, where the data that is shared is accessible, shareable, usable, and reusable, making the point that dedicated Research infrastructures can support the creation and sharing of digital resources, promoting open science and collaboration.

⁷ Digital Research Infrastructure for the Arts and Humanities

Effective digitalization requires strong collaboration among various stakeholders, both within and across institutions. Best practices may require:

- **Teacher Training and Support:** Ensuring that educators have the necessary skills and support to effectively utilize digital tools is crucial for successful implementation.
- **Data Security and Privacy:** Protecting user data and institutional information is paramount, requiring robust security measures and adherence to relevant regulations.
- **Inclusivity and Equity:** Digitalization efforts must ensure equitable access and participation for all students, addressing potential disparities based on socioeconomic status, technological proficiency, and other factors.

6. SESSION 6

UNIVERSITIES IN, FOR AND WITH (CAPITAL) CITIES

The session set the stage for a rich discussion on the transformative role that Higher Education institutions can and should play in their urban environments. Opening remarks emphasized that universities, especially those in capital cities, are not just centres of academic excellence but also **vital hubs for civic engagement and urban development**. The conversation centred on the need for these institutions to move beyond competitive academic pursuits and embrace a more holistic, community-focused mission—collaborating with local, regional, and national stakeholders to drive social, cultural, and economic change.

Panellists explored the opportunities and challenges associated with widening access to Higher Education and **addressing deep-rooted inequalities shaped by varying local contexts**. Innovative proposals were put forward, including initiatives to map global access, build inclusive networks and empower cities through Research and advocacy. These ideas underscored the urgent call to harness data - often limited by discrepancies at both country and city levels - to **create frameworks that support equity and hyper-diversity in urban centres**.

The session concluded with a focused call for practical strategies that universities can adopt to reinforce their engagement with local communities. Discussions highlighted the importance of developing cross-institutional cooperation, establishing dedicated spaces where ideas can be exchanged openly, and integrating students into community-centred projects. With proposals for future events and integrated Research initiatives, the session painted an inspiring **roadmap for academic institutions to serve as dynamic partners in shaping more inclusive, sustainable cities**.

CONCLUSIONS AND WAYS FORWARD

More than an event, the UNICA Days provided a platform for reflection, exchange and strategic dialogue among different actors in the European Higher Education and Research landscape. By bringing together different voices from around the sector, the event underscored the undisputable reasoning that the strategy to fulfill the European vision for Higher Education and Research – including in more recent initiatives like the Union of Skills, presented *a posteriori* of the UNICA Days - lies in collaboration.

As we move forward, we turn the conclusions of each session into actionable steps to lead our work. Below, we highlight the key takeaways from each session where UNICA, as a network, has the greatest potential to drive impact, along with recommendations for the next steps:

❖ *ALLYances* - European Universities and Networks cooperating, not competing

Traditional networks of universities and the European Universities Alliances have different, yet, complimentary roles. Both need each other: alliances benefit from the policy engagement of networks, while networks can rely on alliances to foster the innovation and cooperation push that the sector needs to build a more unified Higher Education landscape in Europe.

ACTIONABLE WAY FORWARD

UNICA has been a pioneer in bringing discussions on strengthening the European Higher Education system to regions on the periphery, including those outside the EU. With 15 members still not taking part in the initiative – some of them for not being eligible – there is great potential for UNICA to act as a bridge, making sure the benefits from the initiative reach the European Higher Education institutions beyond EU borders. By leveraging its diverse network, UNICA can advocate for greater involvement and facilitate dialogue that ensures all its members are able to cooperate within the evolving European Higher Education landscape. These efforts will prove essential to overcome concerns that a two-tier system where alliances receive preferential support is emerging.

❖ Different challenges, concerted efforts

Universities Alliances and traditional networks face different challenges: the former face funding instability, while the latter lack resources for deeper forms of collaboration. This means there is great potential to leverage complementary strengths and to create platforms for alliances and networks to share resources, best practices, and opportunities.

ACTIONABLE WAY FORWARD

By taking on an umbrella role in relation to the Alliances, UNICA is already proactively fostering collaboration with the initiative. The network already organises initiatives jointly with alliances, but there is space to grow collaboratively, by fostering discussions that touch upon the different institutional challenges. In addition, UNICA can also reinforce its work in advocating for the sustainability of the alliances through policy work and advocacy, while reaching out to the alliances for deeper collaboration concerning innovative academic models that can be scaled across the network.

❖ European Degree: with bold opportunities come great challenges

European Degree is seen as a significant opportunity to place Education at the center of EU priorities, but its success will require strong collaboration, clear communication, and a commitment to inclusivity. Institutions should actively engage in shaping its development, even if they are not directly involved in pilot programs, to ensure that it serves the needs of students, universities, and the labor market effectively.

ACTIONABLE WAY FORWARD

Together with peer organizations and the alliances themselves, UNICA is involved in the efforts to bridge the gaps between policy ambitions and institutional realities. The network can take further steps by identifying specific challenges where its expertise and collective strength can offer unique and impactful solutions. One area that was pinpointed as holding great potential is the university-market relationship. The privileged location of our members in capitals - established powerful economic and commercial centers - create not only a special environment to facilitate conversations with employers but also with other relevant actors, like local and regional governing decision-bodies.

❖ Research available in a variety of sizes

Alliances should not be forced into a one-size-fits-all model. They should embrace diversity in missions while advocating for more coherent funding mechanisms. To ensure long-term impact, alliances must align Research activities with educational objectives, leverage their networks for policy influence, and develop sustainable models that go beyond EU funding cycles.

ACTIONABLE WAY FORWARD

UNICA members comprehend universities with varied degrees of educational and Research vocations. We are in a great position to take equanimous positions that benefit both sectors of Higher Education and stimulate diversified collaboration. We deeply believe in the importance of all universities' missions and that a separation between them is not but a gradient. In this sense, all our members deserve our advocative attention, and we will allocate our policy efforts to advance the cause of alliances sustainability, while bearing a deep commitment to the protection of science as an open-ended process with inherent epistemic value, anchored in a citizens-capacitating purpose. The alliances can benefit Research intensive projects by fostering interdisciplinarity and the development of skills in a way that oversteps the great divide (both in funding-attribution as in policymaking) and promotes the recognition of an educational mission as valuable background for the production of high-quality Research and the critical use of its applications.

❖ Towards human-centered digitalization

Digitalization offers opportunities to enhance learning quality, accessibility, and efficiency, but it also presents significant challenges. One important lesson from session 5 is that technology is a tool, not a goal in itself. Success in this area means ensuring digital tools enhance, not replace, effective learning. This requires a human-centered and value-driven approach that prioritizes pedagogy alongside technological advancements.

ACTIONABLE WAY FORWARD

The impact of technological advancements in teaching and learning has been largely assessed within the network throughout the years. Despite their growing complexity,

three fundamental actions remain essential for harnessing the full potential of digitalization while mitigating its challenges: strategic coordination, inclusivity, and continuous adaptation. Promoting expertise through knowledge sharing and capacity building proves to be one of the most successful ways for UNICA to help member universities navigating this area. In addition, UNICA can leverage its advocacy power to address the digital divide, calling for equity and inclusivity in learning environments.

❖ [Shaping the future in the UniverCities](#)

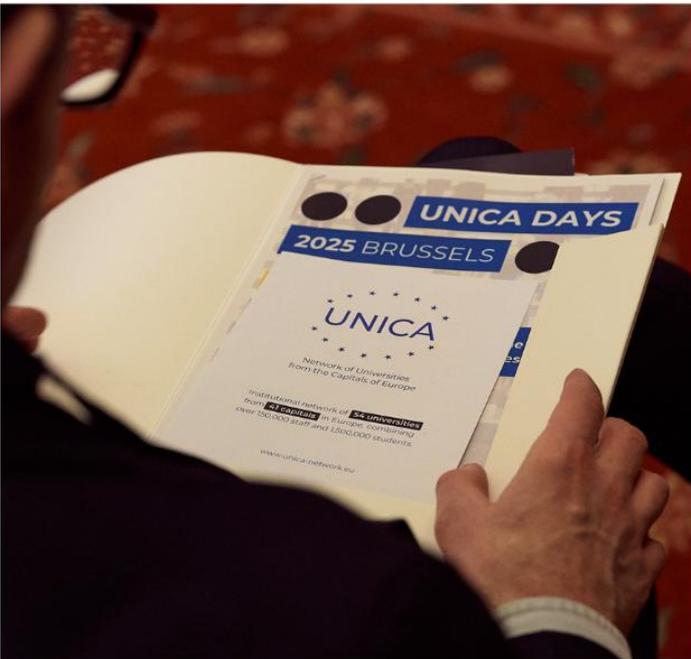
Collaboration with local, regional, and national stakeholders is crucial to drive social, cultural, and economic change. One important means to achieve this is through inclusive networks, city-driven Research, and advocacy initiatives that strengthen university-city partnerships. This session touched upon the very core of the network, highlighting the opportunity – and responsibility – universities from capitals cities have in supporting our societies to address global challenges and shaping a better future.

ACTIONABLE WAY FORWARD

This session reaffirmed the significance of cross-sector collaboration, align Research with urban needs, and inclusive spaces for public engagement. UNICA remains committed to two priorities: enhancing student involvement and promoting citizen science, in an effort to break down the remaining barriers between universities and the communities they serve.

[BEYOND THE REPORT: DISCOVER MORE ABOUT THE UNICA DAYS](#)

- [Official webpage of the UNICA Days 2025](#)
- [Photo gallery from the UNICA Days 2025](#)
- [The concept of the UNICA Days](#)





Network of Universities
from the Capitals of Europe

54 UNIVERSITIES | 41 EUROPEAN CAPITALS

Founded in 1990, UNICA is an institutional network of universities from the capitals of Europe committed to acting as a catalyst in the advancement, integration and cooperation of its member universities throughout Europe. Its vision is to be a driving force in the development of the European Higher Education and Research areas, and to empower its member universities to unlock their full potential, putting knowledge, Research, and Innovation at the service of the needs of society and of the coming generations.

The cultural diversity and “living lab” aspects of Capital cities, the proximity to governing bodies, their technological, cultural and innovative capacity, and the opportunities they provide as powerful economic and commercial centers, create a special environment for UNICA Members. Building on the diverse profiles of its members, UNICA aims to widen and strengthen international collaborations, engage academic leadership, and facilitate networking among academic communities. Activities are prepared by relevant seven UNICA working groups in cooperation with the UNICA Steering Committee and the UNICA Secretariat in Brussels.

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