

Courtesy translation

14th January 2021

As incumbent president of the Standing Conference of the Ministers and Policymakers responsible for Higher Education and Research and the 'Summit of the Greater Region,' I address you on the occasion of the recent European Commission Communication 'On achieving the European Education Area by 2025'. On behalf of the executive authorities of the Greater Region, I would like to draw your attention to a model of cross-border cooperation in the areas of higher education and research.

The Communication of the European Commission underlined its desire to intensify and deepen cooperation between higher education institutions in Europe. The alliances formed under the European Universities Initiative are a measure, but certainly not the only one, for realizing this goal through developing and testing new models of inter-university cooperation.

For many years, the Greater Region has been a fertile experimental ground for ambitious common strategies and a European driving force for innovation, not least in higher education and research. To this end, in 2008 the partner regions supported the creation of the university network "University of the Greater Region (UniGR)" as part of an Interreg IVA project.

UniGR now unites seven universities (the Technical University of Kaiserslautern, and the Universities of Liège, Lorraine, Luxembourg, Saarland, and Trier, along with htw saar as an associated partner) from four countries in the border region of Germany (Saarland and Rhineland-Palatinate), France (Grand Est), Luxembourg, and Belgium with more than 135,000 students and 10,000 teachers and researchers. UniGR pioneered the creation of integrated study programmes and now offers 30 such programmes. Currently, UniGR is establishing interdisciplinary centres for competence in scientific fields of excellence. These centres pool the assets of partner universities and create an outstanding multidisciplinary educational offer with close ties to joint research projects at the highest international level as well as with the innovative environment of the cross-border area. UniGR has founded, for example, the UniGR-Center for Border Studies (UniGR-CBS), and recently created the interdisciplinary centre 'Metals & Materials in a Circular Economy' or UniGR-CIRKLA.

UniGR is thus a European model of a cross-border university, with innovative cooperation structures in the area of governance and a level of cooperation that few university networks have been able to achieve to date. Similar to other cross-border networks such as EUCOR, and thanks to already established cross-border political structures in the Greater Region,

UniGR has been able to benefit from geographical proximity and political support to achieve this pioneering role.

The pilot phases of the European Universities Initiative placed a strong focus on the geographical balance of the networks it supported. The aim was to ensure as even a distribution as possible of higher education alliances across the EU member states. The two calls for tenders in the course of the pilot phases resulted in an impressive geographical distribution of 41 funded higher-education alliances.

However, the criterion of geographical balance excludes purely cross-border networks. It is those networks in particular that often benefit from extraordinary experiences gained in a context of daily transnational cooperation. They have already taken up many of the challenges that future 'European Universities' will face and have often found innovative solution strategies. We would therefore draw your attention to the role played by cross-border cooperation models which could be transferred to the European level and which at the same time contribute to strengthening territorial, social, and economic cohesion between regions.

We thus appeal to you to recognise these cross-border networks as successful pilot projects for "European Universities" in addition to the models currently under development by the European Universities Initiative. In this way, these networks would also be accorded the esteem deserved on account of their many years of experience. The opening of funding opportunities under the next Multiannual Financial Framework 2021-2027, whether in the context of the European Universities Initiative or not, would help to significantly support their further development. Regional and European cooperation are complementary and participation of member universities of cross-border networks in other European higher education institutions should not have a negative impact on their evaluation.

As I wrote to the President of the Commission, Mrs von der Leyen, on 22nd December 2020, border regions are models, inspiration, and driving force behind European integration and are thus a 'Europe in miniature.' The request expressed for their special concerns to be taken into account in EU decisions naturally also applies to higher education and research. The recognition of the higher education networks developed in these regions is above all an important contribution to the realization of the European Education Area.

The President of the UniGR and I remain at your disposal should further information be required.

Tobias Hans