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The evolving landscape of European higher education: Insights from Ulysseus European University

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This article explores the dynamic progression of the Ulysseus European University pilot phase (2020-2023): an excellent example of collaborative innovation and the challenges encountered in reshaping European higher education. The Ulysseus journey mirrors the ambitious vision of the European Commission, aiming not only to innovate but to foster a sense of unity and shared purpose across the European Education Area.

A shared vision for the future

The initiative to establish a European Education Area by 2025 has significantly propelled forward, with 50 alliances and 430 higher education institutions from 35 countries joining forces. Finland has emerged as a frontrunner, with over half of its Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) participating in this transformative movement. The objective of the European University Initiative (European Education Area Progress Report, 2022) is to bring together 60 alliances with over 500 HEI's participating by 2025. The last funding call has just concluded and the results on the last 10 new alliances are expected this summer.

The Ulysseus initiative: An example of innovation

Ulysseus European University, with Haaga-Helia among its partners, has embarked on a remarkable path since late 2020. Transitioning from its pilot phase with notable participation from the Haaga-Helia community, Ulysseus is poised for its next strategic period (2023-2027), thanks to renewed funding from the European Commission. This new phase is crucial for reinforcing Ulysseus's foundation, enhancing its operational capabilities, and broadening its international collaborations with two new member universities, University of Münster from Germany and University of Montenegro.

Achievements and milestones

The pilot phase marked the establishment of the digital Ulysseus campus, an innovative educational nexus comprising six European universities. Central to its achievements are the [Innovation Hubs](#), which concentrate on topical areas such as Artificial Intelligence, Aging and Wellbeing, Digitalization and Circular Economy, fostering a conducive environment for leading-edge research and education. These efforts have resulted in over 30 joint EU project proposals with a remarkable success rate. The joint projects, called [satellite projects](#), link together researchers and innovators from all Ulysseus partner universities making progress in creating a single, borderless market for research, innovation and technology across the EU (European Research Area 2020), aiming to impact our communities, businesses, regions and societies.

The introduction of the Central Management Office, the Digital Platform, and the International Center has significantly streamlined both operational and academic processes, making Ulysseus a pioneer in digital education platforms within the European higher education context. The Digital Platform, particularly, stands out with its joint learning management system which currently holds more than 40 courses jointly created in the first phase of Ulysseus. With more than 2600 registered users it holds the first place in the joint platforms of Ulysseus followed by Ulysseus Intranet and Teams with more than 700 users and Match4Cooperation social network app with 400+ users, encouraging collaboration and research mobility within the Ulysseus community.

Despite these advances, the road ahead is not without its challenges. Developing the Ulysseus campus further and adapting its legal framework, alongside managing a growing digital user base, are key areas of focus in the second phase of Ulysseus' journey. These challenges are crucial to tackle for the alliance's continuous growth and success.

Ulysseus European University's academic collaboration and degree programs

Ulysseus European University has made significant strides in promoting excellence and academic collaboration through its innovative joint and double degree programs. The alliance commitment to cross-disciplinary learning is exemplified by the introduction of more than 10 new double Master and Bachelor degrees, as well as joint doctoral programs across the Ulysseus Innovation Hubs' themes.

In the pilot phase, the alliance established a [Joint European Master Degree in Efficient and Sustainable Energy, Transport, and Mobility](#) coordinated by the University of Seville, reflecting its dedication to addressing contemporary global challenges. Three other Joint Master programmes are currently under development and the [Joint Master on AI for Business Transformation](#) (UlysseusAI) coordinated by Haaga-Helia is currently under European accreditation process and first cohort of students is expected to start their innovative and international learning journey in January 2025.

What sets the UlysseusAI program apart is its status as the first joint European Master degree coordinated by a Finnish University of Applied Sciences, marking a historic moment for Finland's and especially Haaga-Helia's role in advancing European Higher Education. The program design reflects a commitment to competence-based pedagogy, emphasizing real-world applicability and student-centered learning – all characteristics valued and followed by Haaga-Helia's and Ulysseus degrees.

The progress in joint educational endeavors is further highlighted by the establishment of a common framework on academic recognition to facilitate academic collaboration and recognition within Ulysseus (Mäkelä 2023). This framework has been instrumental in the accreditation of the first joint degree under the European approach and the ongoing process for others as well as other Ulysseus educational activities.

However, the journey toward European Joint Degrees is not the smoothest one in any of the European University alliances. Obstacles include the heavy accreditation process, different curricular regulations, national regulations for admission criteria, quality assurance arrangements, diploma format, tuition fees, academic-year-start-dates, as well as restrictions on teaching in different languages in some countries.

Enhancing skills and entrepreneurial mindset

In addition to joint and double degrees, Ulysseus European University has made remarkable impact in broadening the educational spectrum for its students, notably through a wide selection of language courses, entrepreneurship MOOCs, and summer schools. Haaga-Helia playing a crucial role in leading the co-creation of these joint initiatives.

Ulysseus offers an extensive range of language courses, covering 10 languages and various levels, to enhance students' global communication skills and cultural understanding. These courses are not just about language proficiency but also about preparing students for a globalized world where multilingualism is increasingly valued. More than 1200 students across the alliance and beyond have taken part in the comprehensive language programme studying Italian, Spanish, French, Chinese, Finnish, Russian, German and English.

Ulysseus has also launched MOOCs focused on entrepreneurship, design thinking and sustainable development. These courses, developed in collaboration with all partner universities under the lead of Haaga-Helia, aim to instill an entrepreneurial mindset in students and life-long learners, equipping them with the necessary skills to innovate and succeed in a rapidly changing business landscape. The MOOCs have inspired already more than 700 learners worldwide and the journey continues with new implementations in the upcoming semesters.

Additionally, Ulysseus has organized summer schools in Blended Intensive Program format (BIP), which serve as platforms for intensive learning and networking. These summer schools, encompassing themes like entrepreneurship and design thinking, project management and pedagogical skills are crucial in offering hands-on experiences and exposure to real-world challenges. They provide a unique opportunity for students and staff members to engage with experts, develop new competencies, and apply their learning in practical settings. The concept of Entre Camp Helsinki was co-created by all the partners under the lead of Haaga-Helia. The summer camp has been implemented twice in Helsinki and has trained nearly 80 Ulysseus students under the guidance of 18 international coaches in design thinking, entrepreneurial mindset, communications, teamwork and sustainable solutions. The third edition of the camp will take place in Nice this summer. Entre-Camp serves as a best practice in engaging master's students to innovative educational activities co-created by the alliance.

Haaga-Helia reached and surpassed its objectives in building up competences for the future and decreasing the competence gap between learners by offering diverse and practical educational experiences not only to students but also to Ulysseus staff and life-long learners around the globe. In the second phase of Ulysseus Haaga-Helia will be in charge of the whole education spectrum of Ulysseus European University by taking the lead in the development processes of the degrees and other educational activities and the pedagogics of the whole alliance.

Ulysseus Mobility Programmes

All of the European University alliances have committed to enhance mobilities for the entire university community. The 50 % goal set by the European Commission (European University Initiative 2020) unfortunately has not been reached in any of the alliances yet – but all the institutions are highly committed to make it reality by 2030. For Ulysseus this means that every other student within the Alliance will have a virtual, blended or physical mobility experience in Ulysseus during her or his overall study period by 2029. Virtual mobilities count as 90 % of the mobilities and initiatives

such as virtual joint courses, COILS, webinars, online workshops and events that occur within the alliance are counted towards the 50 % mobility goals.

Ulysseus' focus has been predominantly on advancing mobility opportunities for its students, staff, and researchers. This includes facilitating exchanges and collaborative projects across partner institutions, reducing barriers to international experiences, and fostering a dynamic, interconnected academic network. The first year of the alliance mobilities was heavily affected by the presence of COVID-19 but the last two years have shown an increase in physical mobilities: Ulysseus has moved more than 2000 students and staff members physically through semester exchanges, short term programmes, BIP programmes, staff & researchers' weeks and other international events. In addition to physical mobilities more than 2000 students have taken part in virtual activities of the alliance in the first phase of Ulysseus.

Conclusion

Over the last three years, Ulysseus European University has been on an incredible journey (Ulysseus Action Plan 2022). Looking back at what Ulysseus has achieved since 2020, it is clear growth, innovation and quite a few challenges have been mixed into a recipe for success. As Ulysseus embarks on the next phase of its strategy, the alliance is truly making efforts in transforming education across Europe.

The Ulysseus journey is a shining example of how European University alliances can make a big difference, especially when it comes to working together academically, pushing forward with digital and research projects and creating opportunities for students, staff and researchers to study, teach and conduct research in collaborative ways in a borderless Europe. Ulysseus European University is about building a future where education and research in Europe are more connected and forward-thinking.

That said, it's not all smooth sailing. Merging the educational paths of six different countries comes with its fair share of administrative and legal puzzles. Each country has its own set of rules and policies, which makes our mission to create a seamless educational experience quite the challenge. But as Ulysseus moves forward, its central role in bringing the European Commission's vision of a united European Education and Research Area to life becomes even more crucial. It is a big task, but one that promises to create a lively, united academic community ready to take on the world's constant changes.

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