

## EUROPEAN UNIVERSITIES ALLIANCES: THE EXAMPLE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF NATIONAL AND WORLD ECONOMY (UNWE), SOFIA, BULGARIA

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### Abstract

*The current paper is dedicated to the study of the experience of the University of National and World Economy (UNWE), Sofia, Bulgaria, in the most large-scale initiative of the European Commission in the field of higher education, science and innovation – the European Universities initiative or European Universities alliances. The aim of this initiative is to create an unprecedented level of close transnational cooperation between higher education institutions in Europe. The paper is focused specifically on one of those alliances – the European Universities alliance ENGAGE.EU, of which the UNWE is a member, along with eight other leading European universities. This alliance was started in 2020, and its second stage – ENGAGE.EU R&I (ENGAGE.EU 2.0), was launched on November 1, 2023, and will continue until October 30, 2027.*

**Keywords:** European Universities, ENGAGE.EU, University of National and World Economy, UNWE

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The current paper analyzes the flagship initiative of the European strategy for universities – European Universities alliances. The European Universities are transnational alliances of higher education institutions from all parts of Europe that come together for the benefit of students, teachers and society. Currently, there are 64 European Universities alliances with more than 560 higher education institutions of all types, from all across Europe.<sup>1</sup> European Universities are ambitious transnational alliances of higher education institutions developing long-term structural and strategic cooperation, and adapting and providing students, academics, university staff, and lifelong learners with the skills they need to navigate the twin green and digital transition and build a resilient society.<sup>2</sup>

*“In this context, transnational education is no longer an option but a crucial necessity, with a much deeper level of cooperation needed between universities, and with all key actors. The European Universities initiative aims at fostering excellence, innovation and inclusion in higher education across Europe and at accelerating the transformation of higher education institutions into the universities of the future with structural, systemic and sustainable impact.”<sup>3</sup>*

The study is focused on the experience of the University of National and World Economy (UNWE), Sofia, Bulgaria, in the European University ENGAGE.EU, in which the UNWE is a member, along with eight other leading European universities. This alliance was started in 2020 and its second stage – ENGAGE.EU R&I (ENGAGE.EU 2.0) was launched on November 1, 2023, and will continue until October 30, 2027.

The paper explores the various aspects of the second key development project of the alliance – ENGAGE.EU R&I, where the emphasis is on doctoral programs within the alliance, innovation in the field of the joint training of doctoral (PhD) students, new formats of online training, new forms of mobilities, strengthening of the interdisciplinary approach, etc. Based on this, the main challenges and perspectives in the training of doctoral students at the UNWE are presented.

<sup>1</sup> European Commission, 2024, European Universities Initiative, <<https://education.ec.europa.eu/education-levels/higher-education/european-universities-initiative>>

<sup>2</sup> European Commission, 2024, European Universities: A key pillar of the European Education Area, Factsheet, p. 1.

<sup>3</sup> Op. cit., p. 1.

The structure of the paper is as follows: Section 2 is devoted to the European Universities initiative – bridging higher education, research, innovation and society. Section 3 analyzes the experience of the UNWE within the ENGAGE.EU – the European Universities alliance committed to a societal change. Finally, the paper ends with summarizing the results from the study.

## **2. THE EUROPEAN UNIVERSITIES INITIATIVE – BRIDGING HIGHER EDUCATION, RESEARCH, INNOVATION AND SOCIETY**

The key priority for increasing the quality and competitiveness of higher education in the Republic of Bulgaria is laid down and is in accordance with the Law on Higher Education (since 1995)<sup>4</sup>, Law on Academic Staff Development in the Republic of Bulgaria (since 2010)<sup>5</sup>, ordinances and rules on the state requirements for various aspects of training in higher education institutions in the Republic of Bulgaria<sup>6</sup>, the Strategy for the development of higher education in the Republic of Bulgaria for the period 2021-2030<sup>7</sup>, the policies for the development of state higher education institutions, the Council Conclusions on digital education in Europe's knowledge societies<sup>8</sup>, the Rome Communiqué of the Ministers of the Member States of the Bologna Process<sup>9</sup>, adopted in 2020, and other key documents.

Nowadays, we are direct witnesses of how the rapidly entering digitization and the implementation of artificial intelligence (AI), combined with the generational characteristics of students, increased international cooperation and the aspiration to ensure equal access to education for all layers of society, have placed qualitatively new requirements on the nature and peculiarities of teaching in the higher education institutions.

Strengthening the relationship between higher education institutions, scientific research, employers and the various institutions in the educational system, including those at the European level, in the field of digital technologies and AI, should be a priority of the national education policy.

According to the European Council, the EU Member States “...should remain primarily responsible for three areas – social dimension, education and culture, but much can be achieved by working together,

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<sup>4</sup> Law on Higher Education, Promulgated, State Gazette, No. 112 of December 27, 1995, <<https://lex.bg/laws/ldoc/2133647361>>, [in Bulgarian]

<sup>5</sup> Law on Academic Staff Development in the Republic of Bulgaria, Promulgated, State Gazette, No. 112 of December 27, 1995, <<https://lex.bg/bg/laws/ldoc/2135680028>> [in Bulgarian]

<sup>6</sup> Ordinance on the state requirements for the admission of students in the Bulgarian higher schools, adopted by a decree of the Council of Ministers (PMS) No. 79 of 09.05.2000, Promulgated, State Gazette, No. 40 of May 16, 2000, <<https://lex.bg/laws/ldoc/-549432831>> [in Bulgarian]; Ordinance on the state requirements for acquisition of higher education at “Bachelor”, “Master” and “Specialist” educational and qualification degrees, in force from 08.06.2002, adopted by a decree of the Council of Ministers (PMS) No. 162 of 07.23.2002, Promulgated, State Gazette, No. 76 of 6 August 2002, <<https://lex.bg/laws/ldoc/2135456860>> [in Bulgarian]; Ordinance on the state requirements for recognition of the acquired educational degree and completed certain periods of studies in foreign higher schools, by a decree of the Council of Ministers (PMS) No. 168 of 14.08.2000, Promulgated, State Gazette, No. 69 of August 22, 2000, <<https://lex.bg/laws/ldoc/-549417984>> [in Bulgarian]; Ordinance on the state requirements for the contents of all principal documents issued by higher schools (and attached European diploma appendix under the model developed by the European Commission, Council of Europe and UNESCO- European Centre for Higher Education (CEPES)), adopted by a decree of the Council of Ministers (PMS) No. 215 of 12.08.2004, Promulgated, State Gazette No. 75 of 27.08.2004, in force since 27.08.2004, <<https://legislation.apis.bg/doc/23982/0>> [in Bulgarian]; Ordinance No. 21 of September 30, 2004 on the implementation of a system for the accumulation and transfer of credits in higher education institutions, (which introduces the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS)), in force since October 12, 2004, issued by the Minister of Education and Science, Promulgated, State Gazette, No. 89 of October 12, 2004, <<https://lex.bg/laws/ldoc/2135493306>> [in Bulgarian]; Rules on the state requirements for the organization of distance learning form at higher schools, in force from 01.09.2021, adopted by a decree of the Council of Ministers (PMS) No. 78 from 05.03.2021, Promulgated, State Gazette, No. 21 of March 12, 2021, <<https://lex.bg/bg/laws/ldoc/2137210520>> [in Bulgarian].

<sup>7</sup> Strategy for the development of higher education in the Republic of Bulgaria for the period 2021-2030, adopted by Decision of the 44<sup>th</sup> National Assembly on December 17, 2020, Promulgated, State Gazette, No. 2 of January 8, 2021, <<https://www.strategy.bg/StrategicDocuments/View.aspx?Id=1492>> [in Bulgarian].

<sup>8</sup> European Council, 2020, Council Conclusions on digital education in Europe's knowledge societies 2020/C 415/10, Official Journal of the European Union, C 415/22, 1.12.2020, pp. 22-30, <<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52020XG1201%2802%29>>

<sup>9</sup> EHEAROME2020, 2020, Rome Ministerial Communiqué, 19 November 2020, <[https://www.ehea.info/Upload/Rome\\_Ministerial\\_Communique.pdf](https://www.ehea.info/Upload/Rome_Ministerial_Communique.pdf)>

*while fully respecting the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality... Education and culture are key to building inclusive and cohesive societies, and to sustaining the EU competitiveness.*<sup>10</sup>

The most important and large-scale European initiative undertaken in this direction is the European Universities initiative, launched in 2017 to transform higher education, science and innovation in Europe. Transnational alliances of higher education institutions pave the way towards the universities of the future.<sup>11</sup>

In November 2017, the 28 EU leaders debated the future of education at the Gothenburg Social Summit in Sweden. In the same month, the European Commission set out a vision for a European Education Area to be built by 2025 “*in which learning, studying and doing research would not be hampered by borders*”.<sup>12</sup>

The European Council’s Conclusions from the meeting on December 14, 2017 called on the EU Member States, the Council and the European Commission to make progress with a view to deepening strategic partnerships between higher education institutions across the EU and promoting the creation by 2024 of some twenty “European Universities”, consisting in bottom-up networks of universities 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.<sup>13</sup>

Subsequently, in two of its conclusions in 2018, the European Council highlighted the leading role of “European Universities” for the vision of a European Education Area (EEA). The ministers of finance and education of the EU Member States in their conclusion from an organized first-ever joint policy debate in 2019, highlighted the need to increase effective and efficient investment in education and training, skills and competences in terms of quality, quantity, inclusiveness and equity.<sup>14</sup>

Further, on February 27, 2020, the European Council’s Resolution on education and training within the framework of the European Semester was adopted. This Council Resolution “*...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.*”<sup>15</sup>

The European Skills Agenda, adopted by the European Commission on June 30, 2020, envisages the role of the “European Universities” in setting standards for the transformation of higher education institutions in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA)<sup>16</sup>, the European Research Area (ERA)<sup>17</sup> and the newest European Research Area for Research and Innovation<sup>18</sup>. Based on excellence, the new European Research Area for Research and Innovation is expected to “*improve Europe’s research and innovation landscape, accelerate the EU’s transition towards climate neutrality and digital leadership, support its recovery from the societal and economic impact of the coronavirus crisis, and strengthen its resilience against future crises.*”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> European Council, 2017, European Council meeting (14 December 2017) – Conclusions, EUCO 19/1/17 REV 1, Brussels, 14 December 2017, pp. 3-4, <<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/32204/14-final-conclusions-rev1-en.pdf>>

<sup>11</sup> European Commission, 2024, European Universities Initiative, <<https://education.ec.europa.eu/education-levels/higher-education/european-universities-initiative>>

<sup>12</sup> European Commission, 2024, European Universities: A key pillar of the European Education Area, Factsheet, p. 2.

<sup>13</sup> European Council, 2017, European Council meeting (14 December 2017) – Conclusions, EUCO 19/1/17 REV 1, Brussels, 14 December 2017, p. 4, <<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/32204/14-final-conclusions-rev1-en.pdf>>

<sup>14</sup> European Council, 2021, Council conclusions on the European Universities initiative – Bridging higher education, research, innovation and society: Paving the way for a new dimension in European higher education, 2021/C 221/03, ST/8658/2021/INIT, OJ C 221, 10.6.2021, pp. 14–24, <<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52021XG0610%2802%29>>

<sup>15</sup> Op. cit.

<sup>16</sup> European Higher Education Area (EHEA), 2024, European Higher Education Area and Bologna Process, <<https://eha.info/>>

<sup>17</sup> European Commission, 2024, European research area (ERA), <[https://research-and-innovation.ec.europa.eu/strategy/strategy-2020-2024/our-digital-future/european-research-area\\_en](https://research-and-innovation.ec.europa.eu/strategy/strategy-2020-2024/our-digital-future/european-research-area_en)>

<sup>18</sup> European Commission, 2020, ERAXESS. Researchers in motion, A new ERA for Research and Innovation, 1 October 2020, <<https://euraxess.ec.europa.eu/euraxess/news/new-era-research-and-innovation>>

<sup>19</sup> Op. cit.

To this end, the European Universities initiative is being fully deployed under the 2021-2027 Erasmus+ programme and Horizon Europe, as well as the development of a European Competence Framework for researchers.<sup>20</sup>

In the Rome Communiqué of 2020, adopted on November 19, 2020 at the EHEA Ministerial Conference, the ministers responsible for higher education stated that the alliances formed under the European Universities initiative were an important way to explore more in-depth, larger-scale systemic cooperation, which may prove useful in identifying and overcoming obstacles to closer transnational cooperation between higher education institutions in the future.<sup>21</sup>

The European Council's Conclusions on the European Universities initiative – bridging higher education, research, innovation and society: paving the way for a new dimension in European higher education, were adopted at the Council's meeting on May 17-18, 2021.<sup>22</sup> This document argues that: *“European Universities” are developing challenge-based approaches to shared education, research and innovation to enhance interdisciplinary critical mass; they are sharing capacity and pooling resources, strengthening the attractiveness of academic and research careers, supporting institutional change, for example through gender equality plans, and reinforcing collaboration with surrounding ecosystem actors; they are working for open science and open education, engaging with citizens for solving societal challenges and reinforcing excellence in education and research for global competitiveness*<sup>23</sup>.

European Universities alliances are currently a flagship initiative of the European Strategy for Universities<sup>24</sup>. This strategy aims at supporting and enabling higher education institutions to adapt to changing conditions, to thrive and to contribute to Europe's resilience and recovery. It is a call to EU countries and higher education institutions across Europe to join forces.<sup>25</sup>

What are the European Universities alliances?

The key criteria and key cooperation principles the European Universities alliances are the following:

- *“Minimum of 3 higher education institutions, from 3 EU Member States or third countries associated to the Erasmus+ programme.*
- *Alliances develop joint long-term strategies for education with, where possible, links to research and innovation to drive systemic, structural and sustainable impact at all levels of their institutions.*
- *Alliances create and implement European inter-university campuses, where:*
  - *students, academics, university staff, researchers and lifelong learners enjoy seamless mobility (physical, virtual or blended) to study, train, teach, do research, work or share services across borders and disciplines;*
  - *transdisciplinary and transnational teams of students, academics and external stakeholders tackle big issues facing Europe (such as climate protection, digitalization, health, democracy, migration, security);*
  - *students can design their own flexible curricula, leading to a European Degree;*

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<sup>20</sup> European Commission, 2023, Proposal for a Council Recommendation on a European framework to attract and retain research, innovation and entrepreneurial talents in Europe, COM/2023/436 final, Brussels, 13.7.2023, <<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=COM%3A2023%3A0436%3AFIN>>

<sup>21</sup> European Council, 2021, Council conclusions on the European Universities initiative – Bridging higher education, research, innovation and society: Paving the way for a new dimension in European higher education, 2021/C 221/03, ST/8658/2021/INIT, OJ C 221, 10.6.2021, pp. 14–24, <<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52021XG0610%2802%29>>

<sup>22</sup> Op. cit.

<sup>23</sup> Op. cit.

<sup>24</sup> European Commission, 2022, Communication from the Commission on a European Strategy for Universities, <<https://education.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2022-01/communication-european-strategy-for-universities-graphic-version.pdf>>

<sup>25</sup> European Commission, 2023, One year of European Strategy for Universities marks important achievements, 5 April 2023, <<https://education.ec.europa.eu/news/european-strategy-for-universities-one-year>>

- *practical and/or work-based experience is provided to foster an entrepreneurial mind-set and develop civic engagement;*
- *the student body reflects the social, economic and cultural diversity of the population;*
- *Cooperating partners should come from different parts of Europe.* <sup>26</sup>
- The chronology of the European Universities is as follows<sup>27</sup>:
- In October 2018, the European Commission launched the 1<sup>st</sup> Erasmus+ call to higher education institutions to start testing different models for European Universities.
- In June 2019, the European Commission announced the first selected European Universities alliances<sup>28</sup>.
- In November 2019, these first 17 European Universities started cooperating.
- In November 2019, the European Commission launched the 2<sup>nd</sup> Erasmus+ call to higher education institutions.
- In July 2020, the results of the 2<sup>nd</sup> call were announced.
- In November 2020, 24 new European Universities alliances started cooperating, including ENGAGE.EU, of which the UNWE is a member.<sup>29</sup>
- In November 2022, the European Commission launched the 3<sup>rd</sup> Erasmus+ call.
- In July 2022, the results of the 3<sup>rd</sup> call were announced – full roll-out phase. 20 European Universities alliances have been selected.
- In autumn 2022, 44 European Universities consolidated and expanded their cooperation and the 4<sup>th</sup> Erasmus+ call was launched.
- In July 2023, the results of the 4<sup>th</sup> call were announced. 30 more European Universities alliances were added, including ENGAGE.EU R&I, in which the UNWE is a member and two new participants have been added to the network since August 1, 2020 – Hanken School of Economics (Finland) and Universitat Ramon Llull Fundacio (Barcelona, Spain)<sup>30</sup>.
- In autumn 2023, the 5<sup>th</sup> Erasmus+ call was launched.
- In June 2024 – 14 European Universities alliances were selected.<sup>31</sup>
- In the summer of 2024, the results of the 5<sup>th</sup> call were announced.

European Universities initiative had the ambition to expand to 60 European Universities alliances involving more than 500 higher education institutions by the middle of 2024.<sup>32</sup>

Currently, in the summer of 2024, there are 64 European Universities alliances involving more than 560 higher education institutions from all parts of Europe are transforming higher education.

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<sup>26</sup> European Commission, 2024, European Universities: A key pillar of the European Education Area, Factsheet, p. 1.

<sup>27</sup> Op. cit., p. 2; European Commission, 2024, Funding for European Universities alliances, <<https://education.ec.europa.eu/education-levels/higher-education/european-universities-initiative/funding>>

<sup>28</sup> European Commission, 2019, First 17 “European Universities” selected: a major step towards building a European Education Area, Press Release, 26 June 2019, Brussels, <[https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP\\_19\\_3389](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_19_3389)>

<sup>29</sup> European Commission, 2020, 24 new European Universities reinforce the European Education Area, Press Release, 9 July 2020, Brussels, <[https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip\\_20\\_1264](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_20_1264)>

<sup>30</sup> European Commission, 2023, European Universities Erasmus+ call 2023: Results, <<https://education.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2023-07/ANNEX-RESULTS-2023-ERASMUS-EUROPEAN-UNIVERSITIES-CALL-JUNE23.pdf>>

<sup>31</sup> European Commission, 2024, Funding for European Universities alliances, <<https://education.ec.europa.eu/education-levels/higher-education/european-universities-initiative/funding>>

<sup>32</sup> European Commission, 2024, The European Universities alliances in action, About the initiative, <<https://education.ec.europa.eu/education-levels/higher-education/european-universities-initiative/about?>>



The main source of financial support for European Universities alliances comes through the Erasmus+ programme. In addition, alliances can access to national or regional funding schemes, research and innovation funding, and any other relevant EU funding resources.<sup>33</sup>

The Erasmus+ programme has a total budget of €26.2 billion over seven years (2021-2027), which is almost double the funding for the period 2014-2020.<sup>34</sup>

Within the 2021-2027 budget period, the Erasmus+ programme will allocate a record €1.1 billion to the European Universities initiative. This means up to €14.4 million available to each European Universities alliance over 4 years, which is 3 times the amount offered during the pilot phase 2019-2020. Alliances may extend this 4-year funding period for a further 2 additional years under a competitive call for proposals. This opportunity will be included in the Erasmus+ work programs for 2026 and 2027, which have not yet been adopted.<sup>35</sup>

Existing alliances of European Universities are supported to consolidate and expand their cooperation with over 50 additional higher education institutions under the Erasmus+ programme, which has a budget of €402.2 million for the period 2021-2027. In addition, several new alliances will be able to start their transnational cooperation. The amount of €402.2 million includes €3.2 million from the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA III) for the period 2021-2027 to further support the participation as full partners of higher education institutions from the Western Balkans countries, which are not associated to the Erasmus+ programme.<sup>36</sup>

### **3. THE EXPERIENCE OF THE UNWE IN ENGAGE.EU – THE EUROPEAN UNIVERSITIES ALLIANCE COMMITTED TO A SOCIETAL CHANGE**

ENGAGE.EU is a transnational alliance of 9 leading European Universities in the fields of business, economics and social sciences, which aims to empower a new generation of European citizens by providing them with a set of skills and competences to tackle the big challenges facing society, such as digitization, artificial intelligence, climate change, energy transition, economic deglobalization, changes in the geopolitical order, aging society, migration.

The creation of this alliance was dictated by the need that: *“Universities must continue to be competitive on the world stage. Globally, Europe’s relative weight in terms of research-intensive universities is declining. There is untapped potential in joining the efforts of member states on the world stage. Europe can do even better in stimulating mobility and in attracting and retaining talented students, teachers and researchers to maximize Europe’s influence globally in terms of values, education, research, industrial and societal impact.”*<sup>37</sup>

Through joint efforts and interdisciplinary approaches, drawing from business, economics and social sciences, and other disciplines such as humanities, law, public health and STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Art, and Mathematics), the ENGAGE.EU alliance aims to drive innovation, promote sustainability and make a positive global impact. The alliance also aims to inspire active public engagement in the current and future state of Europe – and beyond.

The alliance “ENGAGE.EU – The European University engaged in societal change” (abbreviated ENGAGE.EU) was launched on November 1, 2020, funded by the Erasmus+ programme, as a network

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<sup>33</sup> European Commission, 2024, The European Universities alliances in action, About the initiative, <<https://education.ec.europa.eu/education-levels/higher-education/european-universities-initiative/about?>>

<sup>34</sup> European Council, Council of the European Union, 2024, Erasmus+ programme, <<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/erasmus-plus-programme/>>

<sup>35</sup> European Commission, 2024, Funding for European Universities alliances, <<https://education.ec.europa.eu/education-levels/higher-education/european-universities-initiative/funding>>

<sup>36</sup> European Commission, 2023, 50 European Universities to cooperate across borders and disciplines, 3 Jul 2023, <<https://education.ec.europa.eu/sv/news/european-universities-2023-call-results?>>

<sup>37</sup> European Commission, 2022, Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on a European University Strategy, {SWD(2022) 6 final}, Strasbourg, 18.1.2022, COM(2022) 16 final, p. 4. [in Bulgarian]

of 7 universities from Europe, including the UNWE, which share European values and a global perspective.

Members of this alliance are the following: University of Mannheim (Mannheim, Germany) – coordinator, Luiss Libera Università Internazionale degli Studi Sociali Guido Carli (Rome, Italy), NHH Norwegian School of Economics (Bergen, Norway), Tilburg University (Tilburg, Netherlands), UNWE (Sofia, Bulgaria), University Toulouse 1 Capitole (Toulouse, France) and WU Vienna University of Economics and Business (Vienna, Austria).

As of August 1, 2022, two new partners have been accepted into the alliance – Hanken School of Economics (Helsinki, Finland) and Universitat Ramon Llull Fundacio (Barcelona, Spain).

The funding agency is the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA).

On October 21-22, 2022, at the First Annual Conference of the European Universities alliance ENGAGE.EU, hosted by the University of Mannheim, the second key project for the development of the alliance was launched – ENGAGE.EU Research & Innovation (R&I), funded under the Horizon 2020 programme, which is all about research and innovation.

Participating universities in the alliance join forces to achieve a unique synergy of their valuable experience, raising the existing cooperation to a qualitative new level, guided by a common strategy and common goal, a unified approach and preserving its authenticity.<sup>38</sup>

Each university brings its individual perspective – shaped by its academic areas of specialization as well as its geographic and economic context – to the collective creation of value that exceeds its potential. The ENGAGE.EU alliance opens up unique opportunities to educate and inspire a new generation of citizens who will contribute to making Europe a global benchmark on how to tackle societal challenges.

As the European Commission argues: *“In our interconnected world, addressing global challenges requires a collective effort. It is a shared responsibility to enable current and future generations to acquire future-proof skills for their own and Europe’s benefit.”*<sup>39</sup>.

The ENGAGE.EU alliance creates an unprecedented level of close cooperation between higher education institutions in Europe. It is expressed in multiple aspects: sharing of resources (human and technical); developing common strategies and building common capacity for education and research; training in joint courses/specialties; development of many innovations in the field of joint learning – new formats of online learning and new forms of mobilities; new models of collaborative online teaching; strengthening the interdisciplinary approach; and many more.

The ENGAGE.EU alliance transforms all activities and key academic missions of its 9 partners – higher education institutions in Europe, namely:

1. Engaged Learning;
2. Engaged Research and Innovations;
3. Engaged in Society.

This alliance emphasizes strategic priorities by:

1. ENGAGE.EU programs piloting the learning experience at the alliance based on research-based learning;
2. Doctoral programs at the alliance, as well as launch of various pilot doctoral activities with built-in mobility;

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<sup>38</sup> UNWE, 2022, ENGAGE.EU from the beginning until now, University of National and World Economy (UNWE), Sofia, 25 May 2022, <<https://www.unwe.bg/library/bg/pages/23278/engage-eu-%D0%BE%D1%82-%D0%BD%D0%B0%D1%87%D0%B0%D0%BB%D0%BE%D1%82%D0%BE-%D0%B4%D0%BE%D1%81%D0%B5%D0%B3%D0%B0.html>>

<sup>39</sup> European Commission, 2024, European Universities: A key pillar of the European Education Area, Factsheet, p. 1.

3. ENGAGE.EU labs, open and dynamic innovation spaces for knowledge-creating teams involving learners, researchers, innovators, companies, civic initiatives and policy-makers embodying the challenge-based framework.

Currently, the ENGAGE.EU alliance is an academic home of over 125,000 students and over 14,000 faculty and staff, offering over 520 courses.

In the second key project for the development of the alliance – ENGAGE.EU R&I, an important priority is building of bridges for effective European transnational cooperation of PhD students and early-stage researchers. This concerns the existing doctoral programs at each individual university in the alliance and the creation of a common doctoral program within the ENGAGE.EU alliance (ENGAGE.EU PhD programme).

The alliance's ambition is to offer, through the doctoral programs, a wide range of interactive formats and workshops specifically tailored to the needs of future researchers: from intensive discussions on innovative research to practice-oriented training sessions to develop soft skills, the events offer a rich program that reaches far beyond the traditional academic curriculum.<sup>40</sup>

In addition, a shared PhD program would create an atmosphere where participants not only learn from each other, but also have the opportunity to interact with renowned academics and experts. In this way, it becomes possible to increase the international competitiveness of the training of doctoral students in each of the member universities, including those in the UNWE.

As stated in the Rome Communiqué of November 2020<sup>41</sup>: Cooperation and mobility connect the higher education systems of the EU Member States and promote the development of intercultural and linguistic competences, and a wider knowledge and understanding of our world. Direct contacts and synergies between diverse cultures and higher education systems through staff and student mobility contribute to the excellence of higher education in the of European Education Area (EEA), making it attractive and competitive on a global scale. The EU recognizes the importance and benefits of physical mobility for students, PhD students and staff.

But opportunities for such physical mobility were completely disrupted during the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite the difficulties during the pandemic, the European Commission reaffirms its target that at least 20% of graduates (in the EEA) should have studied abroad and further commits to enable all learners to acquire international and intercultural competences through the internationalization of curricula and/or participation in an international environment at their home institutions and by participating in some form of mobility, whether in physical, digitally enhanced (virtual) or mixed formats.

If a person is a student in any of the European Universities – members of ENGAGE.EU, the student can study online in an international and digital environment at any another partner university. The student has the opportunity to follow a shared module or a course and to be a part of an online international classroom, as well as to exchange views and ideas with students from different European countries while continuing his/her studies at home.

ENGAGE.EU courses or modules are conducted online. Courses and exams are also conducted in online environment and upon successful completion, the student receives a transcript of records with ECTS credits<sup>42</sup>, which he/she can potentially transfer to the study program at his/her ENGAGE.EU home university, if the home university's regulations allow it.

All the necessary information about the application process and the online courses or modules offered by the partner universities are explained in details in the ENGAGE.EU channels. Also, they are published in partner universities' own information channels. This information covers: application deadline, application documents, ranking and selection criteria, registration for a given PhD course,

<sup>40</sup> ENGAGE.EU, 2024, Open PhD and Research Opportunities in Spring 2024, 19 April 2024, <<https://www.engageuniversity.eu/2024/04/19/open-phd-and-research-opportunities-in-spring-2024/>>

<sup>41</sup> EHEAROME2020, 2020, Rome Ministerial Communiqué, 19 November 2020, p. 6, <[https://www.ehea.info/Upload/Rome\\_Ministerial\\_Communique.pdf](https://www.ehea.info/Upload/Rome_Ministerial_Communique.pdf)>

<sup>42</sup> European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) credits.



frequently asked questions (Q&A), contacts, and additional information. The student should contact an academic advisor or the mobility office (Erasmus office) at his/her home university with questions about recognition and how to combine this with his/her studies at home. Such is the example of the Tilburg University's (Netherlands) exchange programs within the ENGAGE.EU alliance, published at the following link: <https://www.tilburguniversity.edu/education/exchange-programs/engage>.

Through the Online Exchange Initiative (OEI) within ENGAGE.EU, students can follow individual semester courses in a digital environment online at member universities of the alliance. Course proposals are published in the ENGAGE.EU Course Catalog on the central website of the ENGAGE.EU alliance: <https://coursecatalog.engageuniversity.eu/>.

Information about the OEI within the framework of ENGAGE.EU is also published on the UNWE's website: <https://www.unwe.bg/engageeu/en/pages/21684/online-exchange-initiative.html>.

One of the first important tasks regarding transnational cooperation and mobility in the field of training of PhD students in the ENGAGE.EU alliance is related to the mapping of doctoral courses (Mapping of PhD courses) offered by all higher education institutions in the alliance. Mapping requires reaching out and gathering information from all institutions in the alliance about the doctoral courses they offer, with the aim of compiling an initial list of doctoral courses that could potentially be open across the alliance.

On this basis, we proceed to compile and publish a single initial list – a catalog of doctoral courses from all higher education institutions in the ENGAGE.EU alliance (PhD Course Catalog). The work task named “Opening the catalog of doctoral courses” means preparing a preliminary catalog of the courses/activities at the doctoral level in all partner universities. These results indicate the PhD courses that could be opened in the future across the alliance. The catalog is subject to an annual update.

For the fulfillment of this task, summarized information has been collected for all doctoral courses that the UNWE offers for PhD students, namely:

1. “Methodology of scientific research” course;
2. “Academic writing” course;
3. “Quantitative research methods” course;
4. “Statistical data analysis” course;
5. “Economics” course.

The information for each doctoral course covers the following:

- Description (annotation) of the course;
- Course coding;
- Teaching methods – face-to-face, online or hybrid (in the case of the UNWE – hybrid), etc.;
- Period of the doctoral course, including academic year, semester, start and end date of the course;
- Number of ECTS credits each doctoral course carries;
- Language of instruction (in the case of the UNWE, the language of instruction is only Bulgarian);
- Contacts.

Teaching in doctoral courses at the UNWE is only in Bulgarian, completely limiting the possibility for doctoral students from partner institutions of the alliance to take part in them online.

Information is available for all doctoral courses offered by the UNWE and other partner institutions. It is published at the following link: <https://coursecatalog.engageuniversity.eu/>.

By this way, the result of mapping and cataloging the PhD courses open to doctoral students across the ENGAGE.EU alliance has been achieved. Information and events for doctoral students are promoted in the channels of ENGAGE.EU and in the local information channels of the UNWE. Email invitations are also sent to all PhD students in the UNWE.

Another important pilot task related to the transnational cooperation and mobility of PhD students within the alliance is the discussion and launch of visiting research periods for PhD students. Such research visits will allow doctoral students to acquire international and intercultural competences and increase their competitiveness.

Given the existing differences in the individual member states of the alliance, first of all, in the second key project for the development of the alliance – ENGAGE.EU R&I, the definition of an “early-stage researcher” is discussed.

As the European Commission notes: *“More generally, the definition of a researcher needs to be rethought to ensure that it covers the wide range of career options. It must be recognized that, in addition to research, other activities such as teaching, scientific guidance, mentoring, interaction with industry and society, play a significant role. It must also be recognized that high-level research and innovation requires the support of multiple research leadership positions held by researchers or other professionals.”*<sup>43</sup>

After lively discussions, the partner institutions in the ENGAGE.EU alliance are solidarizing around a common definition of an “early-stage researcher”, namely: the common definition of an early-stage researcher will include two groups: 1) PhD students, junior researchers (anyone enrolled with a doctorate degree); 2) post-doctoral junior researchers (up to 4 years after completing the doctorate).

Currently, there is a process of studying what are the possibilities for UNWE to offer visiting research periods for doctoral students from partner institutions of the alliance. Other challenges are related to specifying the requirements for conducting joint scientific supervision of dissertations of doctoral students by scientific supervisors from two partner institutions of the alliance. Possible limitations in this regard are related to the financial provision of such international mobility of doctoral students. The PhD candidate must be able to travel to meet physically (and not just virtually) with their supervisor at a university in another alliance member state. This means that all educational degrees, including the doctoral degree, must be included in all agreements concluded under the “Erasmus+” programme between the UNWE and the other partner institutions of the alliance.

Last but not least is the organization of various joint events for PhD students and early-stage researchers within the framework of the ENGAGE.EU alliance. The last events are the following: PhD Research Workshop and the Early-Stage Researcher Symposium, organized by Luiss Libera Università Internazionale degli Studi Sociali Guido Carli (Italy) in Rome, Italy, in the period June 5-7, 2024.<sup>44</sup> The aim is to stimulate the intellectual exchange and personal development of PhD students and early-stage researchers who will work in one of the following interdisciplinary thematic areas: artificial intelligence and society at the forefront of the green transition, inequalities and mobility opportunities. In this way, it is also possible for PhD students and early-stage researchers to get the most out of the expertise embedded in the ENGAGE.EU network and to acquire future-proof skills for their own and Europe’s benefit.

#### **4. CONCLUSIONS**

ENGAGE.EU is one of the 64 existing alliances of European higher education institutions. Those alliances are spread across European capitals and remote regions in many countries, including all EU member states, as well as Iceland, the Republic of North Macedonia, Norway, Serbia, Turkey, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro. Bringing together more than 560 higher education institutions and almost 1,700 associate partners ranging from NGOs, businesses, local and regional authorities from

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<sup>43</sup> European Commission, Proposal for a Council Recommendation on a European framework to attract and retain talent in research, innovation and entrepreneurship in Europe, Brussels, 13.7.2023, COM(2023) 436 final, 2023/0285 (NLE), p. 4 [in Bulgarian]

<sup>44</sup> ENGAGE.EU, 2024, Open PhD and Research Opportunities in Spring 2024, 19 April 2024, <<https://www.engageuniversity.eu/2024/04/19/open-phd-and-research-opportunities-in-spring-2024/>>; ENGAGE.EU, 2024, Call for applications Annual PhD research workshop & Early-Stage Researcher Symposium, Luiss University, Rome, 5-7 June, 2024, <<https://www.engageuniversity.eu/phd-workshop-early-stage-researcher-symposium-luiss/>>

all over Europe, European Universities alliances are agents of change and can bring innovation to Europe's regions.<sup>45</sup> The target for 60 European Universities alliances with more than 500 higher education institutions by mid-2024 has been exceeded.

The analysis made shows the tangible positive impact that the UNWE's participation in the European Universities alliance ENGAGE.EU has and will continue to have in increasing the international competitiveness of the training of doctoral students at the university. A wide range of interactive formats and workshops are available, specifically tailored to the needs of future researchers – from intensive discussions on ground-breaking research to hands-on training sessions to develop soft skills. Organized events for PhD students and early-stage researchers within the alliance offer a rich interdisciplinary academic program, enabling all participants to acquire international and intercultural competences through internationalization and participation in an international environment.

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