EU CONEXUS

Co-funded by the European Union

EU-CONEXUS Policy Brief

N°14 | July–September 2026

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POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT AND REGULATORY FRAMEWORK FOR ALLIANCES

SEPTEMBER 2026

European University Alliances 2.0: political recognition, with the next phase still to be defined

The Letter of Intent accompanying the 2026 State of the Union identifies "European University Alliances 2.0" as a priority for 2027, under "Social and inclusion". This places the initiative within the Commission's forward agenda, but does not define a funding instrument, operational requirements or detailed implementation timetable. [1]
The next phase raises a substantive question: how can alliances deepen cooperation across education, research, innovation and service to society? Inclusion and competitiveness need not be competing purposes. They can be connected through high-quality learning, knowledge circulation, democratic participation and benefits for universities' regions.
The strategic vision, post-2027 programme negotiations and future impact assessment remain separate processes. Political recognition does not settle the funding or monitoring arrangements. [1]

Relevance for EU-CONEXUS:
Future consultations offer an opportunity to demonstrate where cooperation works and where legal, administrative or financial barriers persist. EU-CONEXUS can draw on its joint programmes, shared services and cooperation around coastal sustainability to connect the emerging vision with practical institutional experience.
What remains open: the initiative's scope and form, consultation timetable, future funding model and relationship between monitoring and long-term support. The announcement is not a confirmed call for proposals.

SEPTEMBER 2026

Erasmus+ 2028–2034: accessibility and funding remain central to the negotiations

On 29 September, the European Parliament's Committee on Culture and Education supported a €47.39 billion budget for Erasmus+ in 2028–2034 and measures to make participation more accessible. Its proposals would take greater account of inflation, housing costs and purchasing power when calculating grants, and seek to ensure that at least 20% of participants are people with fewer opportunities. [3]
These are committee proposals, not a final regulation or secured allocation. The General Affairs Council's 22 September discussion continued the work on the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), with the stated aim of reaching agreement between Member States by the end of 2026, allowing legislation to follow in 2027 and funding to begin without interruption in January 2028. [4]

Relevance for EU-CONEXUS:
Sustainable mobility depends on more than participation targets. Support must reflect the actual costs faced by students, while the wider programme needs to offer sufficient continuity for institutions maintaining joint educational arrangements.

JULY–SEPTEMBER 2026

An investment pathway that supports all university missions

In September, 271 higher education institutions from 30 countries signed a joint statement calling for explicit recognition of European Universities alliances in the next EU budget and programme framework, including the European Competitiveness Fund. Klaipėda University and South East Technological University are among the signatories, acting in their own institutional capacity. [5]

A separate call from seven university and research associations urged European leaders to protect research and innovation funding and provide at least €200 billion for the next Horizon Europe programme. This is a sector request, not an agreed budget. Together, these interventions concern both the scale of investment and the ability to connect education, research, innovation and regional development across instruments. [6]
There are already practical examples of such connections. In July, the European Institute of Innovation and Technology announced €70 million for 35 higher education innovation projects. One strand specifically supports longer-term cooperation between European Universities alliances and EIT Knowledge and Innovation Communities. The announcement concerns selected projects, not an open application round. [7]

Relevance for EU-CONEXUS: The policy challenge is to secure complementary support for the Alliance's different missions without treating every activity as eligible under the same grant. Predictable core cooperation, competitive research funding and regional partnerships serve different but connected purposes.

POST-PERIOD UPDATE | 8 OCTOBER 2026
Renewed backing brings calls for a different funding settlement

Reporting on reactions to Alliances 2.0, Research Professional News describes a cautious welcome combined with calls to move beyond short-term and uncertain project funding. Una Europa emphasises a consolidated vision and coordinated, predictable support. Circle U. warns against interpreting the announcement's placement under social inclusion as limiting alliances' wider research and innovation role. [2]
The article also reports EURASHE's argument for drawing on Erasmus+, Horizon Europe, the European Competitiveness Fund and cohesion funding, with performance expectations that respect the diversity of alliances. EAIE stresses that long-term success also requires participating universities to embed cooperation in their institutional strategies and core activities. [2]
The common concern is sustainability on two levels: a credible European and national funding framework, and institutional decisions that give joint work lasting ownership, staffing and operational support.

SEPTEMBER 2026
European Innovation Act: opening opportunities while recognising universities' wider contribution

On 9 September, the Commission presented its proposal for a European Innovation Act. The proposed regulation seeks to improve conditions for innovation, including public procurement of research and development and the use and valuation of intellectual property. It remains a legislative proposal, not a set of obligations already in force. [8]
EUA welcomed the attention to procurement but argued that the proposal gives insufficient weight to academic careers, mobility between universities and industry, and universities' distinctive contribution to regional innovation. The response points to the need for an approach that supports knowledge creation and institutional capacity alongside market uptake. [9]

Relevance for EU-CONEXUS: For cooperation with ports, municipalities, enterprises and civil society, the relevant issue is how policy can support both the development of knowledge and its use. Coastal sustainability requires technological innovation, but also skills, public-sector capacity and long-term partnerships.

SEPTEMBER 2026
Skills portability: making qualifications more usable across borders

The Commission's Fair Labour Mobility Package, presented on 15 September, includes proposals to improve the comparability and portability of skills and qualifications, develop digital tools, and revise aspects of professional qualification recognition. The package combines a Communication with legislative proposals; its presentation does not mean that all proposed measures have entered into force. [10]

Relevance for EU-CONEXUS: More transparent qualifications and digital evidence of learning could help graduates and employers understand joint learning pathways and micro-credentials. These developments should nevertheless be distinguished from automatic academic recognition: the package should not be treated as establishing automatic recognition of credits, study periods or joint degrees.

2 EU-CONEXUS PARTICIPATION AND POLICY IMPLEMENTATION

JULY–SEPTEMBER 2026

Joint European Degree Label: from policy development to programme-level implementation

The EU-CONEXUS Joint Master Programme in Marine Biotechnology, coordinated by the Catholic University of Valencia, became one of the first programmes to receive the Joint European Degree Label. The recognition was celebrated alongside CHARM-EU's Master's in Global Challenges for Sustainability at a European Commission event in Brussels on 15 July. The EU-CONEXUS programme was assessed by AQU Catalunya in cooperation with UNIBASQ. [11]

The significance lies in the integration of the programme: joint design and delivery, governance, mobility and shared support for students. The label recognises the European character of a joint programme. It is neither accreditation of EU-CONEXUS as a whole nor the creation of a new European qualification replacing the existing joint degree. [11, 12]

The external review also illustrates how assessment can avoid unnecessary duplication. It built on the positive Hcéres evaluation under the European Approach, rather than reassessing criteria already fully covered. The complementary analysis addressed the label's additional requirements and identified opportunities for enhancement, including clearer information about access to services and more systematic use of graduate tracking. The outcome therefore provides a basis for improvement as well as recognition. [12]

The programme's delivery provides the practical context: the Agricultural University of Athens hosted the July graduation of 32 students from 20 countries, alongside a week including thesis presentations and Blue Innovation Day. These activities connect transnational learning with research and professional exchange. [13]

On 24 September, the Commission's webinar "Applying for the Joint European Degree Label", organised with PPMI/Verian and ICF, included Fernando Galán and representatives of CHARM-EU among the speakers. Sharing the experience of the first recognised programmes helps other institutions understand the relationship between self-assessment, supporting evidence, external review and continuing enhancement. [14]

JULY 2026

LevelUP: preparing the next phase of a continuing alliance

On 9 July, EU-CONEXUS announced that LevelUP had received a positive evaluation and an invitation to enter Grant Agreement Preparation. The planned 2026–2028 phase focuses on consolidating joint structures, deepening cooperation and strengthening the Alliance's contribution to sustainable coastal regions. The announcement marked the transition from evaluation to grant preparation. [15]

The policy relevance is continuity. Successive grants need to support an institutional strategy that outlasts any one project, with clear responsibility for maintaining joint educational offers, services and partnerships. For EU-CONEXUS, the transition provides an opportunity to connect established cooperation with the priorities of the next phase, without presenting planned activities as completed results.

2–3 JULY 2026 | VIENNA

Research and practice dialogue on the implementation of European cooperation

The European Universities Initiative Research and Practice Symposium at WU Vienna brought together work on governance, institutional transformation, impact and the barriers affecting deeper cooperation. Its published book of abstracts includes Fernando Galán and Laura Howard's contribution, "From Alliances to policy platforms: European University Alliances and the Joint European Degree Label as an implementation 'stress test'". [16]

The contribution examines how joint programme development exposes the distance between policy ambition and the institutional and regulatory conditions needed to implement it. This is a useful perspective for the Alliances 2.0 debate: progress depends on what universities can decide and deliver together, not simply on the number of shared initiatives they announce.

9–10 JULY 2026 | MAYNOOTH

Fourth European Universities Initiative Forum: cooperation beyond project cycles

Hosted at Maynooth University during Ireland's Presidency of the Council of the EU, the fourth Forum brought European higher education leaders together to discuss the next phase of the initiative. The programme addressed mobility, the European degree, student participation, inclusion, links between education, research and innovation, and longer-term investment and sustainability. [17]

For EU-CONEXUS, these discussions connect with a recurring implementation challenge: aligning alliance-level cooperation with the strategies and responsibilities of member universities. The Forum connected the debate on future investment with questions of institutional ownership and the wider value of cooperation.

8–11 SEPTEMBER 2026 | GLASGOW

EAIE: sharing joint programme experience and the realities of alliance development

EU-CONEXUS featured in the policy and practice programme surrounding the EAIE conference in Glasgow. With CHARM-EU, it contributed the experience of the first Joint European Degree Label holders. The programme also brought together EU-CONEXUS, YUFE and EUNICE in "Cracks in the Façade? The untold realities of European University Alliances", while FOREU4ALL organised a session on impact assessment. [18]

These exchanges place the implementation of alliances within the wider internationalisation debate. Joint programmes and cooperation structures are valuable examples, but their transferability depends on explaining the academic, administrative and institutional work behind them. Sharing practical barriers and solutions can help institutions beyond the alliances use the lessons from this experience.

3 EVIDENCE, EVALUATION AND INSTITUTIONAL DEVELOPMENT

SEPTEMBER 2026

Measuring what changes, not only what is produced

In a 30 September commentary for University World News, Nadia Manzoni draws on the Vienna symposium to examine how alliances can demonstrate impact. The article distinguishes outputs, outcomes and longer-term change, and argues for combining comparable longitudinal data with qualitative analysis of how cooperation contributes to institutional and societal effects. It is an analytical commentary, not a formal evaluation of the European Universities Initiative. [19]
The discussion also broadens accountability beyond the funder. Institutional leaders, academic and professional staff, students, regional partners and national authorities have different interests in understanding what changes through alliance participation. A convincing account needs to explain that contribution without attributing every positive development to the alliance. [19]

Relevance for EU-CONEXUS: Useful evidence connects a starting position, a change in practice and an observed benefit. Counts of courses, meetings or participants can support this account, but do not by themselves establish institutional transformation. Shared definitions, documented decisions and proportionate case studies can make the effects of cooperation more understandable.

JULY 2026

The first EUA-IEP evaluation of an alliance: a reference for institutional learning

On 14 July, EUA published the outcome of the first Institutional Evaluation Programme review of a European Universities alliance, INGENIUM. The evaluation considered the alliance as a whole and examined how its strategy, governance and quality arrangements support cooperation across university missions. Its improvement-oriented approach offers a reference for alliances seeking an external perspective on their development. [20]

Relevance for EU-CONEXUS: Alliance-level institutional evaluation, quality assurance of a joint programme and a grant implementation review answer different questions. Keeping these purposes clear can help EU-CONEXUS use external feedback to improve strategy and cooperation, alongside the distinct requirements for programme accreditation and grant accountability.

SEPTEMBER 2026

A European University Leadership Academy in development

EUA announced on 24 September that it had been selected to develop a European University Leadership Academy with CHE and the University for Continuing Education Krems, with EURASHE as an associated partner. The planned 24-month initiative is expected to begin at the end of 2026 and will develop leadership support, mentoring, foresight and peer learning. Selection of the project does not yet constitute an open offer of training places. [21]

Relevance for EU-CONEXUS: The capacity to implement alliance commitments extends beyond central coordination teams. Academic managers and professional services need the authority, skills and organisational support to translate joint decisions into teaching, research and everyday institutional practice.

4 UPCOMING EVENTS AND OPPORTUNITIES

Dates and access arrangements below reflect information available on 8 October 2026. Organisers' pages provide the applicable registration conditions.

13 OCTOBER 2026 | ONLINE
EHESO policy workshop: monitoring the European Universities Initiative
The workshop will discuss the European Higher Education Sector Observatory's contribution to the evidence base, including data and analytical priorities for monitoring alliances. Registration is indicated as open until 9 October. [22]

23 OCTOBER 2026 | ONLINE
EU-CONEXUS ODSO workshop on the Joint European Degree Label
"Joint European Degree Label: Requirements, Benefits and Application Process" is aimed at colleagues developing joint study offers and supporting their quality assurance. Registration is requested by 22 October. [23]

23 OCTOBER 2026 | PROPOSAL DEADLINE
FOREU4ALL third call for workshops
The call invites proposals through the topical group structure for workshops supporting peer learning across alliances. Interested EU-CONEXUS colleagues should coordinate with the relevant topical group representatives. [24]

10–11 NOVEMBER 2026 | BRUSSELS AND ONLINE
European Research and Innovation Days
The Commission's policy event will bring together research and innovation stakeholders to discuss European priorities, including competitiveness, resilience and the future of the research and innovation system. [25]

18–20 NOVEMBER 2026 | YEREVAN
European Quality Assurance Forum
Hosted by the National Polytechnic University of Armenia, the Forum will focus on "Quality assurance for skills, entrepreneurship and innovation: Partnering with the world of work". Registration is indicated as open until 23 October. [26]

POLICY OUTLOOK | 2027
Coastal sustainability in the emerging EU agenda

The State of the Union Letter of Intent also announces a European Heatwave Plan and a European Water Initiative for 2027. These priorities provide a relevant policy context for EU-CONEXUS's coastal and urban sustainability mission. They are announcements of future initiatives, not confirmed funding opportunities. [1]

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