

FROM THE EDITOR

EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY ALLIANCES AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF EUROPE



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This special issue of *Deeds and Days* is devoted to the topic of transformation – visions for European universities and the future of Europe. As Europe grapples with the complexities of a rapidly changing global landscape, its educational institutions find themselves at the nexus of this social transformation, serving as crucibles for the evolution of individual and collective identities. With its rich tapestry of histories, cultures, and languages, Europe is navigating a delicate balance between preserving its diverse traditions and embracing the transformative forces of the 21st century. Universities, as bastions of intellectual inquiry, are at the forefront of this journey, guiding students through a process of self-discovery and critical engagement with the world around them. Cross-border alliances of higher education institutions from various countries in the EU that commit to sharing a joint strategy of building the future of education in Europe are therefore of crucial importance in times of global change. It is in this context that the European University Alliance Transform4Europe (T4EU) fulfills its important role of creating a long-term vision of cooperation across the various levels of the organizations and across different areas of activities, from teaching and research to university administration. The concept of transformation thereby constitutes the backbone of the activities related to T4EU and its sister project, T4ERI (Transform4European Research and Innovation). They are supported by Erasmus and Horizon 2020, respectively, and are projects in which Vytautas Magnus University participates. The idea behind both projects is the future of European universities and their role in bringing about significant political, economic, and social transformations both within Europe and globally. This vision stems from the need for European universities to unite instead of competing against each other. Consequently, they should search for common denominators, commonalities, and ways to cooperate, which will make universities stronger and able to compete globally on behalf of Europe. The idea was launched six years ago:

The European Commission proposed the European Universities initiative to European Union leaders ahead of the Gothenburg Social Summit in November 2017, as part of an overall vision for the creation of a European Education Area by 2025. The initiative was endorsed by the European Council in December 2017, which called for the emergence of at least 20 European Universities by 2024. The concept of European Universities was developed under the guidance of the European Commission, in close cooperation with Member States, higher education institutions and student organisations.¹

It was put into practice with the help of a special program called “The Erasmus+ European Universities initiative.” Presently, it has had four calls. The first was launched in 2019 with the outcome of selecting 17 European Universities, involving 114 higher education institutions from 24 Member States. It must be mentioned that the term *European University* is applied to an alliance of universities forming one unit. Diversity and complementarity are the main features of each alliance. In general, European Universities are defined as

transnational alliances of higher education institutions from across the EU that come together for the benefit of students, teachers, and society. <...> With financial support from the Erasmus+ and Horizon 2020 programmes, they enhance the quality, inclusion, digitalisation, and attractiveness of European higher education.²

The second call of 2020 produced an additional 24 European Universities that joined the first 17 alliances of higher education institutions selected in 2019. T4EU started during that second phase of project calls and was one of the alliances that was additionally supported by the satellite project T4ERI to strengthen its research activities.

Starting with the third call of 2022, current European Universities were entitled to continue to receive support. Sixteen of them were chosen from the winners of the first call, and only four new alliances were able to start their cooperation. The EC press release summed it up:

Together with the 24 alliances selected in 2020, a total of 44 European Universities now involves 340 higher education institutions in capital cities and remote regions of 31 countries.³

A budget of €272 million, which comes exclusively from the Erasmus+ program, was allocated for the winners of the third call. The most recent call of 2023 has resulted in seven new *European University* alliances. It has been reported that with the latest additions, a total of **50 alliances** now involve **more than 430 higher**

¹ Internet access <24 new European Universities reinforce the European Education (europa.eu)>.

² Internet access <https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_20_1264>.

³ Internet access <<https://education.ec.europa.eu/news/44-european-universities-to-cooperate-across-borders-and-disciplines>>.

education institutions in 35 countries. These comprise all EU Member States and nine associated countries.

The European Universities are also a flagship initiative of the European strategy for universities that sets the ambition to support 60 European Universities involving more than 500 higher education institutions by mid-2024.⁴

In the Commission's Communication on the European strategy for universities, a reinforced transnational cooperation between universities is foregrounded with the aim of achieving the European Education Area by 2025 and a new European Research Area for Research and Innovation.

The building of a European Education Area puts the emphasis on already ongoing cooperation not only inside the members of alliances but also among the alliances for the sake of pooling existing resources, developing a common vision for Europe, and uniting strengths to be able to compete globally on the worldwide scene. Complementarity, "division of labor," and joined forces are parts of the main idea behind the transformations needed for the rise of European universities. Thus, fostering fundamental academic and democratic values with the help of diversity, interdisciplinarity, and inclusiveness will be the norm for the T4EU multi-campus university.

Reinforcing specific areas crucial for this transformation is of paramount importance, as the areas are closely related to the problems the world is facing now, i.e., climate change, societal change with migration and aging populations, and digital revolutions. Empowering the most relevant joint research at the alliance universities is a condition *sine qua non*. Having in mind the necessary transformations that future European universities must undergo, an alliance for future joint research was launched and the sister project T4ERI was created.

Unlike the T4EU project, which is a part of the Erasmus+ program and is focused on mobility, student education, and numerous other joint activities, T4ERI is a project of Horizon 2020 and is research-oriented. The partners of T4ERI are the same as in T4EU. As a transnational network of universities, it must achieve one of the following long-term aims: "Define a pioneering, comprehensive and long-term joint R&I agenda and its strategic action plan with views on aligning and modernising R&I at the T4EU partner universities." With that aim in mind, the alliance focuses on its long-term vision and cooperation across the various levels of the research organizations and different areas of research activity. The mission of the project is to turn the alliance into a tightly interconnected network of researchers. The initiative proposed here by Vytautas Magnus University and Saarland

⁴ Internet access <<https://education.ec.europa.eu/education-levels/higher-education/european-universities-initiative>>.

University is to start a jointly published research journal by the alliance universities to bring the alliance one step closer to this goal.

To develop a common strategy for T4EU universities and to ensure the involvement of open science, science communication, and civil society – as well as public and private institutions in research and innovation – some information on science communication, open science activities, and public involvement in research was collected and summarized from all T4EU universities. Based on the responses, the T4ERI project participants developed a Science for All Opportunity Map that has led to the T4EU Joint Strategy *Science4All* as well as an action plan for its implementation.

Although the duration of both projects was initially limited to three years, the collaboration of all partner universities in these two projects paved the way for long-term cooperation, which in the case of T4EU was expanded for four more years. Moreover, the number of participants increased during the project. T4EU started with seven partners (Saarland University, Germany; University of Alicante, Spain; University of Silesia, Poland; University of Trieste, Italy; Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski, Bulgaria; Estonian Academy of Arts, and Vytautas Magnus University), and increased to eleven over the duration of the project (Catholic University of Portugal, the University of Primorska in Slovenia, and Jean Monnet University in Saint-Etienne). In 2023, Mariupol State University, a university in exile, joined T4EU with the effort of Vytautas Magnus University.

Since the first period of T4EU has come to an end, it is important to not only produce reports and deliverables but also to cast a bird's-eye view at the most important milestones and events.

Start of the Alliance: 1.11.2020

First Festival of European Culture (Kaunas): 04.-07.05.2022

First T4EU Week (Katowice): 09.-13.05.2022

Start of T4EU Bachelor Tracks: Spring Term 2022

First Strategic Assembly: 17.-19.10.2022

First Innovative Teaching Conference (Kaunas): 24.-27.10.2022

Entrepreneurship Winter School (Trieste): December 2022

Start of first shared study program: 01.10.2023

Second Strategic Assembly: 04.-06. 10. 2023

T4ERI still has one year to go. Although its objectives are somewhat different in comparison to a typical research project, it aims at bringing together researchers from the Alliance universities to discuss the foundations of the European university and related issues. It is with this goal in mind that the idea of a research journal special issue has come up, which will help turn the alliance into a tightly interconnected network

of researchers. The journal *Deeds and Days*, a biannual research journal published at Vytautas Magnus University, has been selected as the basis for this joint venture. The selection of this particular journal is related to the following factors, which testify to the fact that this publication works well as a T4EU journal:

First, the journal has a long history, vitality, and a brand name. The journal started in 1930, was interrupted in 1940, and reopened in 1995. Furthermore, it has a broad thematic scope: The journal comprises both social sciences and humanities, a fact that will come in handy for the alliance partners (since some disciplines such as history are classified under different areas in different countries). Additionally, it is oriented towards research policies as a topic, especially concerning SSH (see issue no 73⁵ as an example). This trend could be preserved and enhanced to include the policies of Open Science, i.e., one of the aims of T4ERI. The journal has an open access nature as well as aims, reviewing and language policies, and ethical issues (more about it on the journal website⁶). Finally, “Deeds and Days” has a specific flexible overall structure that is open for a variety of academic genres, allowing for special thematic issues. It presents not only academic papers but also has a second section, “Varia,” which brings in materials from grey literature or presents personal pieces, position papers, and interviews. This open format allows for great flexibility, allowing contributors to share not only their research but also their ideas on issues which contribute to the development and consolidation of the university alliance.

In what follows, the structure of this issue and the content of the individual papers will be briefly presented so as to frame and contextualize these papers, which all explore the concept of transformation, demonstrating that this concept can be approached and discussed from different perspectives – as an idea and notion which has been valid for the present, traceable in the past, and a factor and motor that shapes future societies. Both scholars of the European Alliance T4EU and others have responded to the call for papers for this special issue, reflecting a broad range of European scholars in the field of the Humanities and the Social Sciences. The European University is understood as an alliance.⁷

Consisting of two major parts, this volume addresses challenges for transnational cooperation in education and research, and the social transformation needed for a European path and a sustainable concept of European universities. Part I is dedicated to research papers of an interdisciplinary nature framed by works of two philosophers. It begins with the paper of science philosopher Juozas Kasputis from Szechenyi Istvan University (University of Győr) in Hungary, who focuses on a new model role of universities, i.e. the *European University*, the role that has been assigned for them by the European Council. A bottom-up network of universities

⁵ Internet access <<https://ejournals.vdu.lt/index.php/DiD/issue/view/110>>.

⁶ Internet access <<https://ejournals.vdu.lt/index.php/DiD/about>>.

⁷ Internet access <<https://education.ec.europa.eu/education-levels/higher-education/european-universities-initiative>>.

across the EU should bring the designated European Education Area and the European Research Area closer together, and tie the public and private sectors together. The author dwells on the EU educational system that “is entangled in national and supranational interests” and on academic community that is “experiencing one of the biggest existential conflicts.” The risks of not resolving the conflict are spelled out with the help of an idealized figurative image of Homo Academicus, social dystopia, the EU educational policy, critical thinking, and civic engagement.

The importance of the sociocultural context, which influences the formation of intellectual ideas, is also mentioned in Kasputis’s paper. A specific context of epistemic communities in the institutional landscape of the EU and the many transformations they undergo “due to the wide adoption of digitalization, the expansion of neoliberal policies, and shift in geopolitical power arrangements” is the focus of Auksė Balčytienė’s paper (Vytautas Magnus University). She discusses online information disruptions and dysfunctional communication and suggests so-called internal democratization as a resilience strategy against the problems mentioned above. The internal democratization of the epistemic communities includes concepts like caring about fellow citizens and their concerns, moral consciousness leading to enchanted trust, information integrity, and societal cohesion. The paper concludes with arguments sustaining the ambition of European integration, which should “go hand in hand with moral integrity and attentive and responsible communication.”

The paper on data in legal philosophy and practice, co-authored by Tomas Berkmanas and Saulė Milčiuvienė (Vytautas Magnus University), presents the recent evolution of the understanding and meaning of data and the legal regulation of it. The concept of data is placed between two radically different approaches. The authors propose an alternative philosophical stance toward data as a phenomenon, analogous to sociological jurisprudence or legal realism in the philosophy of law. The paper analyzes various relevant aspects at the regulatory level, ranging from attempts to define data in legislation to possible tectonic shifts in the copyright paradigm.

Barbara Bocchi (University of Trieste) deals with the well-being of children and young people as a multifaceted phenomenon with a focus on the school context. She claims that “promoting and intervening in well-being at school is one of the priorities for schools today.” Nevertheless, it is made clear that climate at school invites interventions. Her paper presents a set of indicators, identified in relevant literature on EU and national policies, that can serve as a theoretical framework for future research on school well-being in general and school climate in particular.

Philosophical, communicational, legal, and educational EU related perspectives are supplemented by an interdisciplinary approach based on human machine interaction. Marcel Piterman (Universidade Católica Portuguesa) deals with

unconscious human cognitive biases and discusses the mitigation of human influences on algorithmic decision making in machine learning. Identification and control of cognitive biases (such as confirmation and hindsight biases, to mention a few) in supervised learning algorithms is presented as a multifaceted process comprised of a set of different methods that are helpful in minimizing biases and achieving more accurate outcomes.

The last research paper in Part I responds to the topic of transformations on a more global level. It deals with technological transformations. Jar Žiga Marušič and Uroš Sergaš from the University of Primorska “explore various visions of technological society, found in our pop culture as well as certain scholarly works, with a particular focus on two main motifs that seem to reflect a perhaps unconscious apprehension at the seeming inevitability of the technological transformation of society.” Employing the intertwining images of the Basilisk and the Zombie to envision possible future consequences of AI technology and scientific and societal attitudes toward them, the authors present technological transformations with a focus on ethical constraints and moral dilemmas.

Part II of this special issue is meant to highlight the idea of the European University and EU related topics, and diverges from the standard academic-paper format by presenting several other genres such as a round table discussion, memoirs, essays, and reports on relevant topics and events that characterize the development of cross-border education and have contributed to the many transformative processes in the evolution of European universities. Astrid M. Fellner, for instance, remembers her time as an Erasmus student at the University of Trieste during the time when the Erasmus program had just been established. She takes these recollections as a jumping board for her thoughts on the importance of cultural exchange and international collaboration, which not only enriches people’s lives in numerous ways but also contributes to the development of intercultural competence. Exploring T4EU’s journey, Niki Stammwitz’s interview and Astrid M. Fellner’s exchange with key figures and leading intellectuals from partner universities present the evolution, challenges, and aspirations that have defined the making of this alliance. T4EU goes beyond being a mere institutional collaboration; it represents an experiment and ongoing dialogue, and while it still suffers from the difficulties that the getting-to-know process entails, it shares a commitment to the shaping of the future of European higher education. The last section, “Chronicle,” rounds off this special issue by acting as a record of key moments and events in the first years of T4EU and the European University Alliance.

As Europe positions itself as a hub for innovation and technological and social advancement, universities play a pivotal role in equipping students with the skills and perspectives necessary to navigate a dynamic future. Transformation has

therefore become a key concept of paramount importance within the European framework. As a process that should bring about long-term change in norms and relationships of social structure, it is significant on many levels: individual mind-sets, collective endeavors and efforts, educational institutions such as universities, and specific regions, and on a macro-European level, processes which affect geographic, social, and political space. Social transformation allows for improvement and innovative solutions, especially for universities – sites where people of different generations from all over Europe meet to collaborate, where education is as close to research as anywhere else, where the model of our future society is built, and where key questions concerning these transformative processes are being debated. It is the objective of this special issue to contribute to these ongoing debates and serve as a platform for initiating the conversation between scholars from the different partner universities of the Transform4Europe network and beyond.

Rūta Petrauskaitė
Editor-in-chief *Deeds and Days*

Astrid M. Fellner
Co-editor of Volume 79