



SUMMARY. As the Transform4Europe (T4EU) Alliance concludes its first funding period and embarks on the second, this article reflects on the transformative journey, featuring insightful interviews with key contributors. Four esteemed colleagues, Prof. Pietrzykowski, Dr. Sonja Karb-Ressing, Prof. Maria Stoicheva and Prof. Ineta Dabašinskienė, share their perspectives on critical topics shaping the alliance: the concept of European Universities, diversity within the alliance, and the broad spectrum of activities impacting university life.

Tomasz Pietrzykowski emphasizes academic alliances as tools for European integration, envisioning them as precursors to a unified Europe. Sonja Karb-Ressing underscores the role of knowledge entrepreneurs in proactively shaping societal transformations. Maria Stoicheva interprets the concept of European Universities as an actual imaginary, shaping the future of European integration. Ineta Dabašinskienė delves into the ethical and value-based paradigm in higher education, calling for a reevaluation of priorities in the face of AI's rapid rise.

The article further explores the strengths of the T4EU Alliance, highlighting its diversity, innovative programs, and collaborative initiatives that bridge regional, cultural, and institutional gaps. The contributors express their expectations for the next funding period, envisioning deeper integration, sustainable academic exchanges, and increased engagement with social partners.

KEYWORDS: Transform4Europe Alliance, European Universities, academic collaboration, diversity, societal transformation, ethical education, artificial intelligence, higher education, collaborative initiatives, future expectations.

The end of the first funding period of the alliance and the start of the second period of four years is an important moment for both looking backwards and forward, evaluation of the results achieved and plans for the nearest future. We kindly asked four esteemed colleagues, all of whom have been doing important work within the T4EU project, to share their views on three topics that are of crucial importance for the alliance: the basic idea of the European university as a new approach in academia, the diversity of the universities forming the alliance, and the broad scale of activities in a university life that is reflected and taken care of by the alliance.

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Prof. Dr. Ineta Dabašinskiė is Professor at the Department of Lithuanian Language, and Head of the Research Centre for Intercultural Communication and Multilingualism at Vytautas Magnus University.

Question 1: The concept of European Universities is the unifying idea of the alliance T4EU. Could you please dwell more on the idea of the European University with a particular focus on your own institutional perspective? What is your attitude, ambition, and possible role in the forthcoming political, economic, and social transformations both in Europe and globally? How, do you think, can your institution contribute to these transformations?

Tomasz Pietrzykowski

For me, the idea of academic alliances is the tool to renew and advance the spirit of European integration. We are all aware of the mental obstacles and constraints revealed on many occasions of attempts to make progress toward a more unified Europe. This concept could be the model for the next stages of European integration and its precursor. Perhaps we should also think about new generations of European leaders, who are now able to take advantage of mobilities and other privileges arising from integrated Europe. These new generations have been and can be brought up entirely within the framework of consolidated academic campuses, where drawing on pan-European resources and opportunities is a daily bread. I find the ultimate goal of the European Universities' Initiative to reach far beyond making single universities stronger.

Sonja Karb-Ressing

In my opinion, the transformations mentioned need to be shaped proactively by our societies, which means by the members of society – all of us. This is also the reason why our T4EU alliance puts the concept and the objective of training and educating knowledge entrepreneurs – people able and willing to act as agents of transformation and to actively contribute to transformation – in the focus of our activities. The challenges and transformations being too demanding to be tackled

by single nations, we need European solutions (and in a second step, global solutions). To achieve this, the European idea needs to be reinforced, especially the younger generations must believe in Europe and in international cooperation, and they need to acquire the necessary skills. Moreover, these challenges need to be tackled by joint innovative approaches and research.

The European Universities create an environment and framework for the education and training of European citizens who are willing and able to work together to find global solutions; and for the joint and interdisciplinary research that is needed. They are also meant to carry the European project and the scientific findings into society.

Supported and strengthened within the framework of the alliance, Saarland University (as well as all of our partners) can educate and train the future European knowledge entrepreneurs, can teach its students, e.g., the necessary lingual and intercultural competencies, the digital literacy, critical thinking, knowledge on Europe and first and foremost can help them create their very individual European ties during the events, student mobilities, internationalisation at home experiences, etc. Our university can also create the conditions for scientists to work internationally, and for non-academic staff to acquire intercultural and multilingual skills and to generally upskill to keep pace with the transformation in society. In the next phase of the European Universities Initiative, we will also enhance the creation of a lifelong learning offer.

By making European cooperation and mobility a norm, we will contribute to strengthening the European identity and to making people experience what Europe and the European project is about.

Maria Stoicheva

Three years ago, almost simultaneously with the start of our European Universities Alliance, I was asked to contribute to a book on re-imagining the international legal order with a chapter on re-imagining the European (EU) institutions. The focus of my study then was different but in hindsight I think our Alliance illuminates an important aspect of how we (re-) imagine our future European university in the context of the European integration process.

Being asked to reflect on the concept of European Universities, I can now see that it is an initiative and a new project of transformation as a function of the imaginary significations similarly to the way understood and considered by Castoriadis in his seminal works in the 80s of the last century. These significations exist, once they have been constituted, in the mode of what we call the actual imaginary or the imagined. They refer less to an understanding of separate actions or practices

but in a way lie beneath them as a framework of “how we stand to each other, how we got to where we are.” In my view, what we are committed to do within the European Universities Initiative and the way we in my own university see our Alliance is an *actual imaginary* of our current state of European unification. It articulates meaning, makes effective distinctions concerning what does or does not possess value and what should and should not be done in a far-reaching perspective. Re-imagining in this sense is interpreted as a process of re-ordering of existing social significations and instituting new imaginaries as social significations which impose new meanings and new values.

The concept of European Universities refers to a wider context in which our Transform4Europe Alliance was conceived with enthusiasm, commitment and a dream of how we viewed the future of our own institutions – the universities joining the Alliance in its first and second round. And it is much more radical than the understanding (content and scope) of internationalisation and internationalisation at home, which have been around for quite some time. Whether we will be able to attain the vision and the dream encoded in our mission statement soon is another issue. As in many other areas, the path towards the dream vision seems more significant.

On behalf of my university and all academics involved I can say that we see our contribution in engaging actively our academic staff in the process, in making a constant reference to students’ perceptions and expectations and their wish for fast and immediate results. We also focus on the consideration of the skills and competences they need for the future of European society, not just in our local domestic and regional context. We also think that in this process, working together and setting our goals high, the Alliance and our dream of being truly European will be moulded reflecting the diversity of content. This is a diversity that we originally embed in the concept of European Universities and that will take shape hopefully beyond what is just possible, breaking the boundaries of the limitations of our contexts and creating new entities which might not match our imaginaries, but which will be actual and functioning with reference to questions such as access, equality and inclusion, curriculum development, and quality indicators to measure learning in higher education.

Ineta Dabašinskiė

The political vision originated from European leaders for the European University Initiative (EUI) is straightforward: enhance the global competitiveness of European universities, consolidate resources, and promote European identity and values. While these overarching concepts sound excellent, critical internal reflection

is necessary for specific university groups and their communities, especially within our Transform4Europe (T4EU) alliance.

A notable concern, at least from my point of view, arises from the prevalent discourse surrounding “successful or competitive” higher education, which predominantly focuses on technological advancements and so-called STEM fields. This pragmatic, materialistic perspective tends to overshadow a more humanistic, ethical, and value-based paradigm that should be inherent in our educational endeavors. Universities, ideally, are spaces where students are primarily educated through a value-driven approach. It is our responsibility to instil an understanding of life’s true priorities, the significance of moral principles, and subsequently guide them towards more specialized disciplines.

However, our current trajectory has leaned towards simplicity, emphasizing the acquisition of material resources and operational efficiency. This has fostered unhealthy competition, pushing aside the authentic mission of universities. This pragmatic shift, initiated in politics, is more and more reflected in the higher education system. The hope that pragmatism and economic connections would ensure world peace has failed, as recent conflicts reveal the inadequacy of global politics and its strategies in fostering dialogue and tolerance among diverse regions.

To make the situation even more complicated, simultaneously, we find ourselves in the midst of a transformative era marked by the rapid rise of Artificial Intelligence (AI). This immediate shift, which reminds of a tsunami, calls for a proactive response. Unfortunately, there is an evident unpreparedness to face this transformative period, particularly within universities.

While universities delve into detailed micro-level concerns, there is a notable lack of intention, time, and imagination to formulate robust scenarios for the future. A seismic shift is imminent, demanding a radical transformation, as a substantial portion of existing study programs may soon lose relevance in the face of an evolving employment landscape. The educational systems, which are resistant to change and secure functions in traditional paradigms, still rely on control and outdated metrics for university evaluation. Existing laws and regulations usually block flexible maneuvers, posing challenges for universities striving to stay relevant.

In this context, bureaucratic educational institutions, like ministries and related agencies, may continue to pose potential obstacles, blocking universities from effecting changes required to navigate the evolving socio-economic landscape. There is a growing concern that the national educational system is still too hierarchical and inflexible and, thus, may jeopardize the meaningful contribution of universities to society, and opening space for an agile business to take over the role of relevant and so called “on-demand” education.

Facing these transformative challenges, universities must have a plan to move forward, while combining new technological innovations with ethical principles to enhance academic life and contribute to global wellbeing. And in this complex life, universities, more than ever, should focus on imparting values that help students find life's meaning, develop moral fortitude, and acquire relevant, flexible, and comprehensive skills.

Acknowledging that AI will assume many routine tasks, universities should emphasize skills related to collaboration, cultural understanding, critical thinking, public engagement, and global perspectives. The events of 2022, including the aggression against Ukraine and global instability, underscore the need for preparedness.

In this context, a reliance on liberal arts education, an integral part of our university profile (although not realized in full-fledged scale), should be reconsidered. Despite bureaucratic constraints, liberal arts education, with its emphasis on critical thinking, cultural understanding, and ethical leadership, has the potential to prepare individuals for leadership in times of global conflicts and uncertainties. The holistic and interdisciplinary nature of liberal arts might equip students with the skills and perspectives needed to address the complex challenges of our interconnected world. I believe our Transform4EU Alliance will find a way out to tackle all those challenges.

Question 2: The alliance embraces 11 universities that differ in many ways. They are situated in different regions; they differ in their age, size and profiles, work under different economic, and political conditions. What are the possibilities offered by the alliance and the two EU projects (T4EU and T4ERI) that your university got involved in and appreciated the most?

Tomasz Pietrzykowski

The diversity you mentioned is a significant strength and a value in itself. It complements what is unique at each of our partner universities, making it a truly universal research and teaching environment. I am convinced that over time, it will become a more and more important benefit for the quality of our alumni and the attractiveness of our offer to candidates. I think that the T4EU Week is a particularly successful idea and hope to see it further developed and upscaled. I also regard the intensive contact between our university staff as an essential step toward building their self-confidence. They can discover that the problems and difficulties they have in their daily practice are not so unique and unheard of after all. Moreover, they have many opportunities to observe good practices and solutions abroad and

offer their expertise and perspective to their foreign counterparts. Thanks to that, their understanding of our own conditions and routines increases as well.

Sonja Karb-Ressing

To my mind, the diversity of our alliance – combined with a joint vision – makes T4EU so interesting and enriching for its partner universities. Each of the partners brings in a large variety and number of expertise, experiences, and excellence.

Saarland University has benefited a lot from the exchange of best practices in all possible fields of administration, research and teaching. The discussions with colleagues from the partner universities have initiated new ideas and impetus at our university – as for example in the framework of the Professional Development Programme which allowed a fruitful exchange of the services in charge and interesting (online) programme for staff. Moreover, the diversity of T4EU allows us, in general, to offer our students and staff a much wider range of study/training programmes, research opportunities, course content and perspectives.

There are a lot of possibilities and initiatives within the alliance and the two projects that we appreciate a lot. Just to mention some of them:

These were and are in particular all the activities that further developed our study offer. The T4EU Tracks, for example, allowed us to create a transversal portfolio of integrated modules and joint curricula as a first step to full and automatic recognition of study abroad periods. This new type of microcredentials optimally complements our options for horizontal mobility with very low-threshold short-term mobility and is a driving force for the necessary introduction of a specific student status for short-term and virtual mobility.

The creation of joint master's programmes and PhD programs enables us to initiate new, interesting academic networks and to attract promising students and young researchers to come to our university.

Our students especially appreciated the events and offers like the T4EU Weeks und Cultural festivals which helped them to experience the European, the T4EU spirit and make friends, discover new places and get incentivized for further mobility in the future.

Thanks to the T4ERI project, we were able to further enhance our Open Science policy and activities.

And last but not least, the activities in the area of digitalisation have given an enormous impetus for the introduction of the European student card, the enhancement of Erasmus without paper (EWP) and the federated mutual access to the moodle platforms of the partners.

Maria Stoicheva

The geographical coverage of our Alliance is really European. Ten partners from different regions and one associated partner from a neighbouring country are working closely. We consider this diversity a major resource for achieving our goals. We know that creating a partnership between diverse actors and autonomous universities across borders, a partnership that can work and deliver, takes time. We need to get to know each other. There are challenges in developing cross-border programmes. How the buy-in across the university communities will grow and what channels will be effective in it is yet to be seen. And this refers both to the partners in our Alliance and to the mutual knowledge from the practices of other Alliances. It is clear, though, that the goals of the European Universities Alliances are far too ambitious and far reaching to be realised in a few years' time. And in this process we consider partners and other Alliances as allies in delivering the actuality of a dream of a European University and not as consortiums competing for grants and funding of action plans and project ideas.

For us, the efforts in bringing closer all aspects and levels of higher education are of greatest interest and our commitment to contribute to this process is clearly articulated. Here we can talk about building sustainable academic exchanges, developing joint programmes, creating joint offices and services, and collaboration at all levels of university governance. And importantly, thus making universities hubs for knowledge transfer to our regions and at European level and drivers of societal transformation. Developing strategic documents for the Alliance is a major driver for most of the achievements we would like to attain, and we have been actively involved in developing and drawing concepts and road maps for our further activities.

We also clearly understand that the long-term success of the European Universities depends on the ability of national policy makers and actors to remove regulatory and administrative hurdles. Our higher education systems in the Alliance partners are diverse in regulations and practices, resulting from the historical building of our national systems. Now we need to consider in our Alliances what new rules are needed and how we can create a new environment for deeper integration and collaborations while still respecting our traditions and rules. And in finding these models, which can be beneficial for most of our academic communities and students, we are also co-creators with all other Alliances under the European Universities Initiative.

Ineta Dabašinskiene

The collaborative potential inherent in our partnership is significant because of our rich differences. These differences manifest across various dimensions, including regional origins, distinct historical and cultural trajectories, divergent linguistic

practices, and institutional cultures. It is my conviction that these distinctions collectively form the foundation of our strength, allowing for mutual complementarity, shared learning, and collaborative synergy. Our individualized spheres of study and research contribute to our collective distinctiveness, providing us an exciting perspective for both students and scholars.

The cumulative achievements over the past three years are remarkable and already demonstrate a transformative phenomenon. The cohesion among the consortium of 11 universities has surpassed prior expectations, facilitating the realization of numerous joint projects and the seamless organization of diverse events. These efforts embrace a spectrum of events and activities, such as academic conferences, hackathons, short mobility weeks, dual lectures, teacher exchange programs, summer schools, and cultural festivals. Vytautas Magnus University has actively engaged in these multifaceted activities, demonstrating successful coordination and organization.

Undoubtedly, the intricacies associated with managing such a diverse, thus, complex, collaborative framework pose challenges that demand a diverse set of skills. Yet, the value derived from these efforts is already evident. Witnessing the joy and satisfaction reflected in the eyes of participating students and colleagues, establishing meaningful connections that evolve into long-lasting friendships, and hearing students express a desire to participate in successive Transform4Europe (T4EU) events demonstrate gratifying results.

Finally, I firmly believe in close collaboration and its positive trajectory for our shared future. However, this optimism is accompanied by an imperative to imagine this future through a lens of ambition, creativity, innovation, and shared commitment.

*Question 3: Each university is involved in several areas: teaching, research, administration, cultural activities, student and teacher mobility. Each university should bond with regions and social partners from the regions. In T4EU we have worked on most of these areas; and more **collaboration** is foreseen for the nearest future. What have you benefited from the alliance so far and what is the specific input of your university? What are your specific expectations and desires for the next funding period?*

Tomasz Pietrzykowski

For the University of Silesia, the important breakthrough was getting our administrative staff involved in international collaboration on a much larger scale than it used to take place before. We have managed to make our colleagues think about themselves as part of an international community that needs to be taken into

account in more and more regular decision-making processes. Our weakness in this regard is still a relatively narrow number of people at the university personally involved in the alliance's workings. Seen from another point of view, however, the number is high compared to the average international collaboration project. We recently counted direct beneficiaries of mobility actions within T4EU, and it turned out to be almost a thousand people during the first period of T4EU's existence. Despite the pandemic blocking us for more than half of that period! However, that same number is still low when compared with the total number of staff and students at our universities, which amounts to dozens of thousands of people. We have gone a long way together and done it relatively quickly. Our progress in the tough time of the pandemic, lockdowns, and mobility restrictions is impressive. But there is a much longer way ahead of us. I am positive, though, that rolling out our initiatives during the next funding period will make the T4EU a well-recognizable and familiar brand within and well beyond our academic communities.

Sonja Karb-Ressing

As already partly outlined in my answer to question 2, Saarland University has benefitted from a lot of initiatives and dynamics within the alliance – mainly in the fields of new study offers and innovative teaching, enhanced efforts in the regulations for the registration and enrolment of short-term and virtual mobility, the development of programmes and activities in the field of Open Science and the enhancement of the Erasmus without papers initiative and the European student card.

In my opinion, one of the most important strengths that Saarland University has been able to bring to the alliance and its further development is its many years of experience in coordinating such a highly integrated partnership: Saarland University initiated and for many years coordinated the University of the Greater Region, a regional cross-border pioneering University Alliance. And of course, this long-standing experience fitted in very well with the coordinating role of the UdS for the alliance. In addition, we have contributed our experience and best practices in the field of internationalisation of study programmes to the work of the alliance. Saarland University has a large portfolio of degree programmes with joint, double and multiple degrees. And our Europaicum certificate was one model of how to implement our T4EU tracks.

Our most important expectations for next funding period are certainly:

- the upscaling of the offers developed so far,
- the involvement of more and more students, staff and scientists and their growing identification with T4EU,

- the filling of the T4EU with life by creating more academic and scientific bi-, tri- and multilateral networks from bottom-up through, e.g., the planned “Matchmaking for Excellence” initiative,
- and enhanced activities within the Transformation labs as innovative and co-creative cooperation platforms for researchers, students, and external stakeholders.

It takes time to consolidate an alliance with such ambitious visions. But we are on the very right track and, above all, the trust between the partners is one of the biggest gains from the pilot phase and our foundation for the future.

Maria Stoicheva

As already mentioned, building sustainable academic exchanges, developing joint programmes, creating joint offices and services, collaboration at the highest levels of university governance are among the main areas in which deeper understanding of the context and also more concrete and directed efforts in the next funding period are needed. We are ready and willing to put more effort into these areas and attain a real breakthrough. We have developed ambitious strategic documents and we have shared the potential for contribution to our goals. We believe and we are convinced that the Alliance can contribute significantly to making universities hubs for knowledge transfer in our regions and at European level and drivers of societal transformation.

Our main expectation is that the next four years will contribute to creating real bonds at an institutional, academic and personal level and will address the common challenges we face. My expectation is that our work will bring in more understanding in dealing with challenges even when they do not clearly match those faced by other institutions. Creating these bonds will ensure the potential for real sustainability.

Our expectation is about more and more intense collaborative work at all levels. For example, there is the potential for working together at the highest level in governance via the rotating presidency. We will contribute to more intense collaboration at the academic level with more academic teaching staff and young colleagues involved and a more vocal presence of students. At the administrative level, the joint offices can be critical in shaping the effective model of collaboration in the context of diversity of rules and practices.

Will four years of collaborative work be enough for making our European Universities Alliance part of our academic university life? It is hard to say. Will we find ways to present to, involve and engage students and teaching staff in various T4EU activities so that they become a critical mass for transformation? It is early to definitely say we will. Will we observe a higher level of research collaboration and

generation of knowledge benefitting society, the regions, the cities and Europe as a whole? We definitely are very active in this.

These bonds are particularly important. If I go back to the beginning of my reflection, I should emphasize again that they are important because imaginaries and our imaginary of the European University should be and is collective. It needs to be shared by a large group of people and it should constitute a repertoire in which large groups of people play a part. This means that a European University exists when a significant number of people in a university community consider (imagine) themselves to form a European University community, or behave as if they have formed one. If it has a place in academics' mental maps experienced through their relations, then we can consider that the European University is called into being and given identity and meaning.

Ineta Dabašinskiė

I would like to emphasize again that this alliance stands out distinctly from previous collaborations, as it is not confined by a specific time frame but rather seems to become our destiny – a shared journey of living, working, and creating together for the future. We have started to establish ties between teachers, researchers, and non-academic staff, as well as students, but it is obvious that both individuals and universities must seek out their unique meaning and interest that resonates authentically in this collaboration. Additionally, I shall mention that we still lack a more active networking with our social partners in the regions, as they are very important and might bring more and diverse expertise into academic life, but especially in research and development.

While all these activities mark just the beginning, I am optimistic about the emergence of further exceptional initiatives within our groups as more diverse individuals come together. I firmly believe in the power of social bonds and networking, as the convergence of minds tends to spark brilliant ideas. We need freedom to cultivate ideas, experiment, pilot initiatives, but also to fail and try again – all integral aspects of the normal developmental process, and I am confident that this process will bring brilliant results. Let's hope that the relentless stream of paperwork, reports, and bureaucratic activities won't stop our enthusiasm.

In conclusion, notwithstanding the global, regional, or institutional challenges, I am confident that we will navigate our way through. The collective resilience and determination will undoubtedly pave the path forward.

We would like to thank all interviewees for their time and valuable perspectives on the T4EU Alliance journey so far. In accordance with what has been discussed above, we are positive that the new funding period will provide more opportunities to form even stronger bonds and work on the areas that need further development.

Edited by Niki Stammwitz

EUROPOS UNIVERSITETŲ PRADMENŲ PUOSELĖJIMAS: KETURI INTERVIU APIE
ALJANSO *TRANSFORM4EUROPE* LIGŠIOLINĘ KELIONĘ

SANTRAUKA. Aljansui „Transform4Europe“ (T4EU) baigus pirmąjį finansavimo laikotarpį ir pradėdant antrąjį aptariama pertvarkos kelionė. Keturi gerbiami kolegos – Tomaszas Pietrzykowski, Sonja Karb-Ressing, Maria Stoicheva ir Ineta Dabašinskienė – dalijasi savo požiūriais į svarbiausias aljanso formavimo temas: Europos universitetų koncepciją, aljanso įvairovę ir platų veiklos, darančios įtaką universitetų gyvenimui, spektrą.

Tomaszas Pietrzykowski pabrėžia, kad akademiniai aljansai yra Europos integracijos priemonės ir išsivaizduoja juos kaip vieningos Europos pirmtakus. Sonja Karb-Ressing akcentuoja žinių verslininkų vaidmenį prisidedant prie visuomenės pokyčių. Maria Stoicheva interpretuoja Europos universitetų sąvoką kaip aktualų išsivaizdavimą, formuojantį Europos integracijos ateitį. Ineta Dabašinskienė gilinaisi į etinę ir vertybinę aukštojo mokslo paradigmą, ragina perkainoti prioritetus sparčiai populiarėjant dirbtiniam intelektui.

Toliau straipsnyje nagrinėjamos T4EU aljanso stiprybės, pabrėžiama jo įvairovė, inovatyvios programos ir bendradarbiavimo iniciatyvos, padedančios įveikti regioninius, kultūrinius ir institucinius skirtumus. Autoriai išsako savo lūkesčius kitam finansavimo laikotarpiui, numato gilesnę integraciją, tvarius akademinis mainus ir aktyvesnį bendradarbiavimą su socialiniais partneriais.

RAKTAŽODŽIAI: aljansas „Transform4Europe“, Europos universitetai, akademinis bendradarbiavimas, įvairovė, visuomenės transformacija, etinis švietimas, dirbtinis intelektas, aukštasis mokslas, bendradarbiavimo iniciatyvos, ateities lūkesčiai.