

**SUMMARY.** In this interview, two professors and administrators who have been instrumental in shaping Saarland University's university alliances recall the visionary ideals of Macron's speech, which laid the groundwork for European university alliances. They also talk about the complicated reality and bureaucratic challenges that collaboration between different partners within the landscape of European higher education involves.

**KEYWORDS:** President Macron's vision of European alliances, bureaucratic challenges, setting up the T4EU alliance.

## INTRODUCTION

In September 2017, French President Emmanuel Macron gave a speech at Sorbonne University, which introduced a vision for the future of European higher education. The proposal outlined the creation of European Universities, aiming to foster collaborative academic spaces beyond national borders.<sup>1</sup> Calling on universities to act as motors of Europe's cultural renewal, Macron envisioned European universities as partner universities that should not only engage in ambitious joint research projects but should develop joint-degree programs and integrated curricula across several countries which offer courses in different languages and encourage students to move between participating universities. The European Commission acted very quickly upon this call, making available funds from the Erasmus+ budget, thereby enabling universities to turn Macron's vision into reality.

Macron's idea laid the groundwork for the Transform4Europe alliance, marking a significant shift in the educational landscape. Pursuing the aim of setting up a diverse, inclusive and transnational multi-campus university, the European Alliance Transform4Europe believes in the fact that "universities can play an important role in European transformation processes by educating and training students, staff and

<sup>1</sup> Internet access <<https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2017/09/26/initiative-pour-l-europe-discours-d-emmanuel-macron-pour-une-europe-souveraine-unic-democratique>>.

stakeholders from their surrounding regions, creating new knowledge, developing research, and delivering solutions for major current and future societal challenges.”<sup>2</sup>

I am very honored to present the thoughts and opinions of two scholars, professors, and esteemed colleagues, who have been instrumental in shaping Saarland University’s university alliances. Prof. Patricia Oster-Stierle was Vice-President for Europe and Culture when Saarland University founded its first university alliance, the University of the Greater Region, which is the result of an Interreg VA Greater Region project, which ran from 2008-2013. Since then, it has become a vibrant university alliance which combines research and teaching. She was also active as President of the *Franco-German University (L’Université franco-allemande)*, a distinguished institution which can be seen as a predecessor of the idea of the European university. Prof. Polzin-Haumann, in turn, was Vice-President for European and International Affairs at Saarland University during the project application phase of Transform4Europe, and it was under her leadership that T4EU came into being. Both scholars have served on the Board of Directors of Saarland University’s *Euro-pa-Kolleg CEUS*.

“JE SUIS VENU VOUS PARLER D’EUROPE.” MACRON’S VISION FOR  
EUROPEAN YOUTH AT THE SORBONNE ON SEPTEMBER 26, 2017

*What does Macron’s vision look like ? How did the idea of the European Alliance emerge ?*

### **Patricia Oster-Stierle**

It is no coincidence that Macron gave his groundbreaking speech on the refoundation of Europe in the large amphitheater of the Sorbonne in front of 800 young people from all European countries. He was surrounded by 20 students who sat with him on the podium, behind them shone the twelve golden stars on a blue background, which stand for the European values of unity, solidarity, and harmony between the peoples of Europe. A wreath with the different European flags in the background symbolized the colorful and vibrant diversity of Europe. There was a very special atmosphere at the Sorbonne; not politicians but young Europeans were the addressees of the most important speech Macron had ever given. In his eyes, the centuries-old institution stands for an idea that was initially supported by professors and students. Macron sees the potential for his forward-looking vision of Europe not in political institutions but in this place. To enthusiastic applause from

<sup>2</sup> Internet access <<https://transform4europe.eu/mission/>>.

the audience, he developed his project for Europe's youth, which did not remain vague, but instead named highly concrete measures. He believes that it is precisely at universities that the critical spirit and European thinking can be promoted through intensive exchange between young people. He therefore proposes that by 2024, half of an age group should have spent at least six months in another European country by the age of 25. Recognition of qualifications should already take place in grammar schools. With the establishment of European Universities, which are intended as networks of universities from several European countries, he wants to create a course of study in which every student studies abroad and attends seminars in at least two languages. At the same time, these European Universities should also be places of educational innovation and excellent research. At least twenty of these universities are to be established by 2024. Macron's project was received with great applause. At last, a politician had developed a vision of the future of Europe with concrete plans for Europe's youth that could also be implemented. The planning for a tender was started immediately. The euphoria was great. Today, there are a large number of European alliances. Macron's dream of at least 20 European universities should become reality by 2024. But do the new European Universities correspond to his original vision? Initially, contrary to Macron's idea, universities were considered independently of high schools, which is a pity, because harmonization of school qualifications would also be an important prerequisite for youth mobility and would make circulation within Europe during school and university years desirable. Up to now, European universities have suffered from students' unwillingness to move within the networks. The European Universities that have now been established make it possible for every student to study abroad and attend seminars in different languages, but students often lack the enthusiasm to take advantage of these great opportunities. In addition, new pedagogical concepts that integrate multinational studies into everyday student life have been largely neglected. At the research level, too, there has so far been a lack of willingness to leave the familiar research contexts behind in order to open up to the new possibilities of European alliances. The T4EU project holds the potential that Macron has hoped for European universities. It has also developed teaching concepts with certificates that make it attractive to attend events within the alliance. So far, however – and here the project is no different from the other alliances – it is not well enough known within the participating universities. Neither students nor professors are taking advantage of the opportunities offered by the new European network. Like Macron's vision of Europe, to which there was no response within Europe, there seems to be a certain deafness and blindness to making a wonderful vision a reality.

## FROM THE IDEA TO PRACTICE: SETTING UP THE UNIVERSITY ALLIANCE

The emergence of Transform4Europe was a gradual process, shaped by ongoing collaborations and proposals from a core group of researchers and administrators. The consortium was strategically assembled to leverage the strengths of each partner university comprehensively. This alliance goes beyond a mere institutional collaboration; it represents an ongoing dialogue; it is an experiment, really, constituting a strong commitment to reshaping the future of European higher education.

*How was Macron's idea taken up at Saarland University and implemented in the T4EU alliance?*

**Claudia Polzin-Haumann**

The starting point for our ideas to embark on yet another university alliance at Saarland University was President Macron's speech at the Sorbonne. Much of what was said there was already part of everyday life in the Greater Region. Saarland University has a number of integrated degree courses within the *University of the Greater Region*. It also has a joint-MA program in Border Studies, in which four universities in three countries collaborate. Macron's speech confirmed many of our ideas: joint courses, mobility, collaboration in research – these ideas were all well received at Saarland University. However, when the call for proposals was opened, there was a certain sense of 'disillusionment' at first, because many of the 'flaming ideas' needed to be squeezed into the tight corset of Erasmus+ bureaucracy. Not to be misunderstood, the Erasmus program provides an excellent framework for mobilities, but it already existed and was well-known at that point at Saarland University for a long time. The grand vision formulated in the Sorbonne speech had raised other expectations from what was already possible through Erasmus. In other words, the transition from these visionary ideas to the formal framework of Erasmus+ posed challenges, highlighting the need for more bottom-up organization and increased input from academic subjects. As a first step then, when the call opened, Saarland University tried to further develop the model of cross-border cooperation well established in the University of the Greater Region with various other border regions. It soon became clear that Saarland University needed a greater number of partner universities from other areas in Europe. For the second application, we continued to work with partners from the first project application and opened up our network to include more universities until the current consortium was fixed. The key ideas of and the main objectives for T4EU were then

gradually developed, so as to cover all important areas of university life, at the same time making the best possible use of the respective strengths of all partner universities. It was during one of the meetings of the core group in Saarbrücken that the name “Transform4Europe (T4EU)” was coined. Over the months of the first funding period, the universities grew together closely. To a certain extent, because of the lack of a blueprint, many joint activities had to be tried out in an adventurous way, in order to see what works well. Building close relationships between different institutions always takes time. The Covid-19 pandemic unfortunately has not made our collaboration easier. But the universities have mastered this challenge, so that we can say that T4EU continues to be a big joint learning process. Despite its success, though, it would be a good idea to return to some of the original ideas of the European university, envisioned by Macron. Certainly, collaboration should be organized more bottom-up, with more input from different academic departments and study programs. Without any doubt, management is important, but research and teaching take place in faculties, involving professors, lecturers, and students.

#### CONCLUSION: NAVIGATING THE FUTURE OF TRANSFORM4EUROPE

Saarland University’s participation in T4EU represents a commitment to the idea of European University and a willingness to navigate the complexities of collaborative initiatives. The challenges faced and lessons learned contribute to the ongoing evolution of the alliance, embodying the spirit of shared learning and commitment to a common vision of European integration. At this moment, the alliance stands at the point of negotiation between the visionary ideals of Macron’s speech and the complicated reality and bureaucratic challenges that collaboration between different partners within the landscape of European higher education involves. The core idea of the European University, as envisioned in President Macron’s Sorbonne speech, permeates the alliance’s objectives on the level of ideals, that is the emphasis on cultivating a new generation of European leaders, training knowledge entrepreneurs, fostering international cooperation, addressing multicultural and multilingual realities and thereby instilling a belief in Europe among younger generations. Clearly, Transform4Europe embodies the complexities and difficulties of international collaboration. At the same time, it also encapsulates the potential of collaborative endeavors in higher education. Looking towards the horizon of the next funding period, the expectations resonate with a vision of upscaling existing initiatives, involving a growing number of stakeholders, and infusing life into academic and scientific networks. As T4EU navigates the future, the experiences and

insights of its members will make an important contribution to the ongoing narrative of European integration and academic excellence.

Edited by Astrid M. Fellner

*TRANSFORM4EUROPE* – IDĖJA IR ĮKVĖPIMAS. POKALBIS SU PROF. DR. PATRICIA OSTER-STIERLE IR PROF. DR. CLAUDIA POLZIN-HAUMANN

SANTRAUKA. Šiame interviu dvi profesorės ir administratorės, prisidėjusios prie Saarlando universiteto ir universitetų aljansų formavimo, pasakoja apie vizionieriškus Emmanuelio Macrono kalbos idealus, virtusius Europos universitetų aljansų pagrindais. Jos taip pat kalba apie sudėtingą realybę ir biurokratinius iššūkius, kurie kyla bendradarbiaujant skirtingiems partneriams Europos aukštojo mokslo erdvėje.

RAKTAŽODŽIAI: prezidento Emmanuelio Macrono Europos aljansų vizija, biurokratiniai iššūkiai, T4EU aljanso kūrimas.