



Europe's International Higher Education and Research Cooperation in Times of Uncertainty – The Quest for Sensible Openness



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Executive Summary

In a rapidly changing and increasingly complex global context, there is a need to rediscuss and potentially reaffirm the principles of global cooperation and engagement in higher education and research. ACA aims to contribute to current discussions on the role, nature and consequences of international cooperation in higher education and research, based on the Association and its members' unique position as experienced national policy actors, funding and bridge-building organisations. This reflection paper puts forward five broad principles to underpin Europe's future global cooperation in higher education and research.

1. Safeguarding the global openness principle

First and foremost, we reassert the importance of global openness and trust-based cooperation as a feature and major strength of European higher education and research. This openness should be both inward (intra-European) and outward (towards non-European partners), while guided by a reasonable precautionary approach. As this principle goes hand-in-hand with institutional autonomy and academic freedom, higher education institutions in Europe should themselves decide how to use international cooperation to advance their missions, whilst being able to fall back on support to identify, assess and mitigate various risks. Many ACA members are already offering such support to institutions in their countries and help revise national frameworks accordingly.

2. Switching from 'global leader' to 'leading by example'

We believe there is added value in clarifying the shared principles of joint global engagement that are both inspired by Europe's achievements and informed by specific local contexts. This is different from the leadership paradigm outlined in various EU-level strategies. It is equally important to strengthen support for a Team Europe approach when engaging globally, albeit without using reinforced internal collaboration to exclude global partners, as this leads to new divides.

3. Taking a pragmatic, mission-driven approach informed by values

While the values debate is gaining prominence (although not necessarily clarity), there seems to be a need for pragmatic adjustment to a more balanced, flexible and fit-for-purpose approach. This can be achieved through greater awareness of cultural and historical sensitivities, and by using well-known science diplomacy tools to mitigate new risks. Europe's higher education sector could benefit considerably from the stronger grounding of new partnerships in social and cultural sensitivities to ensure that trust is built on an equal basis and partners feel inspired and empowered rather than required to adhere to a set of unilateral (European) values. By basing their approach on pragmatism, European institutions and individuals will deepen their understanding of global developments and gain an opportunity to trigger desired change.

4. Leveraging a well-substantiated inclusive excellence approach

The EU vision of excellence that is open, fair, and evenly distributed across all regions, the various types of higher education institution, and the four missions is another distinct feature and key strength of Europe's higher education system. The 'inclusive excellence' concept has a lot of potential for cooperation that accommodates multiple viewpoints, but further elaboration is required to make it ready for practical use. More mature approaches are needed to be able to pay closer attention to the more diverse perspectives deriving from a variety of partnerships.

5. Using science diplomacy to maintain and rebuild bridges

Using science diplomacy to build and maintain close ties with Europe's global partners is a prerequisite for strong and stable connections, especially in times of uncertainty. Likewise, resilience and crisis readiness can be built by helping global talent study in Europe, providing them with targeted support, and by enabling mutually beneficial institutional collaborations. Science diplomacy supports Europe's openness and reinforces its capacities at home and abroad.

The Turning Tides of Global Cooperation in Higher Education and Research

International cooperation in higher education and research has recently been challenged by **unprecedented levels of uncertainty** due to a growing number of diverse, overlapping and successive crisis situations (health, political, military, energy and environmental) pouring in with increasing speed, and that are often very interconnected. These new crises have significantly affected opportunities for cross-border collaboration, conditioning them in an unprecedented way in some cases.

Such unforeseen, challenging developments have led to many new critical questions at ACA, most of which have no straightforward answers:

- *How open should international higher education be during uncertain times?*
- *How can we promote trust-based cooperation in times of growing concerns?*
- *How can we bridge values-related differences with Europe's longstanding strategic partners?*
- *What is the best way to achieve both inclusivity and excellence in Europe's approach to global cooperation?*
- *What are the ways in which we can help European higher education prevent and mitigate global or regional tensions and crises?*
- *How can we improve science diplomacy leverage to maintain or rebuild bridges through the Team Europe approach?*

ACA aims to contribute to the **discussions on the evolving role of international cooperation** in higher education and its consequences, with a view to future developments. The reflections in this paper are based on **ACA members' rich experience**. As national organisations supporting international cooperation in a multifaceted way, they hold a unique position in higher education ecosystems.

International cooperation is part of ACA members' DNA as funding agencies for transnational cooperation and mobility in higher education, particularly in times of crisis. Many were created to foster peace and mutual understanding through education and science diplomacy in the aftermath of WWII. They were given the responsibility of **rebuilding bridges** with countries and higher education and research systems where political doors were not only shut, but in some cases locked altogether.

As the higher education sector is witnessing the multiplying complexities in managing and fostering international collaboration, many European countries had to launch processes to adapt their internationalisation plans by **revisiting strategic priorities based on certain values or (newly) perceived risks**. ACA members are central to such processes in their home countries. They look for solutions to the common issues to foster international dialogue through education, and to empower higher education institutions to achieve their missions through cross-border partnerships and mobility programmes. Such exchanges are facilitated through various formats within ACA, ranging from a high-level Strategic Summit, to convening member organisations' leadership, to expert-level Thematic Peer Groups.

Building on these exchanges and responses, this reflection paper discusses several **broad principles that should underpin Europe's future global cooperation** in higher education.

1. Safeguarding the global openness principle in higher education

The aforementioned developments challenged the **openness of higher education cooperation and engagement**, making it necessary and urgent to articulate a **new longer-term vision** that is both attuned to current times, and forward thinking, in order to support the kind of world we wish to foster through cooperation.

Global openness based on trust has been a **defining feature** of the European higher education and research landscape for many years. At EU programme level, it translated into the opening of the EU Framework Programmes for Research and Innovation to any participating organisations around the world and the systematic expansion of the international dimension of the Erasmus+ Programme.

Recently however, EU positions on global cooperation in higher education and especially research, have shown signs of **moving from the increased openness of the last decades to a more restrictive approach**, limiting cooperation with some countries and potentially introducing external oversight over research collaboration in sensitive areas. The global competition narrative and the positioning of Europe as a *primus inter pares*, has also been gaining weight in key policy documents.

This more restrictive approach seems underpinned by several **core motivations**:

- Fear of lagging behind Europe's competitors in terms of research and innovation outputs
- Security concerns or Intellectual Property Rights (IPR) considerations
- Incompatibility with European (or rather fundamental) values
- Lack of reciprocity or diverging political, economic or cultural interests
- Serious breaches of international law.

These restrictive trends are reflected to varying degrees in a series of recently adopted EU strategic documents with a bearing on the global dimension of higher education and research cooperation. These include, among others: the **European Strategy for Universities** (2022), the **Global Approach to Research and Innovation** (2021), the **Global Gateway strategy** (2021) and the **Council conclusions on principles and values for international cooperation** in research and innovation (2022). Most of these documents precede the most recent and most significant geopolitical context-changer: Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Although these documents declare openness as a default *modus operandi*, current debates almost exclusively highlight risks and dangers; at best taking positive aspects of cooperation for granted, and in some cases, completely overlooking them.

Addressing 'foreign interference' (i.e., security or IPR) risks and their implications for Europe's 'strategic autonomy' has so far been given more prominence in **debates over research collaboration** than in higher education, with the scale of cooperation restrictions potentially smaller and less significant for higher education than for research.

Yet the "as open as possible, as closed as necessary" approach has entered the realm of (higher) education too. While this trend may seem more consistent with higher education institutions that do not in practice distinguish between international higher education and research collaboration, it certainly limits the future of cooperation.

This by no means implies that legitimate security or the other aforementioned concerns should not be taken into consideration; but nor should they be applied blanket-fashion in all cases.

Further discussions are therefore needed to establish a **balance between openness and reasonable caution**, while refocusing the discussion on the ultimate benefits of international cooperation.

As a general principle, **trust-based, open collaboration in the field of higher education should remain a European priority**, although some safety nets may be needed to accommodate the exceptional circumstances. As the principle of open collaboration goes hand-in-hand with institutional autonomy and academic freedom, Europe's higher education institutions should decide themselves how to best use international cooperation to advance their missions in the context of possible risks.

Now, institutions need to be aware of, and weigh the risks that international collaboration entails and improve their capacity to assess both the expected impact and potential threats.

Several ACA members including the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD), the Finnish National Agency for Education (EDUFI), the Norwegian Directorate for Higher Education and Skills (HK-dir), and the Dutch Organisation for Internationalisation in Education (Nuffic) are already offering support to their higher education institutions in this regard.

Strategic and operational support for cooperation risks – examples from Germany, Norway, and Finland

The German KIWI competence centre for international academic collaboration (*Kompetenz-zentrum Internationale Wissenschafts-kooperationen*) created under the auspices of DAAD advises higher education institutions on existing or new collaborations with 'challenging partner countries'.

The Research Council of Norway and the Norwegian Directorate for Higher Education and Skills have been asked by the Ministry of Education and Research to develop guidelines for responsible cooperation, protecting academic values and national security interests. These guidelines aim to encourage cooperation while helping Norwegian institutions to better identify the risks.

The Finnish national forum for internationalisation of higher education and research appointed by the Finnish Ministry of Education and recently published a new vision for international activities. This aims to guide Finnish higher education institutions and agencies under the Ministry's remit in international collaboration based on values such as the freedom of science, research and teaching, Finland's competitiveness, cultural and linguistic diversity, sustainable development and a nationally collaborative approach.

In future, the importance of peer learning and the transfer of expertise in cooperating with individuals and institutions from countries that fall under the more restrictive approach will increase, and new solutions, for example, those based on a Team Europe approach, and closer agency coordination will be necessary.

2. Switching from 'global leader' to 'leading by example'

In recent strategies, EU policymakers have defined European higher education as a leader, aspiring to succeed in the global competition against other major players, mainly the United States and China, both of whom are important European partners. Accordingly, for example, one of the key objectives of the European Strategy for Universities is to "reinforce universities as drivers of the EU's global role and leadership."

Nevertheless, it seems more relevant to shift the tone to an **equal footing when collaborating with higher education sectors globally**, and especially in the 'Global South', as part of a mutually beneficial paradigm based on trust.

Europe has indeed already served as a role model in many respects in higher education cooperation and mobility under the umbrellas of the Bologna Process and the Erasmus+ programme. The European Higher Education Area (EHEA) has developed some of the most innovative and successful types of cooperation in higher education, research, and innovation both through EU flagship programmes and via multilateral collaboration between different countries. These are watched closely from outside the EHEA and often mirrored or used as good examples. Thanks to their innovative nature, successful roll-out and significant impact, these programmes and initiatives can provide **inspiration for other higher education systems** across the globe.

Leaving the 'leadership' approach aside, there is **added value in clarifying the shared principles of joint global engagement** at European level, to ensure they are informed by specific local contexts. It is equally important to strengthen support for a Team Europe approach when engaging globally. Some good practice examples which could be further upscaled include the European Commission's multilateral dialogue on principles and values for international cooperation in research and innovation with key partner countries from around the globe or the Study in Europe initiative in the higher education field.

Study in Europe is an EU project, which aims to showcase what higher education in Europe has to offer to students worldwide. It provides information about organising and funding study and research periods abroad in Europe; and helps European higher education institutions connect with potential students and partner organisations around the world. The project provides information about study opportunities in 33 European countries that fully participate in Erasmus+.

3. Taking a pragmatic, mission-driven approach informed by values

The more restrictive European-level approach implies collaborating primarily with like-minded partners, i.e. those that share similar values. While the notion of collaboration with partners with common European or, rather, universal values, is in principle welcomed, in practice it is impossible to fully uphold and could conflict with other institutional or political priorities.

On the one hand, this approach would increase the **risk of inward-looking cooperation and of closing doors to valuable global partners**. This is true not only for big countries like China, but especially in other parts of the world, where many higher education systems score insufficiently on the academic freedom index, one of the highest valued criteria. This would also lead to Europe missing an opportunity to bring about desired change.

On the other hand, Europe should not fall into the trap of competing for leadership against US or Asian higher education systems while largely ignoring how the positioning of, for example, European values or European leadership resonates in places with a colonial legacy. For instance, overemphasizing European values while many higher education institutions in North America and Africa increasingly embrace decolonisation, could undermine Europe's attractiveness towards those partners.

We believe the proposed value-driven approach should be adjusted to a more **balanced, flexible and fit-for-purpose** method combined with awareness of cultural and historical sensitivities, using science diplomacy, and being aware of the potential risks of engagement. Such a pragmatic approach could be driven by institutional mission needs while supported by fundamental principles such as institutional autonomy and academic freedom, as established in the *Magna Charta Universitatum*, a historical declaration now signed by rectors of 960 universities from 94 countries.¹

In practice, such a pragmatic approach could, for instance, involve **differentiating by purpose of cooperation**, e.g., continuing collaboration in projects aimed at tackling wider societal and global challenges that cannot be unilaterally solved, including the sustainable development goals, while remaining realistically cautious and having wider scrutiny over collaboration in strategically sensitive areas.

¹ For more details, see www.magna-charta.org

Finland's approach to academic cooperation with China

In Finland, the Ministry of Education and Culture, together with higher education institutions, research institutes and other stakeholders, prepared [recommendations](#) for academic cooperation with Chinese partners. Issued in 2021, the recommendations help identify the key challenges to cooperation and seek to uphold the principles important to Finnish institutions, such as academic freedom and good scientific practice, while addressing concerns over security and competitiveness.

Pursuing this approach also means **improving collaboration with partners who are historically close** and whose values align with those of the EU, such as **Switzerland and the UK** where previously successful collaborations are not being fully used, regardless of the sector's profound interest in collaboration. With its ambitious growth agenda, Europe simply cannot afford to waste the potential of excellent research and higher education collaboration with these countries through its flagship programmes that have proven sufficiently flexible to accommodate various cooperation modalities as needed.

4. Leveraging a well-substantiated inclusive excellence approach

Inclusive excellence is another framing concept the European Commission raised in the context of the European Strategy for Universities and the European Universities Initiative. It can be useful to approach a **fairer type of engagement**, that is **mutually beneficial for different (international) partners**, as already well-practiced by many higher education institutions throughout Europe.

The EU vision for excellence that is open, fair, and evenly distributed across regions, types of higher education institution, and the four missions ² is a distinctive feature and key strength of EU higher education.

The proposed concept has a lot of potential for supporting cooperation that accommodates multiple viewpoints and requires further elaboration to be fit for practical use. Doing so will allow it to build on the progress made in advancing inclusion in international higher education, which, with notable exceptions, has traditionally been defined more by exclusion.

More sophisticated approaches to excellence are required and a paradigm shift is needed, not only to include more disadvantaged groups in international opportunities, but also to pay closer **attention to more diverse perspectives deriving from a variety of partnerships**. Diversification of academic partners from different countries and regions helps to increase quality and makes the sector more versatile.

Building excellence and fostering inclusion through international partnerships

Some ACA members actively use international cooperation programmes to foster inclusion or increase the quality of national teaching or research. For example, the Dutch [Orange Knowledge programme](#) managed by Nuffic grants scholarships to mid-career professionals working on sustainable and inclusive development in specific countries. In a similar vein, the HK-dir's [Norwegian Partnership Programme for Global Academic Cooperation](#) focuses on enhancing the quality of education in Norway through partnerships with the Global South.

Another avenue where inclusive excellence could come into practice is in providing **support to students and scholars at risk**, either by adapting existing programmes (as currently with use of the Erasmus+ programme to support Ukrainian students), by establishing new lines of support for scholars at risk under well-established schemes (as under Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions for Ukrainian scholars), or through the creation of new schemes at national and European levels. The current national initiatives run by several ACA members could inspire a joint European scheme, and implement a Team Europe approach.

ACA members' students and scholars at risk initiatives

Since 2016, the Institute of International Education (IIE) and EDUFI have worked together on both the Scholar Rescue Fund and IIE Student Emergency Initiatives to jointly support displaced scholars and students from Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen, at Finnish higher education institutions.

The Polish National Agency for Academic Exchange (NAWA) has given financial support to scholars and students from Belarus and, more recently, Ukraine through its dedicated Solidarity programmes.

DAAD has offered scholarships to students and doctoral candidates at risk through its [Hilde Domin Programme](#), and the Norwegian Directorate for Higher Education and Skills runs a similar programme for [Students at Risk](#) (StaR).

² Commission staff working document accompanying the documents: [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 Strategy for Universities](#) and the [Commission Proposal for a Council Recommendation on building bridges for effective European higher education cooperation](#).

5. Using science diplomacy to maintain and rebuild bridges

The **role of science diplomacy and cooperation gains importance** as the world risks solidifying into several internally inclusive and cooperative blocks, that are closed and cautious to the outside world. In this context, science diplomacy provides an invaluable tool for safeguarding European openness and can be better leveraged to collaborate with a broad range of partners.

Science diplomacy can support collaborations that are impactful in **maintaining close ties among institutions and individuals** when other avenues are closed and ensures a greater diversity of perspectives in higher education institutions' core missions. The objective of science diplomacy is to maintain people to people dialogue. It allows strategic choices, for example, by differentiating between institutions and individuals while promoting student and researcher mobility to support individual career paths that can come with fewer strings attached than institutional partnerships.

Using science diplomacy to build and maintain close ties with global partners is a prerequisite for strong and stable links to these partners and their wider systems, especially in uncertain times. Likewise, resilience and crisis readiness can be built by helping global talent study in Europe, providing them with targeted support, and by enabling mutually beneficial institutional collaborations. Science diplomacy therefore serves as an effective tool to support Europe's openness and reinforces its capacities both at home and abroad.

About ACA

Working under the motto "the European voice of national organisations for the internationalisation of higher education", the Academic Cooperation Association (ACA) is a leading European association supporting research, innovative practice-development and smart policymaking in international higher education. Created in 1993 as a member-driven platform, ACA provides a shared voice to national agencies for the internationalisation of higher education in Brussels and represents them in Europe and globally. Within ACA, the member organisations enhance their capacities and join forces in supporting and 'doing' internationalisation. ACA also has a long track record in conducting sound research and providing expert advice on key developments in international higher education to universities, governments and supra-national organisations alike. ACA's core membership and identity is distinctly European, 'with an eye' on global trends. The association is supported by a Brussels-based Secretariat that plays a coordinator and expert role for the membership.

