ECIU UNIVERSITY MAGAZINE

YOU

WE

LET'S MAKE AN IMPACT TOGETHER

ECIU
university

FOREWORD

YOU-WE LET'S MAKE AN IMPACT TOGETHER

As President of the European Consortium of Innovative Universities (ECIU), I am excited to invite you to join us in our collaborative efforts to address societal challenges of today and tomorrow through the ECIU University. Our initiative brings together students, researchers, industry, and societal stakeholders to find solutions with the potential for immediate impact. Innovating together with the surrounding industry and society has been part of the DNA of our member universities for decades. We have a strong commitment to develop high quality educational practices which promote innovation. With learners in the lead, the ECIU University provides personalized skills and knowledge tailored to address Europe's challenges.

The articles in this magazine showcase how we connect learners with communities, businesses, and researchers to solve real-life challenges. This endeavor, which began in 2019, has already connected hundreds of stakeholders across Europe and proven its transformative character. We believe there is huge potential for growth and invite you to join us in this collaborative effort to address societal challenges and create a better world. Your unique skills, diversity of perspectives, and approaches are needed in this collective endeavor. We welcome your unique skills and perspectives to make a significant impact together.

Jan-Ingvar Jönsson
ECIU President

Jan-Ingvar **JÖNSSON**

CONTENT TABLE

WELCOME THIS IS ECIU UNIVERSITY

During the first ECIU University phase (2019-2022), more than **600** learners worked on about **120** challenges on real-life problems, and more than **150** teachers co-created the ECIU University learning opportunities. Also, **285** micro-modules were offered.

In the second, phase, since January 2023, **150** challenges and micro-modules were offered with more than **2000** participations from ECIU University community.

FACT
9 teams and **55** participants, represent ECIU University in a student think tank Create Tomorrow, on the campus of the University of Twente, last year May.

GOOD TO KNOW

ECIU University is continuously working on improving its digital processes. That is why a new version of the digital platform was launched in December 2022 and is constantly upgraded.

Participants who do not yet know exactly what they want to do, can go through a motivation scan. Based on a short set of questions and the opportunity to selects skills and competences they are interested in, applicants are recommended the ECIU learning opportunity that best matches their answers.

The engage platform engage.eciu.eu is a clear showcase of all learning opportunities, which can be divided into challenges and micro-modules. Former are courses that engage diverse teams to solve real-life problems using a novel and practical method of challenge-based learning (CBL). Micro-modules support learners and help them fill the knowledge gaps, for example, widen their knowledge on strategic planning or sustainable development.

START MOTIVATION SCAN

MILESTONE REACHED

ECIU University is the first European Alliance to issue e-sealed micro-credentials through the European Digital Credential Platform. Learners will receive non-forgeable and tamper-proof micro-credentials that meet European standards for digital credentials, and that are quality assured by ECIU University members.

CREATHON

The municipalities of Linköping (Sweden) and Enschede (Netherlands) offered two challenges during de ECIU University Creathon 2024: building digital cities of the future. About 45 eager students from the ECIU University member institutions participated in the event that took place at Linköping University (LiU).

Both challenges revolved around how municipalities can effectively communicate community and crisis information to their residents, a growing problem observed by both Linköping and Enschede.

Students formed various working groups of about five people, with many coming from different backgrounds and studying different higher education programs. They chose which challenge to concentrate on and over three days developed a proposal they presented to a jury. They also had the opportunity to attend various lectures on topics such as pitch training, starting a business, and participated in several social activities in the evenings.

LEGAL ROADMAP

Transnational university alliances like ECIU University are facing difficulties with sharing of financial, human, digital and physical resources, infrastructure and services, as well as with their joint educational and research activities. A European legal status can help overcome these barriers.

The ECIU University investigated the possibilities and presented different scenarios for a legal status, from adjusting current instruments or – in an ideal scenario – developing a dedicated European instrument for transnational cooperation in higher education. Several reports were produced.

EXPLAINER

ECIU University:
an alliance of 14 universities, where learners from around the world work with teachers, researchers, organizations, communities and businesses to solve real-life challenges, build connections, develop new skills, and make a societal impact.

CHALLENGES:
learning opportunities where learners collaborate with stakeholders to find solutions to real challenges faced by businesses, institutions and communities.

CHALLENGE-BASED LEARNING:
a learning model where you study by tackling real-life problems – with a focus on critical thinking, creativity and soft skills development. It gives learners more autonomy over their studies and helps prepare for their future career.

MICRO-MODULES:
short courses that help learners develop new soft and hard skills, broaden their perspectives and prepare for upcoming challenges.

FLEXIBLE LEARNING PATHWAYS:
a learning model where the students decide on their own learning path and process, based on their goals.

'THIS IS WHAT EUROPE NEEDS'

'ECIU University is strong, but it needs to stay ahead and keep pioneering,' says Vanessa Debiais-Sainton, Head of the Unit in charge of European Higher Education policies and programme at the European Commission's Directorate General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture. She discusses the importance of European Universities alliances and ECIU's role in the higher education landscape.

In your professional opinion, how is ECIU University doing in general?

'It is doing very well. It is well established and delivering on key priorities of the Commission. All European Universities alliances, including ECIU University, have been piloted and they are now at a critical stage when they need to mainstream all the fantastic ideas and activities they have piloted. Our objective is for the majority of students to benefit from the alliances, but sometimes we see – which is normal with any new initiative - that the possibilities offered by European Universities are not well known.'

What is ECIU University's biggest strength?

'ECIU University is quite unique in several aspects. Firstly, its big size. At the start, we thought ECIU University might be too ambitious because it was so big, but on the other hand, they weren't starting from scratch. The alliance was already established unlike others which chose to start small and grow step by step.

Secondly, ECIU has chosen to strongly focus on micro-credentials. For us, it's fantastic to have a European University that is trailblazing micro-credentials as this can help us implement this approach at a European level.'

Why do you consider micro-credentials to be an important part of higher education?

'Micro-credentials are very interesting because they are flexible and can therefore be easily implemented in the existing curriculum. They lead to increased mobility and impact more students. They can also be easily applied to anybody who needs to upscale and rescale. The world is moving fast, and so everyone will need to upscale or rescale, either to switch careers or just to keep up with their own field.

Micro-credentials are very helpful in order to include what we call challenge-based approach in the curriculum. We believe that a challenge-based approach is needed in our education, because we know that the jobs of tomorrow won't be the jobs of today, but we don't know what exactly they will look like. However, what we do know is that global challenges are all multidisciplinary. We want our graduates to have a strong expertise but also to be able to work with other expertise. This has always been our objective. We need to be able to look at one challenge from different perspectives. This is very important if we want Europe to be competitive with other parts of the world. We strongly believe that this European diversity is a strength that is completely unexploited at the moment.'

What is the impact of ECIU University on Brussels?

'We appreciate that the alliance is sharing their experiences, because this is helpful for all higher education institutes. The alliances are pioneers, but they serve the entire higher education sector. We see that is what ECIU tries to do and that is very welcome.

The Commission has formed the main guidelines for higher education, involving three key areas of focus: European Universities Alliances, the European Degree, and upscaling and rescaling. We have released the European Degree Package, in which we have presented a pathway to facilitate development of more joint European programmes. We are happy that ECIU has tested the European criteria needed for a joint degree. They have learnt a lot through micro-credentials, and we appreciate their experience.'

What steps should it take in order to keep pioneering?

'My advice moving forward is that ECIU University needs to mainstream its practices. Furthermore, they need to communicate, communicate and then communicate. People need to become aware of the opportunities and benefits of ECIU University.

We also need to valorise and recognise the work of staff involved in ECIU University and other similar alliances. Of course, we need people to do research, but we also need staff to work on European alliances. To make European Universities alliances a success, you need to combine top-down and bottom-up approaches. You need to have a strong vision and strategy from the top leadership – and ECIU has the 2030 Vision, which is very important -, but you also need all academic and support staff to work together and to see the benefits of working together.

I hope ECIU University will continue its good collaboration with the Commission because they really feed us valuable input. Lastly, all alliances and their members should reach out to their ministries and convince them of the benefits of these European alliances. The entire higher education sector needs to be mobilized and work on this together.'

Why is it important to have initiatives such as ECIU University and to invest in European Universities?

'We are convinced that that such a close collaboration will increase the competitiveness and attractiveness of these universities. We already see how much interest they trigger outside Europe because the students and staff can benefit not only from one university but the entire alliance.

And I must say, every time I talk to students or staff who have experienced benefits of a European Universities alliance, they all have stars in their eyes. They say it has brought more than they could have envisioned. We only hear positive experiences, but of course, we know that not everything is rosy. The alliances encounter many challenges every day, and our role as the Commission is to support them. We learn from them, and we adopt the right strategy, such as the newly developed EU framework for micro-credentials.'

What is your wish for the future of ECIU University and other European Universities?

'We are very happy to see so many European Universities alliances bringing all parts of Europe together. This is how you can confront ideas and develop new insights by incorporating different cultures, different countries, expertise and perspectives. Although Europe is not quite ready for the European University alliances and joint European degrees, we strongly believe that this is the way forward. About thirty-five years ago, ERASMUS programme received a lot of opposition as well, but the higher education institutions mobilised and convinced their governments of the importance. We are at a similar stage with European Universities now.

We need to be leading and join forces in research and education. A European degree is a way for universities to offer unique pro-grammes and give students the opportunity to experience what Europe really is. It is a way to keep Europe competitive and attract the best talent from all over the world. By joining forces, we will be able to lead in digital and green transition of the future. It will lead to graduates who are open-minded, curious and able to work in multidisciplinary and multicultural teams. This is what Europe needs.'

THE 14 UNIVERSITIES OF ECIU

DENMARK
SINCE 1974
01

AALBORG UNIVERSITY

24.000 STUDENTS	5.000 STAFF

Ranked as the best European university for engineering.

NORWAY
SINCE 2004
05

UNIVERSITY OF STAVANGER

12.000 STUDENTS	1.600 STAFF

Produces more business ideas per researcher than any other university in Norway.

FINLAND
SINCE 2019
07

TAMPERE UNIVERSITY

22.500 STUDENTS	4.200 STAFF

Formed by merging the University of Tampere and Tampere University of Technology, brings together research and education in technology, health and society.

LITHUANIA
SINCE 1922
11

KAUNAS UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY

7.407 STUDENTS	1.754 STAFF

One of the largest technological universities in the Baltic States, offering interdisciplinary, industry-oriented studies and acting as an R&D hub.

IRELAND
SINCE 1989
02

DUBLIN CITY UNIVERSITY

18.500 STUDENTS	1.919 STAFF

Ireland's University of Enterprise, leading for licensing and innovation partnerships with SMEs and multinational companies.

ITALY
SINCE 1962
08

UNIVERSITY OF TRENTO

17.300 STUDENTS	1.640 STAFF

Leading University in Italy for quality of research and education. At the center of the economic and social innovation in the Trentino region.

SWEDEN
SINCE 1975
12

LINKÖPING UNIVERSITY

40.400 STUDENTS	4.500 STAFF

In close collaboration with business and society, LiU is an innovator in education and research. Ranked among the top 2% in the world in international university rankings.

FRANCE
SINCE 1957
03

INSTITUT NATIONAL DES SCIENCES APPLIQUÉES

20.000 STUDENTS	3.500 STAFF

Since they were created, INSA Group and its schools have implement a model based on innovation and diversity, invented by one of its founders, the philosopher Gaston Berger

POLAND
SINCE 1945
09

LODZ UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY

10.227 STUDENTS	2.610 STAFF

The 4th most frequently chosen university in Poland, known for innovative teaching methods, and the 1st one in Europe to have implemented the Mobility Window.

GERMANY
SINCE 1978
13

HAMBURG UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY

7.620 STUDENTS	708 STAFF

Offers one of the top 5 combined Management and Engineering study degree programs in Germany.

MEXICO
SINCE 1943
04

TECNOLÓGICO DE MONTERREY

89.641 STUDENTS	10.117 STAFF

Is in the Top 25 Undergraduate Schools (NO. 14) of the Princeton Review's Top Schools for Entrepreneurship Studies for 2018.

PORTUGAL
SINCE 1973
06

UNIVERSITY OF AVEIRO

17.000 STUDENTS	2.800 STAFF

2024 Highly Commended EAIE Award for Excellence in Internationalisation.

SPAIN
SINCE 1968
10

UNIVERSITAT AUTÒNOMA DE BARCELONA

42.649 STUDENTS	10.762 STAFF

The UAB is a public and groundbreaking university. A leader in rankings and a benchmark in research. Barcelonian and Catalan. Supportive, diverse, sustainable and participative. With a campus!

NETHERLANDS
SINCE 1964
14

UNIVERSITY OF TWENTE

11.000 STUDENTS	2.950 STAFF

Europe's most entrepreneurial university with more than 700 spin-offs.

'WE ARE SHIFTING THE MINDSET'

Developing co-constructed micro-credentials with industry and societal stakeholders is a key element of ECIU University. Mairéad Nic Giolla Mhichíl is closely involved in obtaining formal recognition for it. Five questions for the ECIU University Micro-Credential Lead and Director of Micro-Credential Strategy and Innovation at Dublin City University.

MAIRÉAD
NIC GIOLLA MHICHÍL

In December 2020, the European Commission published a major new report promoting a common European approach to the future of micro-credentials. It is part of a much wider new skills agenda and transformative 2030 vision for the future of European universities. ECIU University actively contributed to the proposed roadmap of actions which provides a strong foundation for the future of micro-credentials.

Micro-credentials are short, industry and society-relevant certified learning opportunities that are credit-bearing in a higher education context. It is a proof of the learning outcomes that a learner has acquired following a short learning experience. These learning outcomes have been assessed against transparent standards.

The ECIU University learning opportunities can be accessed via the central Engage platform.

Implementing new things in existing systems is rarely easy...
'The biggest ambition is creating a mindset shift in the institutions to embrace short form learning. We are winning more and more battles, however our partner universities value greatly their current provision of degrees and diplomas, while micro-credentials are designed to help learners develop new skills and competencies in more flexible ways. We need to show how micro-credentials can complement and help our institutions innovate within their portfolios.'

What did it take to bring Brussels into this story?
'Policy from Brussels is very important to us it has really pushed the agenda forward. Continuing EU support is needed, such as in funding

calls, having micro-credentials included is critical. It allows us to support from an educational perspective what is needed to get done in our institutions, deliver to learners and innovate at the same time. It is really like a culture change. National structures and approaches are not always in line with European ambitions. Support is also needed at a national level to ensure that there is consistency across Europe for things like the recognition of the credits.'

This is where we hit the I of ECIU, Innovation, how do you get everyone on board?
'We do this through constructive conversations, examples and good dialogues. The best part is that we all want to go in the same direction as we have signed up to the ECIU, so we are reading the same book, however I think we need to accept that some institutions are reading quicker than others, but thankfully we all share the same values and that is the foundation on which we continue to build in the ECIU.'

Is ECIU University leading the way?
'We do get a lot of questions from other universities, and university alliances asking us about how we are doing that. In addition, we have also written three white papers on

this topic. At our online presentation of the paper *Paving the road for the micro-credentials movement,* there were more than 300 participants and we showed how a university alliance can issue micro-credentials on behalf of alliance members through the European Digital Credential Platform. There's a lot of interest in it, and from that point of view, we are leading the way.'

What do we do well?
We learn well and quickly. We are never done, we are still learning, but what we've done very precisely, for example, is establish good processes and a sound basis for micro-credentialling and the issuing of micro-credentials underpinned by a competency taxonomy and

linked to skills framework. That forms the basis of ECIU Micro-credentials. To do this, we use the ESCO framework, the European classification of skills. They are clear and recognizable descriptions of your skills and this will support our learners in the labour market. Another feature we offer to learners is a motivation scan. Learners who are interested in following a micro-module or a challenge answer ten questions that will give them an impression of their wishes and ambitions. We link these to the learning opportunities that ECIU University can offer them in that area.'

What is your advice to other higher education institutions?
Move beyond the point of fear of missing out with respect to micro-credentials. It is important that you think carefully about the why, the drivers i.e. why should you offer micro-credentials as an educational institution. What added value will they bring to your institution? Also look at the strengths of your institution, what are they and in which sector are you distinctive? Once this is clear, and you establish demand, micro-credentials may add value for you, please do remember though to design and co-design micro-credentials to meet the needs of learners, industry and other stakeholders.'

'WE NEED THE SAME SPIRIT THAT MADE US SUCCESSFUL SO FAR'

Shelaa Kiiskilä is a researcher at Tampere University completely focused on micro-credentials, their issuance and everything related to it. At ECIU University, she works on the development and implementation of these mini-degrees.

TEXT SANDRA POOL

PHOTO OWN PICTURE, KAUNAS UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY

What was the most challenging thing for you to get to where the alliance is today?

'My focus and ultimate goal were to ensure ECIU University can issue micro-credentials for all the learning opportunities we offer. The challenge there was that no other alliance had done it before, and so no lessons to learn from others. We had to go through the learning process and figure out how to issue micro-credentials as an alliance. To do so, we worked with the European Digital Credentials for Learning (EDC), and all our partners in figuring out a solution and then actually make it happen.'

What is the next step that ECIU University should take?

'A natural next step is working with industry actively in identifying the future skills and competences their employees (present and/or future) need and offer learning opportunities including challenges. I envision our next step would also include bringing in labour market needs and help our learners (regular or continuous) identify their skills and gaps to provide effective learner guidance to narrow that gap.'

What does the alliance need to take on future challenges?

'Same passion and spirit that made us successful so far. We are the first alliance to figure out how to issue micro-credentials. We are also the first alliance to take advantage of features in EDC to add European Skills, Competences, Qualifications and Occupations (ESCO) to our micro-credentials so learners can over time visualize their skills and identify gaps.' ◣

'ECIU UNIVERSITY OFFERED A NEW PERSPECTIVE TO CHALLENGES'

TEXT ANASTASIYA BUKHTIAROVA
PHOTO UNIVERSITY OF TRENTO

The University of Trento is no stranger to challenges. It first introduced them in 2015, long before becoming part of ECIU University. However, joining ECIU University was a game-changer by offering social challenges focused on making impact.

'The initial idea around challenges was to connect companies and organizations with students who could help find innovative solutions to their problems', Roberto Napoli, then-assistant to the rector and the current challenge coordinator at the University of Trento, says. 'It proved to be a very interesting experience for both companies and learners',

Still, challenges back then were quite different from the way they are now, Roberto points out. Joining ECIU University was a game-changer. 'While it inspired an even greater commitment to challenge-based learning at the University of Trento, more importantly, it changed the university's approach to challenges – or rather offered a new perspective.'

'The main difference was the aim of the challenge itself', Roberto explains. Originally, the University of Trento's challenges mostly prioritized the market perspective, he shares, with innovation seen as more of a solution to the challenge providers' issues rather than a goal in its own right.

'ECIU University offered so called 'social challenges'. They set a bigger goal of creating a global impact – and making the world a better, more sustainable place. They also redefined the students' role in the challenges, embedding their voices deeper into the process, and offering them more opportunities and space to identify the issue, discuss it, and come up with a solution. 'It was a very interesting adjustment to the challenge structure because it emphasized the early stages of the challenge and allowed students to contribute more.'

The University of Trento took this opportunity to exchange knowledge by working closely with other member institutions, both hosting and attending other universities' challenges. ◣

EDUCATIONAL REFORMS

Ever since joining ECIU University, Kaunas University of Technology (KTU) has used this chance to broaden its perspectives, offer more learning opportunities and help reshape the educational landscape. The Vice-Rector for Education, Kristina Ukvalbergienė, shares more on how this journey has unfolded – and what comes next.

For KTU, joining ECIU University was a natural decision due to their shared goals and values – flexibility, innovation and resilience. 'When the discussion about the alliance of European Universities started, we had no doubt about the value of this initiative,' Kristina Ukvalbergienė shares. 'Before, ECIU was already cooperating quite closely in the fields of education and research, so the initiative only strengthened the scope and depth of cooperation.'

'We now have collaborations between rectors, vice-rectors, administration colleagues, researchers, teachers and students on all levels throughout member institutions. And together we have a chance to make a bigger impact on the European educational landscape. This is incredibly motivating.

What is even more inspiring,' she adds, 'is the transformative potential these collaborations have. Whether it is reshaping the European educational environment or implementing changes on the local scene – creating a unique opportunity to foster innovation at our university.'

Embracing new approaches

One example of new practices adopted is the challenge-based learning (CBL) ecosystem introduced after joining the alliance, the KTU vice-rector says. 'We have 78 study programmes – which makes up almost

80 percent of overall programmes – including at least one course that uses challenge-based learning.'

There has been an entire ecosystem developed to adapt to this new perspective. It is included in study programmes, used in extracurricular courses, and embedded into the teachers' training. This way, it will be easier for learners to obtain new skills that respond to their career goals and face challenges that may await them after graduation.

More changes

That is far from all the things that have changed. The flexible learning pathways model that allows students to personalise their learning experience was adapted to reflect the university's goals. It is being implemented in ten study programmes already – with the first five study programmes set to offer a small-scale flexible learning pathway as early as 2024.

Micro-credentials are also gaining momentum. This academic year, for both KTU and ECIU University learners, 29 learning opportunities with 1 to 3 credits are available.

The impact can be seen on all levels – even the infrastructure is changing, as a new CBL co-creation area with a high level of digitalisation dedicated to challenge-based learning was established.

Of course, challenges are inevitable when implementing such changes. Among the few mentioned by the vice-rector are managing the teachers' workload, which is usually higher than with standard study modules, and developing a system for the motivation and recognition of their efforts.

The university is also still looking for the best way to engage stakeholders in challenges and help learners choose from the huge pool of new opportunities. But even with all the questions which have yet to be answered, there is no doubt the effort is worth it – and the community's response is proof.

'The students are reacting well to the changes,' Ukvalbergienė says. 'The number of students participating in the learning opportunities is constantly growing. They see the value, they want to engage in challenges and modules, they aspire to become ECIU University ambassadors.'

'We can now offer them more mobility and flexibility in studies, as well as provide them with a bigger choice of learning opportunities. Through challenge-based learning, we help students develop life skills. In this way, we can better prepare them for the future.'

Even more is planned, Ukvalbergienė shares. Moving forward, the university aims to prioritise life-long learning in a way that benefits both the university and the alliance – providing learners with broad and diverse opportunities on each stage of their learning path.

The world is changing – and so should universities

As KTU adopts innovative approaches, it also brings its own knowledge and good practices to the table – contributing to its partners and alliance's goal. To inspire innovation and foster a global impact. It is especially important today, Ukvalbergienė points out. 'As the world changes rapidly, so does the educational environment, and so should the educational institutions – adapting to the new challenges and helping develop new knowledge that will allow students to thrive in this reality. No matter the challenges, it is important to keep up what we're doing,' she says. 'The landscape is changing quickly. It is changing so much that some people may even wonder if they need universities. But being part of ECIU University is our opportunity to answer this question. This is the way we can change the discourse, reform, develop new, relevant competencies and quickly adapt to the demands of tomorrow.'

BEECAUSE WE CARE

Bees play a crucial role in the environment, but today they are under threat – with bee populations worldwide declining. Is it possible to change the game? Poland-based tech company Intelligent Hives hopes so. That is why it joined forces with ECIU University – through the 'BeeCause We Care' challenge, hosted by Lodz University of Technology (TUL).

TEXT ANASTASIA BUKHTIAROVA

PHOTO VECTEEZY.COM

Among ECIU University learners working on the challenge, were João Santos from University of Aveiro (Portugal) and Louis Dumont from INSA Toulouse (France). Louis suggested an AI-powered application that would record and analyze the sounds of bee births inside the hive, allowing to monitor bee health. Meanwhile, João's idea was to create a website that would keep track of bees born and dying per second due to external factors – a powerful way to raise awareness.

'Working in multi-disciplinary teams that include students from various backgrounds allows focusing on different aspects of the problem,' says Piotr Korbel, a TUL professor who oversaw the challenge. 'With these two solutions, we saw two different approaches. One – on the technical side, and another – on the marketing side. Nevertheless, each proved promising in its own way.'

'Students' passion for the subject left me speechless,' adds Marzena Stawicka, senior assistant at TUL's Language Centre and the provider of a micro-module embedded in the challenge. 'Seeing them so invested in the challenge felt truly rewarding.'

An opportunity for everyone

'Supporting projects like these aligns perfectly with our mission,' says the Intelligent Hives founder Sebastian Gorecki. 'By working closely with academic institutions and motivated students, we can collectively push the boundaries of what's possible in technology and environmental conservation.'

The company hopes to continue its cooperation with TUL and ECIU University, and is planning to implement one of the students' solutions.

'I see immense value in projects like this,' notes Piotr. 'Especially when you have motivated students in charge of deciding how to learn and move forward. They can bring new solutions to the table. And their ideas might prove game-changing.'

'WE NEED TO EMBRACE DIFFERENCES'

'It was wonderful to see how the learners committed to the work, and how diverse their approaches were,' says Margarida Fardilha (University of Aveiro), one of the winners of the 2024 ECIU University Team Impact Award. She talks about the winning challenge and the importance of intercultural collaboration.

What challenge did you work on and why did you select this topic?
'Our challenge was very different from other challenges on the ECIU University platform, which might be why people responded to it and enjoyed it. It explored 'how lifestyle impacts reproductive health'. I was the initiator, and I chose this topic because my scientific research focuses on male reproductive health and how human reproduction is impacted by lifestyle choices and the environment.'

How did you approach working on this challenge?
'We involved a stakeholder from reproductive clinics who gave our students insight into the main problems in the field, the state-of-the-art technology and methods available. This alone gave students a lot of different ideas. It was wonderful to see how the learners committed to the work, and how diverse their approaches were. It showed that you can take many very different people – different in terms of age, background, expertise, culture and so on – and come up with meaningful results.'

What surprised you the most?
'I didn't expect it to be so valuable. The students who participated in this challenge were not from the health field. First, I thought this would be a problem, but it turned out to be an advantage. They could bring different perspectives and see things we might not. In today's world, we need to bring people of various backgrounds together and embrace differences.'

Have you achieved the impact you were aiming for?
'The idea behind the challenge is to produce impact in society. One of our student groups worked on introducing free STD tests into society. In only one day, they engaged fifty students at their university and provided them with free tests. This is something that could be easily implemented everywhere and help us avoid consequences of STDs.'

Why do you think you were selected as the winning team?
'All applicants for the award had to make a short video showcasing their challenge. I think our video clearly shows the benefits of the challenge – and how good it was for all students and teachers. In the video, you can see how much happiness they get out of the work and the intercultural cooperation.'

The Team Impact Award was handed out during the ECIU University Forum held in June in Kaunas. The purpose of this award is to show the entire community the impact of challenges that the candidates completed. The winning team consisted of members from the University of Aveiro, Hamburg University of Technology and Kaunas University of Technology, and worked on a challenge focused on reproductive health.

ECIU UNIVERSITY FORUM:

BUILDING THE FUTURE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

ECIU University held its first Forum with the title 'Education for a Resilient and Sustainable Society', last June. In Kaunas, Lithuania, at Kaunas University of Technology (KTU), more than 200 participants from fourteen European countries came together. Over 80 teachers, 70 staff members and 60 students arrived for two days of unique workshops, discussions and inspiring presentations – with 38 parallel sessions taking place.

The purpose of the Forum was to strengthen mutual co-operation, exchange knowledge and information, develop new ideas, and make new connections. The common denominator was the future of education and innovation.

'At ECIU University, we come together to find answers to the most pressing challenges our society faces,' ECIU University Director, Sander Lotze, reminded those present. 'And finding answers is not something that we can do by ourselves: it is something we should do together.'

Check out the pictures for an impression of the meeting. Interested in attending the Forum? The next ECIU University Forum at University of Trento will take place 10-11 June, 2025.

'CHANGE OF ATTITUDE AND APPROACH IS NEEDED'

TEXT *ALESSANDRA SALETTI*
PHOTO *KAUNAS UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY*

Ryan Wakamiya is the ECIU University Learner Engagement Coordinator. His main job is to get students involved in the European University: not so much as learners, but rather as co-thinkers and co-builders.

RYAN **WAKAMIYA**

What do you think of students attending university today, what are they like and what do they want?

'They want to make an impact, play an active role, find their place at the university. This is what students tell me when I ask them about their expectations regarding the university experience. Most of all, they want to participate in hands-on activities, get involved, voice their opinions, and be heard on the issues that really matter to them such as climate change, students' rights and opportunities, especially for future generations.

We are talking about motivated students, with high expectations, who want to change the world. But is everyone really like that?

'That is an interesting point. 'Many students do not develop their potential in leading the change yet. Their opposites are those who are called the 'early adopters', the pioneers. In my opinion, universities should not limit themselves to reaching out to these students, but instead try to increase the number of people capable of innovation, because that is what our societies need. We need programmes that stimulate a change of attitude and approach.'

Where should change start from?

'In educational sciences, we often refer to the concept of 'scaffolding', which is a teaching technique in which instructors take a step back and let learners solve a problem, only offering support when it is really needed. This model of tutoring provides the foundation for what we call the 'challenge-based approach' in training.

Mobility programmes have always been a training ground for innovation as well. Not everyone has the resources, the time or simply the courage to leave and perhaps be gone for a long time. That is why we now also have short-term mobility programmes between universities.'

For both studying and having fun?

'Yes, because motivation can be triggered by a variety of things, such as the desire to change the world, help people, or stand out or succeed in work. But other factors can be also involved, at least at the beginning, such as having a good time, going on an adventure, learning a language, meeting other people and networking. We should keep in mind that the most difficult step is always the first one.'

Redesigning university courses and the way in which they are taught, however, is not easy...

'The challenge is to adapt and reshape without cutting the content. We must consider the entire programme of study, the 'user journey'. It starts even before students enrol, and we should even think of those who decide to go back to the university to learn new skills years after they have left.' ◄

'KEEP INNOVATING'

TEXT *SANDRA POOL*
PHOTO *OWN PICTURE*

Quentin Leroi studies Physics Engineering at INSA Toulouse, France. He is Student Ambassador for ECIU University.

QUENTIN **LEROI**

'I heard about ECIU University in my first year through a teacher. My educational institution had just become a partner of the consortium that year. Later, during my Erasmus exchange at Kaunas University of Technology (KTU) in Lithuania, which is also a member, I saw ECIU University everywhere: on posters and banners and there were a lot of talks, everywhere. It was hugely promoted. I participated in two initiatives: the engineering project BOOGIE-U and a hackathon. Once back in France, I was asked if I wanted to become a Student Ambassador for ECIU University.

And that is what I wanted to do. My role is twofold: first off, I represent ECIU University locally, for instance internally at my educational institution. We do this by organising events and by talking about ECIU University. In addition, I am the representative of our students to the alliance. I collect feedback within our organisation and can help build this European University from a student's perspective.

At INSA, student engagement is a great asset. For example, I get compensated for time when I am engaged in student activism. And I think that is important. What I learnt outside of the lecture hall cannot be learned from books. Many of my soft skills have been developed, such as communicating with people from different countries and at different levels of education. I can now talk to students, staff, teachers and researchers, and then try to get everyone around the table and achieve consensus. That has been really instructive.

It is my goal to participate in a challenge during the next academic year. I have not done that so far, while I am very curious about the method of challenge-based learning. That is what I would like to pass on to ECIU University: keep innovating, because I think that is where the power of collaboration lies.' ◄

'WE TAKE STUDENT INVOLVEMENT VERY SERIOUSLY'

TEXT SANDRA POOL
PHOTO OWN PICTURE

Marija Pedersen is the Head of Education at the student organisation at the University of Stavanger in Norway. With one Master Degree already completed and currently pursuing her second, she focuses on establishing the student educational policy and works closely together with the ECIU office at the university.

MARIJA **PEDERSEN**

'First of all, the context,' Pedersen begins. 'Our students are always involved in decision-making processes within our university, at all levels. Student elections are held every year for this purpose.' The Norwegian law stipulates that students must make up at least twenty percent of the decision-making bodies of the organisation. 'Yes, we take student involvement very seriously, as does the university.' Pedersen herself was chosen for her current position through this process.

More flexible learning pathways
According to her, the University of Stavanger aims to create more flexible learning pathways, increase internationalisation, incorporate challenge-based learning, and provide education for all ages, promoting lifelong learning. 'ECIU University has everything that the student parliament wants, covering short-term mobility and developing micro-modules for quick skills and knowledge updates. As a student organisation, we now work very closely with the ECIU office at our university, as well as with ECIU University's Learner Engagement Coordinator, Ryan Wakamiya.'

Student perspective
Pedersen has plenty of ideas to get more students excited about ECIU University. 'We were recently in Hamburg discussing the model of the student council, and the students were quite excited to take a larger part in ECIU governance. It is very valuable to have two students on the

ECIU board, because it ensures that the student perspective is delivered first-hand when decisions are made. Students are also represented on the ECIU Vice-Presidents' Education group and must be present wherever decisions are made, for instance in working groups and other bodies, in order to put forward invaluable information. Even if you only have a few students that are very engaged and enthusiastic, their input is precious in itself.' However, they need to be rewarded in some way for their engagement.

Make it easy and fair
Furthermore, she would like to see a better infrastructure for short-term mobility across all partner universities. 'That is a huge challenge right now. The Erasmus+ short mobility grant does not have the same value for students from different partner universities, depending on the country they come from and travel to. One Euro in Kaunas stretches a lot further than one Euro in Stavanger.' Another issue is the distance between the universities: 'Some partner universities are close to each other, making it possible to use cheaper transport options than airplanes for short mobility, but this is not the case for all partners. Addressing this challenge will most likely increase activities. The goal should be to make it easy, fair, and not a significant financial burden on students to take part. I would really argue for a policy on this, and I am sure that this will enable ECIU University to make everything it has to offer available to more students,' Pedersen concludes. ✎

'I WILL NEVER BE ALONE IN EUROPE AGAIN'

TEXT SANDRA POOL
PHOTO OWN PICTURE

Eddie Arriaga Flores is from Guatemala. Six years ago, he moved to Germany to study Civil Engineering at Hamburg University Technology. He is currently a student board member in the ECIU University board. 'Our opinion is valued.'

EDDIE **ARRIAGA FLORES**

Together with student Jacob Blasius (Aalborg University), Arriga Flores represents the student voice within the consortium. 'We play good cop, bad cop: Jacob is very diplomatic and can put everything nicely into words, but , I am not, haha! But together we make a good team.'

The fact that he is allowed to influence the discussions at the highest level has brought him new experiences. 'Our input is important and is taken into account in decisions. I notice that everyone at this level knows what things are about. I can feel the passion. Because of my board work, I have been able to travel a lot. Actually, I am never alone in Europe anymore: I now know someone in every country. My network has really grown tremendously.'

> 'Ask students for their feedback, then you can be sure that you are doing the right thing'

By participating in challenges and other alliance activities, Arriga Flores has also gained new knowledge. 'I have been to the European Parliament, but I never thought I would be there as a civil engineer. I also did a challenge about virtual reality. I come into contact with all kinds of interesting subjects and this way, my knowledge has broadened vastly.' His home base, Hamburg University of Technology, has a very liberal approach when it comes to student activism. 'There is a reason why I have taken more time over my studies than usual. It is because I do all kinds of things besides them. Lectures are not compulsory, but you have the responsibility to catch up on lessons. I think that is quite a unique situation. I hear from other students that they have many more obligations.'

According to Arriga Flores, student engagement is important to shape the future of higher education: 'Students have a lot of ideas: they know what they want and what education should look like. We do sometimes notice some resistance, since in our experience people in the field often operate on the basis of assumptions. Ask students, ask for their feedback, then you can be sure that you are doing the right thing.' ✎

'THE REAL GOAL WAS BUILDING A COMMUNITY'

'The main objective of the research project SMART-ER was to create a new ecosystem for research and innovation at ECIU,' says Xavier Gabarrell (Autonomous University of Barcelona). The Scientific Director of SMART-ER discusses the project's results, the 'enthusiastic collaboration' of all partners and the importance of citizen science.

TEXT *MICHAELA NESVAROVA*

PHOTO *AUTONOMOUS UNIVERSITY OF BARCELONA*

XAVIER **GABARELL**

RESEARCH CONFERENCE
IN BARCELONA

What was the main idea behind SMART-ER?

'The focus of the project was on United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 11 (SDG 11): 'Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable'. Preparing cities for future challenges was the overarching theme, but the real goal was building a community. We wanted to engage not only researchers from the various universities, but also stakeholders related to the universities. These included public administration, small local companies, spin-offs, NGO's and more. We wanted to bring them all together and create one ECIU ecosystem.'

Was there any particular reason to focus on cities?

'It's a topic where we can apply knowledge from all the member universities. However, it was just a pilot which we can now apply to other topics and fields.'

The project is now officially finished. What were its main outcomes?

'One of our main achievements was community building and organising a conference in Barcelona. It was not a regular research conference; it joined together researchers and stakeholders from many different fields and countries and brought together the entire ECIU community. Unlike at other conferences, we didn't define the topics of research. Our call was open, as long as it involved a collaboration between researchers and stakeholders. It was a conference of the future.'

What were some of the topics and projects presented at the conference?

'There were several citizen science pilots. One of them was the BiciZen mobile application, which aims to make city regions more bikeable. The platform allows users to share their experiences and data about cycling. For example, people can share info about bicycle parking, theft, safety, cycling paths and so on. This app now has thousands of users, which shows that you can create a high societal impact with a relatively low investment. Another example was CARE - Citizen Arenas for Improved Environmental Quality & Resource use in SMART-ER Cities. The objective of CARE is to raise citizens' awareness about environmental challenges and alternative resource management options related to water, biodiversity, waste, air, climate and energy. It creates citizen arenas - open collaborative forum bringing together citizens and researchers, enabling co-creation of scientific questions related to air and water quality or energy and waste resources.'

Were all the projects focused on citizen science?

'Citizen science was one of the main requirements from the beginning. We are changing the way we want to conduct research and innovation. We don't start with a scientific hypothesis; we ask the people what they need. A societal challenge should always be the starting point of our work – that is at the core of our vision and mission.'

How do you look back on the project?

'Our major achievement was the impact we had in terms of pushing the internal engagement and stakeholder participation. We acted as a bridge to create networks. People who connected through SMART-ER applied for many other European calls and started other projects together. In this regard, we were extremely successful. Every 100.000 euros we invested eventually led to millions of euros from EU funding. That is a good investment and comes with a lot of benefits for the partner universities.'

Who was involved in the project?

'There were about 3000 people involved from all the ECIU member universities. I think the one word to describe the collaboration would be enthusiastic. This is quite impressive, considering that we started the collaboration during the pandemic and all the first meetings were done virtually. The SMART-ER team didn't know each other at all beforehand, but we all became excellent friends. This shows that people are the main value of ECIU.'

What have been the reactions to the project?

'We've received a very positive assessment. I'd say we have been very successful, and I want to thank all the people who created this result. We created a community where researchers, staff members, stakeholders and citizens all work together.'

Will there be a follow-up to the project?

'I expect there to be more SMART-ERs in the future. We will now share all our experiences and analysis and open a call for other projects following the SMART-ER model. SMART-ER was a pilot. The next step is to integrate our experiences in the ECIU University. It's not just a project, it's a way of working.'

ECIU UNIVERSITY RESEARCH INSTITUTE FOR SMART EUROPEAN REGIONS (SMART-ER)

ECIU University Research Institute for Smart European Regions (SMART-ER) was an EU-funded project focused on preparing cities for future challenges. The project ran from 2021 until 2024 and involved all ECIU member universities. It aimed to develop a new model of research and innovation through an alliance of universities for virtual research, innovation and education: the ECIU University Research Institute. Its goal was to create and validate new models of performing collaborative research in a virtual environment and novel transformative approaches and practices.

A WAY TO GAIN NEW INSIGHTS AND IDEAS

TEXT
SANDRA POOL
PHOTO
OWN PICTURE

The core element of ECIU University is collaboration with parties from society, such as municipalities, regional government, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), foundations, industries, or healthcare institutions. They are asked to submit a real-life challenge for students to work on. What are their experiences in collaborating with universities in this way? Three stakeholders respond.

ALOS Technology, located in Italy, provided the challenge 'Back to the Future', which was aimed at finding sustainable and green economy solutions by using the technology of photobioreactors (PBRs). The challenge was organised in co-operation with University of Trento. 'The teams were asked to adopt a holistic view in finding novel applications of micro-algal technologies,' says Francesco Guzzonato, CTO at ALOS. 'This ranged from bioremediation to life-support systems for space exploration, and from the sustainable production of food, feed and nutraceutical and cosmetic compounds to bio-architecture.'

According to Guzzonato, the collaboration was very fruitful: 'In more than one instance, the teams proposed a radically new approach or new, unexplored applications. Micro-algal technologies are a market that is still in its early stages of development. Therefore, as ALOS, we decided that a broader, open-ended challenge was more interesting as opposed to asking the teams to address a narrow issue about a specific technology or application. This degree of freedom allows the team to explore the possibilities, cross-contaminate ideas, and hopefully contribute to highlighting the potential of these technologies. The challenge holds the potential to create and expand a market in which companies such as ALOS can thrive.'

FRESH INSIGHTS

Another participant is the Mazingira Association, a non-profit volunteer organisation that focuses on environmental sustainability and preservation. Since 2011, the Mazingira Association has been actively involved in the villages of the Kilombero valley, situated at the base of the Udzungwa Mountains in south-central Tanzania. Their primary goal is to harmonise local economies with conservation efforts.

The Mazingira Association was the stakeholder in the challenge 'Engaging with the future: international co-operation for resilient communities', which was organised in co-operation with University of Trento and Linköping University. 'The goal of this challenge was to explore the future of international co-operation projects related to sustainability and education focused on migration, and to envision possible scenarios at EU level', says Silvia Ricci, Coordinator at Mazingira Association. 'By working closely together with students from all over the world, from different backgrounds and universities, the Mazingira Association gained fresh insights and innovative ideas for the abovementioned future projects.'

'The interactive, practice-based learning activities that were facilitated by the challenge allowed us to forge new partnerships and networks, both regionally and internationally. Additionally, the experience helped us to refine our strategies for funding, organising, and implementing projects. It was an opportunity for us to connect academic knowledge with our practical field experience, and in return to allow students from different universities to gain real-world insights into sustainability and migration.'
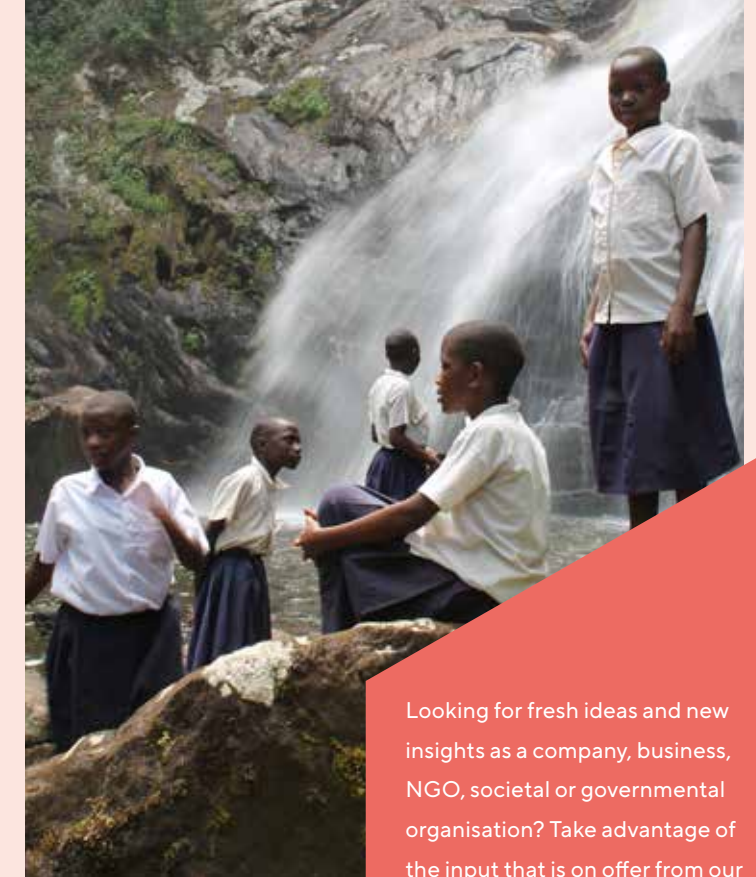
Looking for fresh ideas and new insights as a company, business, NGO, societal or governmental organisation? Take advantage of the input that is on offer from our students, who are located across thirteen European countries. Check out the website for more information on how to work together with ECIU University.

LINES OF DEVELOPMENT

The third stakeholder offering insight in their experiences is Opera Universitaria di Trento, which also participated by submitting a challenge. They provide services such as accommodation, meals, scholarships, and access to sports and culture to talented and deserving students who do not have the means, through a modern, innovative and creative vision on the right to study. The organisation proposed a challenge on university housing: 'We presented the TRent housing portal, created by us with the aim to facilitate the matching of supply and demand for housing in Trento and Rovereto,' says Maria Laura Frigotto, President of Opera Universitaria. 'The collaboration with ECIU University has enabled us to examine the housing portal from an international perspective, to enhance the innovative aspects of TRent and, at the same time, to propose lines of development in order to consolidate its position in the panorama of tools used for housing research.'

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