Hasselt University’s Roadmap to a European University

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Abstract: Hasselt University (UHasselt) recently joined EURECA-PRO, an eight-university partnership spanning seven European countries working to create a European University on Sustainable Consumption and Production. EURECA-PRO pursues sustainability research focused on the processes of resource extraction, production, and consumption in order to investigate the entire value chain of materials and products. EURECA-PRO partners and UHasselt have similar research expertise in the field of sustainability, present complementary educational profiles, and share multiple strategic policy priorities, such as inclusivity, lifelong learning, sustainability, and internationalisation. In what follows, we outline our motives and hopes in joining EURECA-PRO: the enhancement of international staff/student mobility, increased academic collaboration, further development of research/education innovation, and a positive spill over effects for UHasselt’s wider academic and geographical community. As a relatively new partner, UHasselt will invest substantially in communication strategies and initiatives to build connections between UHasselt staff/students and partnering institutions. UHasselt appreciates EURECA-PRO’s accomplishments to date and acknowledges the facilitation of UHasselt’s entrance into the alliance. Overall, UHasselt considers EURECA-PRO a valuable platform to enhance research, teaching, and public engagement on topics already a part of UHasselt’s DNA. At the same time, we believe that Hasselt University has meaningful contributions to make to EURECA-PRO, for example through expertise in international programmes, specialised and rare infrastructure (e.g. Ecotron) and an established reputation as a leading research institute and teaching hub on topics, such as circular economy and energy transition, residing at the heart of the EURECA-PRO Alliance.

Keywords: Sustainability, Internationalisation, Synergies, Challenges, Hopes, EURECA-.PRO

Der Weg von Hasselt University in eine European University

Zusammenfassung: Die Universität Hasselt (UHasselt) ist vor kurzem EURECA-PRO beigetreten, einer Partnerschaft von acht Universitäten aus sieben Ländern Europas, die gemeinsam die Europäische Universität für nachhaltigen Konsum und nachhaltige Produktion bilden. EURECA-PRO betreibt Forschung zum Thema Nachhaltigkeit mit dem Schwerpunkt auf Prozessen der Ressourcengewinnung, der Produktion und des Verbrauchs. Demnach forscht die EURECA-PRO-Allianz entlang der gesamten Wertschöpfungskette von Materialien und Produkten. Die EURECA-PRO Partner und UHasselt verfügen über ähnliche Forschungskompetenzen, weisen komplementäre Bildungsprofile auf und teilen mehrere strategische politische Prioritäten, wie z. B. Inklusivität, lebenslanges Lernen, Nachhaltigkeit und Internationalisierung. Im Folgenden skizzieren wir unsere Motive und Hoffnungen, die sich hauptsächlich auf die Erhöhung der Internationalisierung bei der Mobilität von Mitarbeitern/Studenten, auf die Intensivierung der akademischen Zusammenarbeit, die weitere Entwicklung von Innovationen in Forschung/Bildung und die Hoffnung auf positive Spillover-Effekte für den weiteren akademischen und geografischen Kontext der UHasselt konzentrieren. Als relativ neuer Partner wird UHasselt erheblich in Kommunikationsstrategien und -initiativen investieren, um die Verbindung zwischen den Mitarbeitern/Studenten von UHasselt und denen der Partnerinstitutionen zu verbessern. UHasselt schätzt die Leistungen des Netzwerks und erkennt die Art und Weise an, in der es UHasselt beim Eintritt in die Allianz unterstützt. Insgesamt betrachtet UHasselt EURECA-PRO als eine wertvolle Plattform zur Verbesserung von Forschung, Lehre und öffentlichem Engagement zu Themen, die bereits in der DNA von UHasselt verankert sind. Gleichzeitig glauben wir, dass die Universität Hasselt viel zu bieten hat, was die Expertise in internationalen Programmen, die spezialisierte und selte- ne Infrastruktur (z. B. Ecotron) und den etablierten Ruf als...
führendes Forschungsinstitut und Lehrzentrum zu Themen betrifft, die im Zentrum der EURECA-PRO-Allianz stehen.

Schlüsselwörter: Nachhaltigkeit, Internationalisierung, Synergien, Herausforderungen, Hoffnungen, EURECA-PRO

1. Introduction

The European Commission, through the Erasmus+ programme, is committed to the development of European Universities that will strengthen the European Education, Research, and Innovation Area and create additional career opportunities for students and researchers. The European Commission defines European Universities as “transnational alliances of higher education institutions developing long-term structural and sustainable cooperation. They mobilise multi-disciplinary teams of students and academics through a challenge-based approach in close cooperation with research, business and civil society. European Universities will pool together their online and physical resources, courses, expertise, data, and infrastructure to leverage their strengths and to empower the next generations in tackling together the current challenges that Europe and the world are facing. They promote all forms of mobility (physical, online, blended) as well as multilingualism via their inclusive European inter-university campuses” [1].

Since this definition was given in 2020, it has become clear that European University Alliances will only grow in importance. As a forward-looking University, UHasselt has therefore been keen to explore potential partnerships. During our search, UHasselt was approached by several universities and explored numerous potential collaborations. Our hope was to find a balanced collaboration with like-minded partners who shared not only a common network mission (both now and moving forward) and understanding of expectations and commitments but also had a similar perspective on European University development.

For our part, we perceive the development of a European University as a profound commitment that requires a great investment from all partners including a focus on cooperation, a mindset able to overcome present obstacles, and a willingness to face future challenges together. Quickly after initiating talks with the European University on Sustainable Consumption and Production (EURECA-PRO), it became clear that the structure, focus, mission, and vision was a perfect fit for UHasselt. Things therefore moved quickly after that: UHasselt was invited to present its application and, following discussion and the approval of several UHasselt decision-making bodies, a EURECA-PRO Rector’s meeting granted UHasselt membership in the alliance.

In January 2022, UHasselt became the eighth EURECA-PRO member. Hasselt University is in full support of EURECA-PRO’s ambition to become a leading European University capable of spurring innovation and inspiring transformation in the field of sustainable consumption and production. We share the EURECA-PRO belief that this can be achieved through intense inter-university collaboration in education, research, and public engagement. UHasselt is committed to strengthening academic collaboration between scholars across the alliance and to increasing international knowledge exchange while delivering interdisciplinary, cutting-edge research outputs and enhance partners’ research reputations in this field. By doing so, UHasselt intends to play a significant role in bringing EURECA-PRO students and staff together as an international community of learners and in validating research results at the regional and international level through Open Science practices and the organisation of Science Awareness events. Together with EURECA-PRO partners, Hasselt University has the ultimate ambition to become the prime partner and consultant of the European Commission as well as of industrial players and public agencies active in the field of sustainable consumption and production in Europe and beyond.

2. Motives and Hopes

EURECA-PRO membership is an important step toward UHasselt’s vision of internationalisation and a growing reputation as an international hub for research, teaching, and public engagement on topics related to sustainability. We therefore hope to create exciting new learning opportunities for students and staff within EURECA-PRO to increase international mobility and knowledge production while spurring interdisciplinary research collaboration beyond geographical borders. Doing so within the EURECA-PRO Alliance will grow our reputation as an innovative university in the field of sustainability as well as strengthen our ability to drive innovation and transformation at the local, regional, European, and global levels.

2.1 Focus of European and Flemish Research Agenda

Flanders shares Europe’s vision and believes that the future of universities will be defined at the European level. In 2019, only two years after French President Macron first raised the idea of “European Universities”, the European Commission moved forward with the creation of 17 alliances. Last year, another 14 alliances were added to these already-existent European Universities. Europe’s commitment to European Universities is undeniably strong and convincing: a third call for alliances is on its way, and the ambition to have 60 European Universities by 2024 is backed up by a 1.1 billion budget.

Seated at the heart of Europe and housing many European institutions, Belgium is very attuned to European-level developments. The same is true for the regions of Belgium: Flanders, Wallonia, and the Brussels’ Capital Region. Flanders, which houses UHasselt, goes beyond sharing European ambitions and provides substantial financial incentives for Flemish Universities’ participation in European University Initiatives to enhance internationalisation within Flemish research-intensive universities. UHasselt has a 904k grant from the Flemish government in support
of our EURECA-PRO membership. As mentioned before, EURECA-PRO acts as a force multiplier for enhancing internationalisation processes within Hasselt University. We intend to invest in the international mobility of staff and students, to stimulate interdisciplinary collaboration amongst researchers, to participate in joint grant writing with partners, and to improve the student experience of Hasselt and EURECA-PRO students.

At the same time, we believe that the established sustainability expertise of UHasselt researchers and institutes (e.g. the Centre for Environmental Sciences (CMK) and the Institute for Materials Research (IMO)), our academic community’s central position in a variety of international networks (e.g. the Copernicus Alliance and the European Network on Higher Education for Sustainable Development) and the highly specialised equipment at our disposal (e.g. a Field Research Centre with ECOTRON and large-scale biodiversity and climate research infrastructure) will benefit EURECA-PRO partners. In sum, Hasselt University seeks to enhance the international profile of our education in line with the European and Flemish agendas and, by doing so, to increase the quality of our research-led teaching, the joys of life-long learning and student exchange in a ‘borderless’ educational environment. We believe that these ambitions dovetail perfectly with those of EURECA-PRO and that our approach will benefit all EURECA-PRO partners to create a win-win situation for all involved.

2.2 Synergies with UH Policy Priorities

UHasselt’s membership in EURECA-PRO is a good match. EURECA-PRO’s policy objectives align with UHasselt’s four transversal policy objectives: Sustainability, Inclusiveness, Lifelong Learning, and Internationalisation. In terms of focus, UHasselt’s EURECA-PRO participation flows naturally from our most prominent research and teaching expertise. The majority of our educational and research programmes circle around the topic of sustainability and explore themes such as circular economy, energy transition, and sustainable resources. Moreover, UHasselt’s students and scholars put their sustainability research/education into practice within various organisations and networks in this field and are already involved in public engagement. UHasselt also has a strong commitment to equality and diversity and thus shares the EURECA-PRO conviction that international mobility and the cultural exchange it fosters will contribute to a more open-minded society and a more inclusive Europe.

In addition, UHasselt’s conviction that research and education is without age or borders runs parallel with EURECA-PRO’s focus on “borderless”, flexible, and international educational programmes. Moreover, as an organisation UHasselt’s persistent efforts to widen access to higher education, to increase educational opportunities for everyone and to create a supportive academic community for students and staff support EURECA-PRO’s plans to create a more inclusive European Higher Education Environment.

EURECA-PRO’s vision and dedication reflect UHasselt’s mission as a Civic University in multiple ways. We deeply believe in our civic responsibilities as an institution that plays a key role in driving social, economic, and environmental change in our region, Limburg. We share, for instance, a desire to educate engaged citizens and purposeful leaders to increase their employability in fields that address pertinent societal challenges. Like EURECA-PRO, we too aim to positively impact our home regions and their economies while being determined to initiate developments at the European and global level in line with the UN SDGs. Finally, similar to all EURECA-PRO partners, UHasselt believes that joining forces with other stakeholders (higher education institutions, governments, businesses, and civil society organisations) plays an essential role in tackling pressing issues on the local, regional, European, and global levels.

2.3 Synergies with EURECA-PRO Partners

We are thrilled to be part of a geographically diverse alliance whose vision, mission, and focus align so well with ours. UHasselt is itself committed to Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 12; unsurprisingly, similarities, commonalities, and complementarities in research, education, and policy agenda arose rapidly with EURECA-PRO partners. Already after the first meeting, a foundation of common ground for a partnership that produces mutually beneficial outcomes and promising opportunities for teaching, research, and public engagement collaboration had been established. Though rudimentary, Fig. 1 displays the many synergies that exist between EURECA-PRO topics and those researched and taught at UHasselt’s institutes, centres, and faculties.

Additionally, UHasselt has a proven expertise in providing education that supports societal innovation and transformation focused on sustainability with inclusivity and accessibility as guiding principles. As such, UHasselt is well positioned to contribute to the development of BSc and MSc programmes in European Studies on Sustainable Consumption and Production. An example of the work we have already done in this direction is our brand new MSc in Materiomics, which combines the study of (1) quantum materials and technologies, (2) materials for energy, generation, storage, and conversion, (3) materials in circular processes, and (4) materials for health with basic academic research and employability skills. Beyond these thematic synergies, UHasselt also offers a creative and interactive study environment. Our education is student centred with a strong focus on differentiated teaching methods and with a vast investment in the development and implementation of innovative educational concepts (such as blended and distance learning). This is reflected in several of EURECA-PRO’s educational pillars (such as a dedication to project-based learning and work-based learning).
2.4 Challenges Related to the (Delayed) Participation in a European University Alliance

As mentioned, UHasselt only entered the EURECA-PRO Alliance quite recently, after seven other partners had established a shared history. In order to create true structural collaboration and a veritable European University beyond geographical, disciplinary, cultural, and political borders, it is essential for university partners to know each other well. As UHasselt, we were warmly welcomed by all EURECA-PRO members and are excited to strengthen ties with partner universities while supporting mobility amongst university staff. To this end, Review Weeks are valuable chances for us to get to know our partners better. We cannot emphasise enough how much we appreciate the efforts that have been made to organise these.

Each partner university resides in a different educational environment with its own set of rules (e.g. inter-university agreements govern what courses UHasselt can offer), regulations (e.g. in Flanders we have strong language regulations limiting our ability to offer English courses) and peculiarities (e.g. evaluation regimes and accreditation conditions). As in every international collaboration, we will need some time to find overlap between partners that take these varied constraints into account. Nonetheless, we believe that our experience with the Transnational University Limburg during a cooperation between University Maastricht and University Hasselt has provided us with valuable lessons and experience. Moreover, UHasselt students are currently rather unfamiliar with the educational profile of EURECA-PRO partner universities. As such, these universities might not immediately be considered as potential destinations for student exchange. The same goes for incoming students beginning at EURECA-PRO partner universities, who might not have heard of UHasselt or its programmes before.

EURECA-PRO will need time to become fully embedded in the UHasselt community as a strategic research partnership. Not only do researchers across the alliance need to find each other intellectually, they also need to meet each other socially to allow partnerships to grow. Moreover, established scholars might need encouragement to consider alliance partners over already existing partnerships. More junior researchers, on the other hand, will need support to ensure sufficient investment in collaboration with partners. Luckily, UHasselt can financially incentivise collaborative EURECA-PRO research. Nonetheless, nothing can replace researchers finding synergy with other scholars themselves by encountering like-minded colleagues to collaborate with. Finally, we appreciate that EURECA-PRO’s research focus might not always suit the agendas of all UHasselt research, institutions or centres. We will of course not force scholars to frame their research within EURECA-PRO’s vision and are strongly committed to supporting all UHasselt scholars regardless of their EURECA-PRO involvement.

3. Solution Strategies

UHasselt has an established reputation as a creative and innovative university with strong problem-solving skills and imaginative solutions. The already existing EURECA-PRO Alliance expertise plays in our favour; it, for instance, greatly facilitates the formation of structural collaboration.
across the network (e.g. by providing Erasmus+ partnerships or opportunities for PhD students). At the same time, the current pace of the project allows us to inscribe ourselves into the EURECA-PRO story and to let collaborations grow. It also enables us to carve out a place for the ambitions of our university. Here follow several proposals to counter the challenges listed in the previous section:

We believe that strong communication strategies related to research dissemination and project information will play a vital role in ensuring the successful development and implementation of EURECA-PRO. This will be crucial to driving staff and student engagement as well as incentivising industrial and strategic partners to collaborate with EURECA-PRO. We also need a strong communication strategy between universities to ensure we get our story out in a way that motivates staff and students and gets them excited about the opportunities and possibilities EURECA-PRO can offer. Making sure that staff feel involved is essential as we strive to live up to our university-wide policies of inclusiveness while moving toward EURECA-PRO’s interdisciplinary ambitions. Getting the word out will also be crucial in enhancing citizen science initiatives and turning EURECA-PRO into a trusted partner for industrial and social organisations on the Flemish, European, and international levels.

EURECA-PRO has proposed to UHasselt to lead a research cluster, a so-called ‘Lighthouse’ in EURECA-PRO jargon. This offers the ideal context to integrate UHasselt’s research activities with those of the alliance. Reaching an agreement with research-active staff on the topic of the UHasselt Lighthouse is the first step in establishing UHasselt research within EURECA-PRO. Next, we hope to incentivise interdisciplinarity and cross-faculty collaboration by supporting joint seminars or conferences at UHasselt centre around UHasselt’s Lighthouse Mission. Furthermore, we plan to host a EURECA-PRO conference on the topic of the UHasselt Lighthouse to bring scholars from across the alliance together. Social events could be organised alongside academic events to showcase UHasselt’s welcoming environment while enabling international encounters for our own staff. Additionally, we will financially support staff in initiatives that drive UHasselt’s Lighthouse Mission research agenda forward, especially when such initiatives include mobility between partner universities.

Finally, we will develop an internal communication strategy (perhaps including presentations, podcasts and videos) to support students in their funding applications while enhancing student exchange and engagement within EURECA-PRO.

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