

On the way to the European University: high-level panel discussion in Berlin highlights opportunities

The h_da is a unique German pioneer with its objective of becoming a European university. The long-term aim is to merge completely with its eight partners in the European University of Technology (EUT+). The question of how such a transnational university could be constituted was the focal point of a high-level panel discussion held in the Hessian State Representation in Berlin.

By Kilian Kirchgessner, 15 December 2023

The participants in the panel discussion compared the creation of a European university with a box full of Lego building bricks: the individual bricks are on the table – and now they need to be assembled into a functional model. None of the panellists left any doubt that this path will be full of challenges at the most varied levels. They include specific questions about the recognition of academic achievements and degrees in all participating countries, along with the clarification of how this kind of university could be financed.

The discussion also covered the large advantages and opportunities offered by a common European university. “The creation of a European technical university is a visionary step that can influence not only the way we regard education, but also the foundations of our European identity,” said Ayse Asar, State Secretary in the Hessian Ministry of Higher Education, Research, Science and the Arts. Dr Jens Brandenburg, Parliamentary State Secretary in the Federal Ministry of Education and Research, recalled the words of former Foreign Minister Klaus Kinkel, who said that Europe did not grow out of treaties, but from the hearts of its citizens. “That says it in a nutshell,” Brandenburg said, adding, “We are not occupied solely with rules or individual cooperative research projects, but with the bigger picture.”

The President of the Darmstadt University of Applied Sciences, Prof. Arnd Steinmetz, pointed up the geostrategic dimension of the project. He called to mind the European values that such a transnational university would help to communicate and realise: “We have a European understanding of technology, which differs from that in other countries. We call for a humanitarian approach in the application of technology.” He went on to say that the goal was to educate well informed and responsible citizens in the new university – a mature way of handling technologies was essential in the influential debates on artificial intelligence and the energy policy of the future. “We see ourselves as the voice of this European understanding of technology,” Steinmetz

stressed. But to be heard, he said, one needed a certain size. The universities involved in the EUT+ alliance were contributing the knowledge and creativity of 120,000 students and 13,000 members of staff – “and that makes for a voice which gets heard!” At the same time, Steinmetz noted, a common European university would boost visibility in the international university rankings.

Yet with all these visions, it was also apparent just how large the challenges are which still have to be resolved. This begins with the choice of the legal form for the European university, for which there is no precedent. Here the devil is in the detail: “I would like to emphasise that in Germany the competences regarding universities rest largely with the federal states,” said Hessian State Secretary Ayse Asar. She added, “Federalism – with competition for the best ideas – is exceptionally precious.” The diversity of the European education system had to be retained. At the same time, it was launching a discussion on a “new type of university” – a “European university” that could exist alongside other universities, colleges of applied sciences and art colleges, enriching the overall the spectrum. After all, “We must ensure that our educational landscape is not only excellent – it should also be inclusive. The European University of Technology, which is being considered here, should be a place where talents come together irrespective of their origin.” There was an opportunity to create a “catalytic motor to drive innovation and the sharing of knowledge.”

Tine Delva, Deputy Head of Unit Higher Education in the Directorate-General for Education, Culture, Youth and Sport at the European Commission, described the search for a suitable legal form using a striking simile: “I’d compare it sometimes with a marriage contract. It’s possible to argue about things, but if you have some rules, there’s less risk of separation. Of course you can separate. It’s always up to the universities to decide whether they want to be in an alliance or not. But with a workable legal form the ties will be more durable.”

Many other questions came up in areas such as the financing of a European university. Hessian taxpayers’ money could not simply be spent outside the federal state, Ayse Asar stressed. “However, the founding of a European university also generates specific added value: the Darmstadt University of Applied Sciences will become vastly more attractive, both to students and to researchers.”

But will professors in Darmstadt, for example, have to forego their public employee status in the future? And which legislation will be applied to social security, if a single university has sites in nine different countries? “There are already European rules that can be applied,” Tine Delva explained. After all, there are already international organisations for which international social security systems exist. “Introducing a new

social system in Europe for a new type of university would not be compatible with the treaties or technically feasible.”

Alongside such legal questions, the discussion on creating a European university also turned to facilitating the recognition of degrees. For engineering subjects, in which all nine universities in the EUT+ are specialised, each country currently has different regulations. That has to be standardised, according to h_da President Arnd Steinmetz. He simultaneously spelled out a vision for the students: “At the moment, students who want to spend a semester abroad have to start arranging that during their first semester, so they can actually go in their fourth or fifth semester,” he said. But the path had to be made seamless: “It must be possible to decide to spend one semester in Darmstadt, one in Riga and then one in Dublin – and have the security of knowing that achievements will be recognised. This is what it’s all about!”

The founding of a European university was another step in an evolutionary process, according to the panel. Whereas two or three universities had set up joint degree programmes during the early phase of the European university area, right now due to various different university alliances there were often six to nine partners in a common boat. A common university was now another step in this development. At present there are 50 university alliances in Europe with 430 partners, State Secretary Jens Brandenburg said. Many of these alliances were currently developing models for future cooperation – a merger into a common university, like the EUT+ is planning, was one of these models. “This diversity is a defining European feature,” Brandenburg stated. “Right now none of us can say with certainty where this journey will end.”

Pia Ahrenkilde Hansen, Director-General for Education, Culture, Youth and Sport at the European Commission, was also basically optimistic. “Your alliance has already proved its ability to re-invent the European university model,” she said, addressing the EUT+ universities. She called the vision of a common, transnational university inspiring: “This kind of unconventional thinking is the future of European university education!”