

Statement of AVUni – the Czech Association of Research Universities

on the proposed amendments to the European Competitiveness Fund (ECF) framework

On 20 April, the draft report of the European Parliament's ITRE Committee (Committee on Industry, Research and Energy) concerning the framework of the European Competitiveness Fund (ECF) was published. The report proposes the deletion of Article 30 and the reduction of Recital 21 of the document defining the programme framework of the European Competitiveness Fund. Such amendments would remove the legal basis for the eligibility of universities and higher education institutions, including specifically the European University Alliances, to directly receive funding from this Fund.

We are convinced that, in light of the recent EU reports (Mario Draghi, Manuel Heitor, Enrico Letta) and at a time when the EU is seeking ways to strengthen the competitiveness and prosperity of both the EU economy and the economies of its Member States, including the increasingly urgent need to ensure security and defence capabilities, universities represent one of the principal strategic resources for such competitiveness, particularly through:

- educating a qualified workforce for the labour market and helping to bridge the growing gap in key qualification areas, especially STEM education (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics);
- research and the practical application of its outcomes as a source of innovation for competitiveness, knowledge transfer, and the development of entrepreneurship as pathways to economic efficiency and productivity.

At the same time, we wish to emphasize that one of the key prerequisites for the competitiveness not only of Europe, but also globally, is undoubtedly internationalization. Strengthening European university cooperation through the concentration of knowledge and expertise in order to achieve synergies in both education and research is therefore essential for meeting labour market needs and fostering innovation arising from research. This is precisely the purpose of the European Universities Initiative (EUI), which aims to create and strengthen European University Alliances — European Universities as centres of excellence — as a tool for implementing the fifth freedom: the free movement of knowledge and innovation.

For this reason, we are also following with considerable concern the budgetary pressure currently affecting the ERASMUS+ programme, which remains one of the most effective and economically efficient European Union instruments in terms of cost-benefit ratio for strengthening the international dimension and competitiveness of European universities.

We therefore consider it absolutely essential to express our disagreement with the proposed amendments to the foundational ECF document, as we view the exclusion of universities as a significant restriction both in access to financial resources and, above all, in opportunities to fulfil their role and contribute to strengthening the competitiveness of both the EU economy and the economies of Member States.

By shortening Recital 21, which originally defined universities and European University Alliances as key partners for EU competitiveness, European universities and their alliances effectively become “invisible” within the ECF framework. Together with the complete deletion of Article 30, which was intended to provide the legal basis enabling universities and alliances to directly obtain ECF funding for the development of labour-market-relevant skills and strategic projects, European universities and European University Alliances are in practice excluded from funding opportunities under this Fund. Universities would thus cease to be perceived as a pillar of

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competitiveness and would instead be reduced merely to the role of educational institutions without any connection to the EU's strategic investments.

We therefore call upon the political representations and Members of the European Parliament, as well as the representatives of EU Member States in the relevant EU bodies and the European Commission, to consider and support the rejection of the proposed amendments and to preserve Article 30 and the wording of Recital 21 in the ECF Regulation in their original form. We believe that it is in the interest of Europe for universities to remain fully integrated partners within EU programme frameworks and innovation ecosystems.

On behalf of the AVUni

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