

Una Europa alliance partnering with three African universities to work on sustainability



Representatives from Una Europa and partner African universities meeting in Helsinki.

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"The Una Europa for Virtual Exchange (UnaVEx) project will harness the power of virtual exchange to bring 2,500 university students together across Europe and Africa to tackle pressing societal challenges such as climate change, global inequality and the biodiversity crisis in an international and intercultural context", says Una Europa, the European university alliance launching the project with three African partner universities, on 26/05/2024.

The UnaVEx project, funded by Erasmus +, regroups the universities of Helsinki (Finland), Bologna (Italy), Leuven (Belgium), Kinshasa (Democratic Republic of the Congo), Johannesburg (South Africa) and Nairobi (Kenya).

"The project is to educate these students in this intercultural framework, that they learn to use the online modules and we

These projects are in line with one of the alliance's main focuses: sustainability and climate protection.

"Adding the interactive element to our sustainability micro-credential is a good way to mainstream sustainability knowledge across two continents", states Sophia Karner, Una Europa Senior Policy Officer.

Una Europa was founded in 2019 as part of the first-generation alliances and regroups the universities of Berlin (Germany), Bologna (Italy), Dublin (Ireland), Edinburgh (Scotland), Helsinki (Finland), Krakow (Poland), Leiden (Netherlands), KU Leuven (Belgium), Zürich (Switzerland), the Complutense University of Madrid (Spain) and Sorbonne University (France).

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"Bringing together students in an intercultural setting"

"This project aims to bring together students, bachelors, masters and PhDs in an intercultural setting to exchange experiences, build the future, and become sustainability leaders", states Sophia Karner.

"Our students demand this international exposure, especially from outside Europe. They really see the value in exchanging with students who have such different life experiences. Adding this interactive element to our sustainability micro-credential is a good way to mainstream sustainability knowledge across two continents."

UnaVEx regroups three universities that are full partners and the others are associated partners from Una Europa (the students will still be able to benefit from the project) because the funding was not sufficient to bring all eleven universities into the project.

The idea is to have a one-week course with 50 students, half from Europe and half from Africa, who will then go into small groups of students in their universities to be moderators for the project and spread the information.

"We wish for the moderators to be mostly students, whom we try to motivate by offering internships and certificates to value their experience.

The first moderators' programme will start in autumn 2024 and the first virtual exchange week will take place in March 2025", declares Hanna Lappalainen.

A partnership tackling challenges

"We also face some challenges with the realisation of this project: distance learning is not that common in our partner African universities, and some students may not have access to a laptop all the time so they may use a smartphone instead.

We also have some language barrier issues, for example the University of Kinshasa is mainly French-speaking but they found creative solutions: they aim to mobilise English-speaking students as moderators, who can then spread information in French or other spoken languages.

We are actively working on solutions so every person involved in the project can benefit from it", explains Hanna Lappalainen.

"A partnership with Africa has been a priority since the beginning"

Collaboration with HEIs on the African continent has been on the agenda since the beginning, according to Sophia Karner. "The rectors wanted the alliance to have a strong internationalisation and wanted Africa to be a priority because of the close history between our continents, the preexisting bilateral relation between the universities and the pressing global challenges that need to be tackled together."

Una Europa mapped potential partners in Africa, invited rectors and people from African universities to Helinski and established a working group with the alliance and African universities.

The alliance already had a micro-credential in sustainability, so the project was built around an existing offering but tries to add value to it and develop it further with African partners.

A meaningful way of working on sustainability education

Una Europa applied to an Erasmus + programme only funding virtual exchanges, as they considered the format most suitable for sustainability education.

"We were also looking at the accessibility aspect, we know that mobility is really expensive and not possible for everyone so this is a good way to have an international experience", says Sophia Karner.

The project is funded for three years with a budget of € 500,000 and hopes to reach a total of 2,500 students across the two continents.

"Una Europa has six focus areas selected by the universities, sustainability and climate protection was one of them. We have quite innovative joint education formats in sustainability already, but this collaboration is where we see a lot of potential."

We have also seen from our African partners that there is a lot of demand for educational activities and research on sustainability and they have quite unique expertise on the subject that doesn't exist in our universities", declares Sophia Karner.

An alliance turned towards research, international collaboration and environmental sciences

"There is a real balance in what we do between research and education, the project-level activities depend on the funding, but even the Erasmus project includes some level of research", states Sophia Karner.

The governance at Una Europa is made up of representatives for both education and research and they plan to adopt an R&I action plan in

This is an area where alliances can add a lot of value, we can give a unique interdisciplinary and international dimension to PhDs."

"We have a lot of projects now that we are out of our pilot phase"

Una Europa was piloting the European degree label in 2023, leading a consortium of six alliances that were experimenting on the European degree.

The alliance also developed a proposal for the Climate University for Virtual Exchange (CLUVEx) project under the Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange pilot.

"CLUVEx aims to equip students from European and Neighbourhood-East universities with climate competencies. After CLUVEx succeeded in securing a grant, we went for the next Virtual Exchange.

While CLUVEx focuses on climate change, UnaVEx is more focused on sustainability, building on the Una Europa micro-credential in sustainability", explains Hanna Lappalainen.

Una Europa also encourages collaboration among its partner universities by investing in new projects through its seed funding.

"We have a lot of projects now that we are out of our pilot phase, it really started to run with it, to access funding.

We just finished our Horizon 2020 project, but we are more than the EU-funded projects, we want to build a lasting strategy across education, research and innovation to impact society as a whole", states Sophia Karner.

A future of extra-European collaboration and long-term partnership

"I hope that the future of European alliances is to have more extra-European partnerships if it aligns with their individual vision and strat-

that unique added value of coming as an alliance and we think in our collaboration with Africa it has worked very well", declares Sophia Karner.

The whole project was developed online but there was a first meeting in person at the University of Johannesburg (South Africa) in April 2024.

"This is not a single project on the side, this is really fitting towards the broader vision that we have for collaboration with African partners and we have a commitment to long-term collaboration", according to Sophia Karner.

Further reading

Essential(s)



Research in European university alliances: "Putting aside R&I is like cutting an arm" (K. Guillaume)

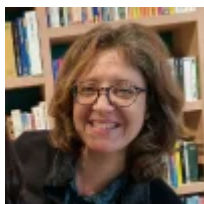
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Interview(s)



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