

D4.6 RUN-EU EUROPEAN MOBILITY INNOVATION CENTRE POLICY PAPER

Advancing Sustainability and Becoming Nature Positive

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1. Introduction

The European Commission's investment in European university alliances presents a unique opportunity to tackle urgent global challenges, such as climate change, biodiversity loss, resource depletion, and other ecological imperatives. Within this context, RUN-EU firmly believes that higher education institutions play a critical role in the collective endeavor involving regional, national, and European stakeholders to combat climate change.

As we look towards the future of international mobility for higher education students and staff, it becomes evident that sustainable measures must strike a balance between expanding inclusive international mobility and meeting global emission targets for 2030 (United Nations, 2022; European Commission, n.d.). This challenge aligns with **Sustainable Development Goal 13 (SDG13 - Climate Action)** (United Nations, 2023), emphasizing the urgent need to combat climate change and its impacts. Moreover, countries worldwide have committed to reducing their greenhouse gas emissions through their **Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs)**, outlining specific targets set under the Paris Agreement (United Nations, 2021). Understanding the interplay between SDG13 and the NDCs is crucial. By aligning our efforts with these international frameworks, we not only contribute to global climate action but also strengthen the context of our policy paper.

With this in mind, RUN-EU has set a goal to significantly reduce CO2 emissions, with the ambition of leading the way as the inaugural Nature-Positive European University Alliance, as outlined in the RUN-EU Subsidy Application 2023 (p. 81). The growing awareness and understanding of ecological consequences of international mobility are not limited solely to the act of physical travel, but extend to various aspects or components of mobility within the realm of higher education. This drives RUN-EU partners to reassess their approach, striving to alleviate the environmental footprint of these activities.

This policy paper explores nature-positive universities and discusses their manifold advantages. Our contention is that embracing a nature-positive philosophy empowers universities to nurture ecological stewardship, heighten student involvement, stimulate innovation, and contribute meaningfully to the sustainability agenda. Additionally, this will enable universities to serve as key players in creating long-term positive societal and environmental impact. This paper also seeks to demonstrate the potential of nature-positive universities to shape a more environmentally harmonious educational landscape.

2. The European University Initiative & RUN-EU

European Universities are formed as part of the European University Initiative¹ and are international coalitions of higher education institutions (HEIs) that are in the process of pioneering the path to the universities of the future. They aim to champion European values and identity while transforming the quality and competitiveness of higher education in Europe.

Within the dynamic framework of the European University Initiative, the pursuit of transformative excellence is facilitated through diverse collaboration models for European Universities, driven by the Erasmus+ calls for proposals.

Key attributes that define these alliances include:

- Bring together partners from an array of higher education institutions (HEIs), spanning a vast geographic expanse across the European continent.
- Are built on a shared long-term strategy that prioritise sustainability, excellence, and European values.
- Offer student-centered curricula delivered jointly across multiple university campuses, enabling diverse student populations to shape their own programs and engage in mobility at all levels of study. By fostering the exchange of best practices, expertise, and research findings, alliance members can mutually benefit from shared knowledge. This collaborative environment enables continuous learning, empowering institutions to develop unified strategies for sustainability.
- Embrace a challenge-based approach, fostering collaboration among students, academics, and external partners in interdisciplinary teams to address the most pressing issues currently faced by Europe (European Commission, 2020).

European University Alliances possess a reservoir of knowledge and talent, positioning them uniquely to wield influence. They have the capacity not only to adopt nature-positive principles but also leverage their expertise to drive transformative change across our respective regions.

As a prospective Nature-Positive European University Alliance, RUN-EU aims to go beyond traditional notions of environmental sustainability and actively seeks to restore and enhance ecosystems, as well as create positive interactions between humans and the natural world. This aspiration seamlessly aligns with the European University Initiative (EUI) and the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) objectives (*quality, inclusion, gender equality, green digital transitions, teachers and training, and the broader dimensions of higher education and geopolitics*), whilst continuing to be a champion for academic freedom, quality, and excellence addressing all four missions of higher education institutions: education, research and innovation and service to society.

¹ <https://education.ec.europa.eu/education-levels/higher-education/european-universities-initiative>

RUN-EU includes partners representing a diverse array of higher education institutions, including Universities, Technological Universities, Universities of Applied Science, and Polytechnic Institutes. This collective encompasses an expansive geographic panorama spanning Ireland, Portugal, Spain, Belgium, The Netherlands, Finland, Austria, and Hungary (Figure 1). This diverse representation is anchored in a co-envisioned and co-enacted long-term strategy focused on sustainability, digitisation, excellence, and European values. RUN-EU offers student-centred and co-designed curricula jointly delivered across our campuses (such as Short Advanced Programmes), where diverse student bodies can experience study and mobility at all levels of study. RUN-EU adopts a challenge-based approach where our stakeholders cooperate in interdisciplinary teams to tackle the biggest issues facing Europe including climate change and loss of biodiversity.

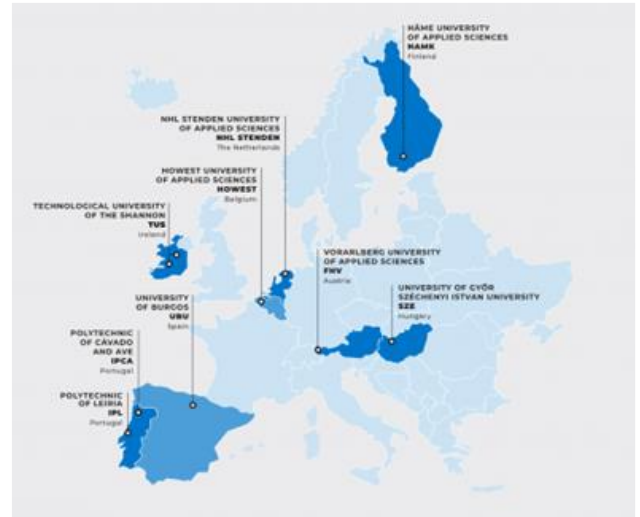


Figure 1 Map of RUN-EU Partners

In summary, RUN-EU aspires to be a Nature-Positive European University Alliance, reshaping education's role in ecological harmony. This pursuit embodies a transformative shift toward sustainable coexistence, a change that reverberates beyond academia.

3. Explaining the Nature-Positive Paradigm

The mobility of students and staff in higher education institutions has growing contributions to greenhouse gas emissions (Shields & Lu, 2023; Baer, 2023). Travel-related activities to academic conferences, exchanges, study trips, and more collectively influence the scale of these emissions. As more policies in Europe encourage mobility of students as a part of their curricula, the impact is expected to increase (Rizvi, Lingard, & Rinne, 2022).

The tension between the push for greater mobility of students and staff and the need to minimize one’s environmental footprint is exemplified in the RUN-EU mobility data. As shown in figures 2 and 3, most students and staff travel by plane and they indicate this was their preferred mode of transportation (D4.5 RUN-EU European Mobility Innovation Centre (EMIC) monitor report).

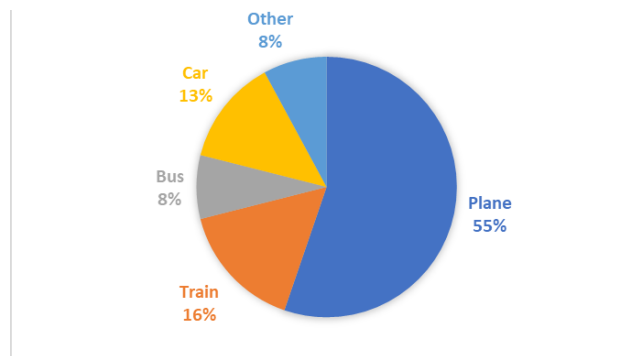


Figure 2 - Main mode of transport used by RUN-EU students to reach their host institution (2020-2022)

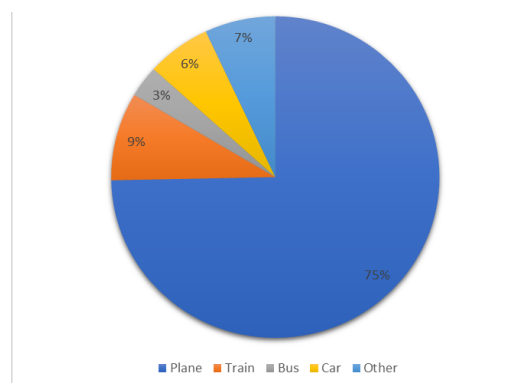


Figure 3 - Main mode of transport used by staff members to reach their host institution (2020-2022)

Nature-Positive Universities emerge as responses to the escalating environmental challenges and seek to provide solutions through higher education (Cambridge Institute for Sustainability Leadership, 2022). These universities serve as pioneers, demonstrating how higher learning institutions can lead by example in forging a harmonious relationship between academia and the natural world (Nature Positive Universities, 2021).

The concept² of Nature-Positive Universities centers around four key pillars: conservation, regeneration, integration, and collaboration (Bennun & Starkey, 2022; FAQs, 2022). Conservation involves the protection and preservation of existing natural resources and habitats. Regeneration focuses on restoring degraded ecosystems and biodiversity. Integration aims to embed nature-positive practices throughout campus operations, academic programs, and research initiatives. Collaboration emphasizes partnerships between universities, communities, and other stakeholders to maximize impact and knowledge, cultural and collaborative exchange.

Rooted in the understanding that human well-being is inextricably linked to the health of ecosystems, this approach aims not merely to minimize harm but to actively restore and enhance the natural world.

3.1. Benefits of Nature-Positive Universities

3.1-1 Ecological Stewardship

Nature-positive universities actively contribute to ecological stewardship by implementing sustainable land management practices, biodiversity restoration projects, and conservation initiatives. By valuing and protecting local ecosystems, these institutions can serve as living laboratories for applied research, provide hands-on educational opportunities, and foster a sense of environmental responsibility among students and staff.

To show an initial commitment to ecological stewardship, NHL Stenden implemented a tree planting ceremony during the RUN-EU European Mobility Innovation Center (EMIC) conference in April 2023 in Leeuwarden.

3.1-2 Student Engagement and Wellbeing

Engaging students in nature-positive initiatives can enhance their educational experiences, well-being, and personal development. By incorporating outdoor learning, green spaces, and sustainable campus design, universities can create supportive environments that inspire curiosity, creativity, and a sense of connection with nature. Such experiences not only foster a love for the environment but also promote mental and physical well-being among students.

To foster a connection between nature and students, the Green Office of NHL Stenden played a big role in the inaugural Student Council Summit event in October 2023 hosting nearly 60 students in Leeuwarden. Together, the students and the Green Office brainstormed on ways to incorporate nature-positive initiatives into RUN-EU 2.0.

² <https://www.naturepositiveuniversities.net/what-is-nature-positive/>

3.1-3 Innovation and Research

Nature-positive universities provide fertile ground for research and innovation that addresses sustainability challenges. By encouraging interdisciplinary collaboration and supporting research projects focused on regenerative practices, ecosystem restoration, and sustainable technologies, these institutions become catalysts for breakthrough solutions. The integration of nature-positive principles across academic disciplines allows for the development of holistic approaches to complex environmental issues.

Through the RUN-EU Discovery Programme, a collaborative, interdisciplinary exchange of expertise, research findings and best practices between alliance members has taken place, among others on sustainability topics.

3.1-4 Global Leadership and Collaboration

Nature-positive universities have the potential to inspire and influence other institutions, communities, and policymakers. By actively engaging in collaborative partnerships and sharing best practices, they contribute to regional and global sustainability agendas. Universities can leverage their expertise and resources to drive systemic change, influence policy development, and contribute to the achievement of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.

In this regard, RUN-EU has become part of the European Universities Community creating a new platform to share and exchange best practices with University Alliances all over Europe.

3.1-5 Real-world Action

Numerous universities worldwide have already embraced the nature-positive paradigm. Institutions such as Wageningen University & Research, who have made substantial progress in implementing nature-positive practices, demonstrating the feasibility and benefits of such initiatives (FAQs, 2022). Their experiences offer valuable insights and serve as inspiration for other universities aspiring to become nature-positive.

Through the RUN-EU network and its connections, real working examples can be shared and further replicated. For example, HAMK has implemented the Amazing Business Train as a working initiative for green mobility and curricula innovation which works as an example for all other partners.

3.2 Challenges of becoming a Nature-Positive Universities

3.2-1 Funding Constraints

One of the primary challenges in implementing sustainable initiatives within a European University Alliance is the availability of funding. While the European Commission provides initial funding, additional resources will be necessary to support ongoing sustainability efforts. Fortunately, RUN-EU received additional funding (€14.4mio) from the European Commission to

fund another four years of collaboration as a European University (2024-2027). Aside from that, mitigation strategies should include actively seeking external grants, establishing partnerships with businesses and organizations that align with sustainability goals, and advocating for increased financial support from relevant stakeholders.

In the case of RUN-EU, RUN-ERA (RUN – European Research Area) will be positioned to seek additional funding for RUN-EU, and it is likely that other EUAs will operate similar structures. RUN-ERA will bring together the strengths and achievements of the RUN-EU cycle 1 project on research and innovation (European Innovation Hubs & RUN-Discovery Programme) and of the RUN-EU Plus project to: i) identify and support joint research and innovation opportunities ii) be the interface for the development of research and innovation activities focussed on societal transformation with external stakeholders in business, industry, society and regional government and iii) support the development of the research community across RUN-EU.

3.2-2 Integration of Nature-Positive Principles Across Disciplines

Another expected obstacle in the path of Nature-Positive European University Alliances lies in the integration of nature-positive principles across diverse academic disciplines. Infusing ecological considerations into subjects traditionally distant from environmental studies requires a comprehensive overhaul of curricula and teaching methodologies.

The challenge entails striking a delicate balance between imparting specialized knowledge and nurturing a holistic understanding of nature's interconnectedness. This necessitates the collaboration of educators, researchers, and administrators to reshape existing courses and develop interdisciplinary programs that seamlessly integrate environmental awareness. Moreover, there are inequalities in terms of proportion of students enrolled and resources available between the universities which also makes the dissemination and integration of a Nature-Positive Policy difficult (McCowan, 2023). By adopting innovative pedagogical approaches, promoting cross-disciplinary collaboration, and encouraging faculty development, European University Alliances can overcome this challenge.

In conclusion, the Nature-Positive paradigm forges a new frontier in education, one that harmonizes with the planet's needs. The journey toward a Nature-Positive European University Alliance requires a robust financial foundation. Through creative resource allocation, strategic partnerships, and innovative mechanisms like RUN-ERA, these alliances can fortify their fiscal standing, transforming challenges into opportunities for sustainable progress.

4. Becoming Nature-Positive – Recommendations for RUN-EU and other European University Alliances

4.1. RUN-EU picks up the gauntlet

Context is everything and in the case of RUN-EU, engagement with external (regional) stakeholders already forms a central approach to achieving our long term mission and vision. Identification and the collection of good practices are already being developed in the Alliance in, for example, entrepreneurship education (which include active connections to partners in the quadruple helix); in fostering STEAM, digital, sustainability skills in young people; and developing humanitarian support activities to communities. RUN-EU will compile a list of good practices (18 are estimated) into a public report that will guide future developments.

Through Nature Positive Measures, RUN-EU aims to create and promote a European Mobility Innovation Centre (EMIC) *Sustainable Transport Guide* to promote awareness of alternative approaches to mobility which are more sustainable and are focussed on reducing the environmental impact of RUN-EU mobility activities across the Alliance. RUN-EU partners will deliver a *Nature Positive Baseline Assessment* by M9 in the second phase of the European University Initiative that will inform the definition of concrete *RUN-EU Nature Positive Measures and Targets* by M12, to be operationalized from there until the end of the project (RUN-EU Subsidy Application, 2023, p. 93).

4.2. Recommendations for RUN-EU and other European University Alliances

Universities and European University Alliances (EUAs) specifically, have the potential to serve as key drivers of societal change and are uniquely positioned to advance sustainability. They have the capacity to conduct cutting-edge and relevant (applied) research, educate future leaders, and engage with local stakeholders in the context of the quadruple helix. By integrating sustainability into their operations, curriculum, and research agenda, universities and EUAs can lead by example and inspire other sectors to follow suit. In the context of a European University Alliance, this collective commitment to environmental sustainability can facilitate and pioneer transformative change across the European continent and the world.

4.2-1 Research Innovation, Knowledge Sharing and Partnerships

Promoting research and innovation focused on addressing environmental challenges should be a priority for the alliance. By allocating resources and providing support for interdisciplinary research projects, the alliance can contribute to the development of sustainable technologies,

practices, and policies. Furthermore, encouraging collaboration between academia and external stakeholders can facilitate the implementation and scaling up of research outcomes.

Knowledge sharing and capacity building are essential for advancing sustainability within a European University Alliance. By facilitating the exchange of best practices, expertise, and research findings, alliance members can learn from each other and develop collective strategies for sustainability. RUN-ERA, together with RUN-ESEC (RUN – European Stakeholder Engagement Center) are recommended to formulate joint agendas and action plans to operationalize stakeholder engagement from a sustainability perspective, within the context of the European Innovation Hubs and the RUN-Discovery Programme. RUN-ESEC will operate capacity-building initiatives, such as SAPs, Service to Society programs (RETOS), and collaborative research projects, which can further enhance the alliance's ability to implement sustainable practices effectively.

The European Mobility Innovation Centre (EMIC) Sustainable Transport Guide is one initiative that will help everyone involved in RUN-EU learn about eco-friendly ways of moving around and reduce the environmental impact of their mobility efforts. EMIC will continue to play an important role in the next phase of RUN-EU to facilitate the transition to Nature Positive University and Green Mobility.

Overall, collaboration with external stakeholders is vital for a European university alliance to achieve its sustainability goals. Building partnerships with businesses, NGOs, local communities, and government entities can leverage resources, expertise, and networks to amplify the impact of sustainable initiatives. In the context of RUN-EU this would involve the development of an EZ-ID (European Zone for Interregional Development). Collaborations such as EZ-ID (or similar) can foster innovative solutions, facilitate knowledge exchange, and promote wider adoption of sustainable practices beyond the academic sphere.

4.2-2 Policy Integration

To make environmental sustainability a core element of a European university alliance, it is crucial to integrate sustainability principles into the alliance's policies, strategies, and governance structures. This includes developing sustainability-focused guidelines, setting targets and indicators to measure progress, and establishing accountability mechanisms to ensure ongoing commitment. In the case of RUN-EU, this will be tackled through the objectives related to becoming Nature Positive. However, it is vital that RUN-EU members, meaning individual HEIs, formulate local, institutional policies in relation to sustainability.

4.2-3 Education, Student Engagement and Outreach

A EUA focused on environmental sustainability provides a unique platform for engaging students in real-world sustainability initiatives. By involving students in sustainability projects, internships, and fieldwork, universities can nurture a new generation of environmentally conscious graduates equipped with the skills and knowledge to tackle global environmental

challenges. This engagement fosters a sense of ownership and empowers students to become active participants in building a more sustainable future.

The alliance should develop and implement curricula and programs (e.g. SAPs, MOOCs, COILs and Double Degrees in the case of RUN-EU) that integrate sustainability across disciplines, ensuring that all students receive an interdisciplinary education on sustainability. Outreach activities, such as public lectures, awareness campaigns, and community engagement, can also raise awareness and inspire broader societal change. This initiative should be taken on by RUN-ESEC in collaboration with RUN-EMIC and the local Green and Sustainability Offices of the RUN-EU partners.

4.2-4 Infrastructure, Operations and Benchmarking

Universities within the alliance should adopt sustainable practices within their infrastructure and operations. This includes implementing energy-efficient technologies, reducing waste generation, promoting recycling and circular economy principles, and prioritizing sustainable transportation options. Sharing best practices and establishing benchmarking systems can further drive progress in sustainable infrastructure and operations across the alliance. It is recommended that RUN-EU members (and other EUAs can mirror this initiative) engage in a cross-institutional benchmarking exercise following the Nature Positive Zero Measurement and continue to compare results as the alliance(s) progresses.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the concept of nature-positive universities presents a necessary vision for higher education institutions committed to advancing sustainability. By adopting a nature-positive approach, universities and EUAs can become hubs of ecological stewardship, innovation, and collaboration, while instilling in their students a deep appreciation for the natural world and an understanding for the importance of ecological sustainability for the future.

As the world faces unprecedented environmental challenges, nature-positive universities have the potential (and responsibility) to lead the way towards a more sustainable future. It is imperative that universities seize this opportunity and work collectively to foster positive relationships between humans and nature, ensuring the well-being of future generations.

By prioritizing environmental sustainability within a European university alliance funded by the European Commission, universities can collectively address pressing global challenges. This position paper has highlighted the benefits, challenges, and recommended actions for integrating sustainability into the alliance's mission and activities. By embracing sustainability as a core principle, RUN-EU and other EUAs can foster collaboration, promote transformative change, and contribute to a more sustainable future for Europe and the world.

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