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CHARM-EU: the challenge-driven university

On 1 September 2021, 73 students started the joint-degree Master's programme Global Challenges for Sustainability. This is the first European joint-degree Master's programme launched as part of the *European University Initiative*. The programme is offered by an alliance of five European universities. In addition to Utrecht University, these include the University of Barcelona, the University of Montpellier, Trinity College Dublin and Eötvös Loránd University. Together, these five European universities constitute the CHARM-EU alliance: *CH*allenge-driven, *A*ccessible, *R*esearch-based, *M*obile *E*uropean University.

In this article, the authors discuss the background to the CHARM-EU alliance and the Global Challenges for Sustainability Master's: what is involved in offering an international programme such as this; what the success factors are and anticipated developments.

Emmanuel Macron, 2017

"I believe we should create European Universities – a network of universities across Europe with programmes that have all their students study abroad and take classes in at least two languages. These European Universities will also be drivers of educational innovation and the quest for excellence. We should set for ourselves the goal of creating at least 20 of them by 2024."

Europe

The Global Challenges for Sustainability Master's programme has its origins in the European Union. It was Emmanuel Macron who, in 2017 at Sorbonne University, shared his ideas on the creation of virtual networks of European universities, with the idea of connecting individual universities to each other on a long-term basis, thereby creating a network of partnerships.ⁱ

With a view to enabling young adults within the European Union to benefit from high-quality European education and creating job opportunities within the European labour market, agreements have been made within the European Union to establish a **European Education Area**ⁱⁱ. The European Higher Education Area applies to all the 29 European countries and regions that signed or endorsed the Bologna Declarationⁱⁱⁱ in 1999. The purpose of the Bologna Declaration was to create a common European higher education environment with mutually recognised diplomas. It was agreed that study programmes would consist of an *undergraduate* and a *graduate* component and that the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS)^{iv} would be introduced. This resulted in a European quality guarantee and the establishment of comparable degrees, and barriers to the free movement of students, lecturers and researchers were removed. See also the article by the Accreditation Organisation of the Netherlands and Flanders (NVAO) and the Commission for Efficiency in Higher Education (CDHO) elsewhere in this issue.^v

In 2017, the Council of Europe decided to promote educational cooperation in the form of new consortia of European Higher Education institutions in order to increase the overall quality of education, strengthen the international competitiveness of higher education institutions vis-à-vis the United States and Asia and promote European collaboration in the field of education. With the European Universities Initiative^{vi}, the Council of Europe aims to educate a generation of Europeans who can work together across borders (countries, cultures, languages, disciplines) to help solve the global, societal issues with which Europe is faced. The Council of Europe wants to promote European values and identity by educating students to become engaged, critically thinking

European citizens and by creating more educational opportunities for students who have difficulty accessing conventional education, as well as for professionals.^{vii}

The European Universities concept has been developed in cooperation with Member States, higher education institutions and student organisations and is co-funded by the Erasmus+ programme.^{viii} Erasmus+ promotes mobility of students and staff. For the European Universities Initiative, a grant scheme was set up to which proposed alliances could apply.

Utrecht University

The Council of Europe's initiative to create a network of European universities is in line with Utrecht University's ambitions to create an international working and learning environment, thereby encouraging an open mindset among students and staff, enabling the growth of scientific knowledge and, above all, providing better prospects for students in an ever more global labour market. These ambitions are also set out in a number of Utrecht University's strategic plans.^{ix}

Utrecht University has been involved in the development of the network of European universities from the outset and has looked for possible collaboration partners within existing networks such as LERU and the Coimbra Group. This was not easy, not only because European countries were looking for alliance partners at the same time but also because they could not be existing alliance partners. There was very little time between the publication of the grant application (autumn 2018) and the final submission of a grant proposal (February 2019).

The CHARM-EU Alliance

The current CHARM-EU Alliance was formed by a number of partners from the Coimbra Group and the LERU network. To this end, Utrecht University has joined the Coimbra Group.^x The five alliance partners have shared ambitions in the field of educational innovation, with a specific focus on mobility and inclusiveness.

Once the alliance had been formed, in late 2018, the rough outlines of the grant proposal were drawn up and the work packages were distributed among the partners. Utrecht University had ultimate responsibility for Work Package 4 Teaching & Learning Strategies and, together with Trinity College, was responsible for Curriculum Design and Pilots. These are both components form the core of the proposal and the final alliance.

The personal contacts between the initiators of CHARM-EU helped to build mutual trust. Clearly, there were cultural differences, but existing personal contacts proved very valuable. The mutual trust was reflected, among other things, in the fact that implementation of the plans had already begun before the European Commission grant had been awarded.

In the summer of 2019, the European Commission announced^{xi} that it was to award a three-year grant to the proposal submitted by Utrecht University together with the alliance partners. In 2019, the European Union approved 17 of the 54 proposals submitted. In 2020, a second round of grants followed, under which 24 of the 62 proposals submitted were approved. In 2021, there are 41 consortia involving a total of 279 European universities.

CHARM-EU was officially launched in November 2019, with the University of Barcelona as alliance manager. CHARM-EU stands for CHallenge-driven, Accessible, Research-based and Mobile European University. The alliance focuses on interdisciplinary, challenge-based education that can be followed at multiple universities: mobile, flexible, online and for different target groups. Students can follow flexible study paths, both online and face to face, at any of the five institutions. Throughout the project, research will be carried out into educational experiences and results. This research helps the alliance partners create high-quality transnational, socially driven and well-integrated educational programmes.

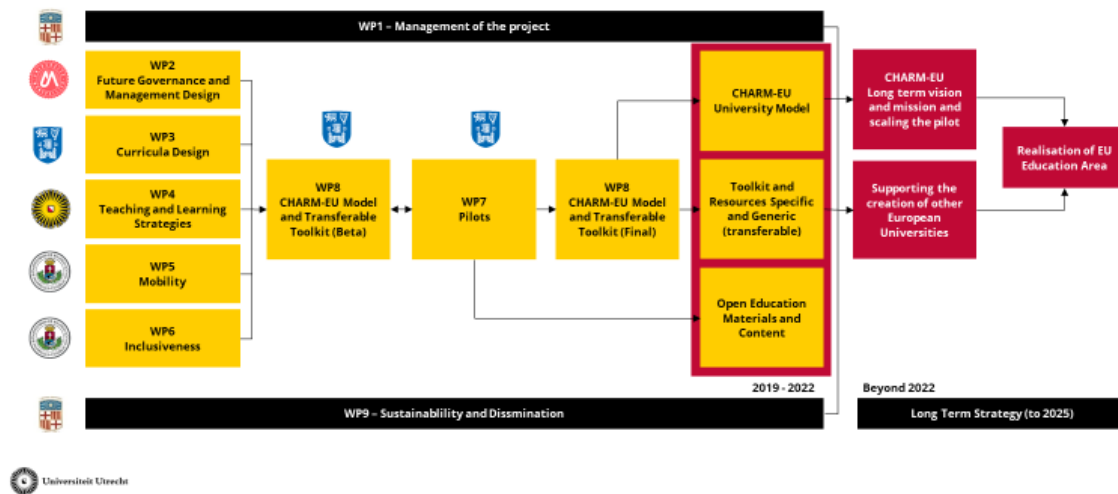
Building a joint European university such as CHARM from scratch primarily attracts innovative institutions. They enjoy doing something new and are willing to take risks. They are the pioneers who provide the connection to their network. They play a key role in getting other institutions on board.

CHARM-EU puts new educational and research concepts and the governance of a European university into practice. This makes CHARM-EU interesting not only for the partners themselves but also for other institutions involved in European higher education.

Governance

CHARM-EU has divided the tasks involved into work packages (Figure 1).

The CHARM-EU project



(Figure 1)

Managing an alliance like CHARM-EU, with five partners from different countries, each with its own background, profile, culture, organisation and national legislation, is a challenge in itself. The alliance partners agreed that, when developing the project, they must focus not only on how joint education and research should be provided but also on how the alliance should be managed (governance). As a work package, governance therefore forms part of the project.^{xii}

Work is currently under way to determine the optimum form of governance for CHARM-EU. An organic, dynamic and flexible organisational structure, which can be adapted where necessary, would seem the most obvious choice. The European Commission has been asked by all the alliances to look into a suitable legal form for the European University Initiatives. The European Commission is expected to provide feedback on this in late 2021.

CHARM-EU has invested heavily in the process of working together as a team, of understanding, valuing, trusting and respecting each other, drawing on insights from experiences of other alliances. Meetings were organised in which the competences of the participants proved to be of great importance for cooperation and the achievement of results.

Within CHARM-EU, a project manager at each university manages its organisation. At Utrecht University, the project manager is centrally embedded in the University Corporate Offices. Within the University, several faculties are involved in the various work packages. The programme itself comes under the Faculty of Geosciences.

A Joint Virtual Administration Office is responsible for the day-to-day running of the Master's programme and is managed by the alliance manager. The Joint Virtual Administration Office includes an employee from each partner who has a specific focus within the team.

First European joint-degree Master's programme

On 2 September 2021, CHARM-EU's Master's programme in Global Challenges for Sustainability was officially launched. A first: for the first time, students have the opportunity to follow a joint-degree Master's programme at a European network university, with five universities together awarding a single diploma. Students will follow their programme at the different locations and will

also visit the different locations during the course of their degree programme, either in person or virtually. With the help of a large network of extra-academic actors, CHARM-EU educates students to contribute to the solution of global, societal challenges around sustainability. The programme focuses on the skills that this requires, and the concept of *21st Century Skills*^{xiii} is key.

Innovative

CHARM-EU is committed to permanent innovation in all aspects of a university, based on an innovative concept for teaching and learning. Since Utrecht University has a wealth of experience of multidisciplinary educational innovations such as challenge-based education, student-led education and blended learning, the educational concepts and innovations of Utrecht University form the point of departure.^{xiv} CHARM-EU is a so-called 'test-bed university': the results from the evaluation of new developments can be used for further educational innovation within Utrecht University. Naturally, the same applies to the alliance partners.

Another choice related to the scope of the Master's, in terms of the number of credits. The length of 90 ECTS (European Credit Transfer System ^{xv}) in 18 months is a compromise that was brought about by the desire to develop and implement a Master's programme within the period of the project. This was a nigh on impossible task, particularly since the duration of the project – three years – was fixed and the different alliance partners have different standards for the number of study hours covered by an ECTS. Apart from Trinity College Dublin, most other EU countries apply a standard of 25-30 study hours per ECTS. On that basis, and in order to ensure that the programme was feasible for students to study, the alliance partners opted for a curriculum of 90 ECTS over an 18-month period. A 120 ECTS curriculum over two years was also discussed, and was preferred by the French partner, but it was not pursued given, among other things, the length of the project.

CHARM-EU is a virtual university with physical locations at the five partners. This means that students can start their education on the campuses of all five partners, both face to face and online. In order to facilitate education, the alliance partners have set up what are known as Hybrid Classrooms^{xvi} with facilities that enable optimal collaboration. This method was not new and had already been devised before the outbreak of COVID-19.

The CHARM-EU Master's programme

The Master's programme in Global Challenges for Sustainability focuses on three themes: water, food and health. The choice of these themes is based on a review of the research focus of the alliance partners. All five partners work in these fields, but not to the same extent. The cooperation within CHARM-EU allows the alliance partners to complement each other, thereby firmly embedding these fields across the alliance as a whole.

Transdisciplinarity and Challenge-based education are central to the programme. The programme focuses on the development of 'transversal skills'.^{xvii} The programme is open to students who have been awarded a Bachelor's degree, in any discipline.

The programme consists of three phases (Figure 2). Before the start of the programme, each student chooses to study food, water or health in more depth in phases two and three of the programme.

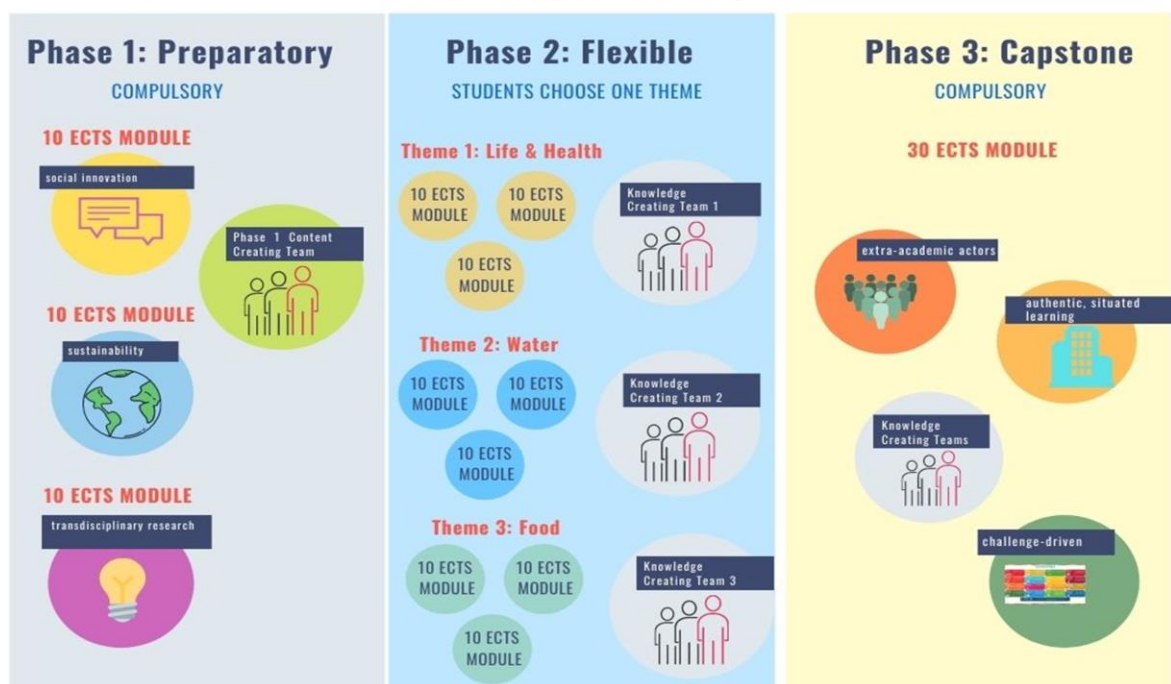


Figure 2

In phase one, students learn the basics of transdisciplinary research, social innovation and sustainability and explore specific societal challenges.

In phase two, the group is divided into three groups, which explore their own specific topic in more depth.

In phase three, each student works on their own Challenge-Based Capstone. These challenges are concrete societal challenges, supplied by companies or public organisations. Each student is encouraged to spend one of the phases at a location other than the main location.

Initially, development of the programme relied mainly on the educational expertise of Utrecht University. The innovative capabilities of Educate-it^{xviii} and the Centre for Academic Teaching^{xix} and the support provided by the expertise of academics were extremely valuable to the development of the Master's programme. In 2020, forum discussions with external stakeholders were held to shape the programme content, and Knowledge Creation Teams^{xx} were formed. Within Utrecht University, many faculties are involved in the programme. From the organisation, development of content, didactic expertise, programmatic testing and guest lectures to proposing 'challenges' for students to explore in phase three.

Accreditation and labour market relevance

In order to enable the creation of the European Higher Education Area, the commission has drawn up agreements regarding, among other things, the quality of the education, the use of ECTS and the number of study hours per ECTS, the mutual recognition of diplomas and the issuing of a joint degree. Still, whatever has been agreed, the various partners each have their own national laws and regulations and responsibilities. This meant that all five CHARM-EU partners had to jump through their own national hoops to be able, as universities, to offer the joint-degree Master's programme Global Changes for Sustainability.

If a Dutch university is to be able to offer a programme whose diplomas are legally recognised, the programme must be listed in the Central Register of Higher Education Programmes (CROHO). To this end, two procedures have to be followed: the 'macro-efficiency' test (*toets macrodoelmatigheid*) by the Commission for Efficiency in Higher Education (CDHO) and accreditation by the Accreditation Organisation of the Netherlands and Flanders (NVAO). Both procedures can be undertaken at the same time, and given the urgency of the situation, this was obviously the option that was chosen. If it was to be possible to launch the programme in September 2021, a CROHO label was required.

Elsewhere in this issue, we look in general terms at both the 'macro-efficiency' test and accreditation based on the European Approach.^{xxi} This article gives an insight into how Utrecht University fared in taking all the formal steps needed to be able to launch the Master's programme in Global Changes for Sustainability.

In the context of the European Approach, the partners first of all found a committee of international experts willing to review the new programme. The chair was from the Netherlands. After a visit in December 2020, the external review board gave a positive rating for all nine criteria and also made a number of recommendations. The alliance partners immediately took the recommendations on board and developed improvement plans. Based on the European Approach, the next step was for one of the national accreditation organisations to accredit the report of the external review board. This was done by the Spanish accreditation organisation (Agència per la Qualitat del Sistema Universitari de Catalunya). Once AQ Catalunya had accredited the programme, the way was clear for Utrecht University to apply for accreditation from the NVAO. Based on the European Approach, the NVAO carried out a basic assessment of the programme. It did, however, have a number of questions, e.g. regarding the number of credits in relation to the length of the programme. Having received satisfactory answers to the questions raised, the new programme was accredited by the NVAO in June 2021.

The 'macro-efficiency' test had its own approach and dynamics. Not all of the CHARM-EU alliance partners have such a test, and at times, it was therefore seen as an unnecessary delay. All in all, it was no easy task for Utrecht University. Not only because the macro-efficiency test's current criteria are based on the Dutch labour market but also because, in some cases, this concerned professions that do not yet exist. Although there were commitments from the external cooperation partners of the CHARM-EU Alliance to accept graduates from the Master's programme, the initial application was not satisfactory. The main problem here was the inability to convincingly demonstrate the need for graduates from the programme on the Dutch labour market. Following discussions between the CDHO and Utrecht University, Utrecht University engaged an external organisation to help with an exploration of the labour market, both now and in the future. The second attempt was successful. In mid-July 2021, following a positive report from the CDHO, the Minister of Education, Culture and Science granted approval, acknowledging that there was a need in the Netherlands for the Master's programme in Global Challenges for Sustainability. The first European joint-degree Master's programme under the European Universities Initiative^{xxii} in our country.

With the accreditation and the approval from the Minister of Education, Culture and Science, a CROHO label was requested from the Education Executive Agency (DUO). At last, students who had applied for the programme could register and the programme could actually get started.

CHARM-EU in the future

In the years ahead, CHARM-EU will continue to focus on expanding the existing joint degree programme, but it will also embrace more flexible approaches such as 'micro-credentials'.^{xxiii} Other European university networks are already gaining experience in this field. We are keen to learn from them, just as we are keen to share our experiences with others.

In addition, work is under way to set up joint research in joint PhD programmes and the TORCH project^{xxiv}. TORCH focuses on research around the education offered by CHARM-EU. TORCH was launched in early 2021 and is funded by the EU research project HORIZON 2020.^{xxv}

The CHARM-EU Alliance is also keen to increase the number of partners within the CHARM-EU Alliance in order to strengthen the alliance's position. This has the support of the European

Commission. Not only in terms of the number of partners in the university networks themselves but also in terms of the number of university networks.

We began this article by discussing the European Commission's aim with the Higher Education Area and European universities: to educate a generation of Europeans capable of working across borders, to promote European values and identity, to make higher education more accessible, to share experiences of educational innovations and to strengthen the competitiveness of European universities. That is why the European Commission wants to increase the number of universities in a network.

When the CHARM-EU alliance partners set to work, there was a great deal of scepticism as to whether it would be possible to develop the joint-degree Master's programme in such a short space of time. However, thanks to the efforts and cooperation of many, the trust in and respect for each other and the use of each other's expertise in the right places, the CHARM-EU alliance has succeeded and can play its part in educating a generation of Europeans who are capable of working across borders.

'Together, we can achieve more', says the article on the European Higher Education Area by the NVAO and CDHO elsewhere in this issue. How true that is.

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End notes

ⁱ [Sorbonne speech of Emmanuel Macron – Full text / English version: Tout un monde \(ouest-france.fr\)](#)

ⁱⁱ [European Education Area \(europa.eu\)](#)

ⁱⁱⁱ [European Higher Education Area and Bologna Process \(eha.info\)](#)

^{iv} [ECTS users' guide - European Commission \(europa.eu\)](#)

^v See also the article by the NVAO (Lineke van Bruggen) and the CDHO (Veerle Slegers-Sanderink) elsewhere in this issue.

^{vi} [European Universities Initiative | Education and Training \(europa.eu\)](#)

^{vii} [Continuing Education – Utrecht University \(uu.nl\)](#)

^{viii} [Erasmus+ | EU programme for education, training, youth and sport \(europa.eu\)](#)

^{ix} [Strategic Plan 2025 – Utrecht University \(uu.nl\)](#)

^x **COIMBRA partners** in CHARM-EU: UB, TCD, Elte, Montpellier, UU. See [CG statement on European Universities Networks | Coimbra \(coimbra-group.eu\)](#)

LERU partners in CHARM: UB, TCD, UU. See [23 leading universities pushing the frontiers of innovative research | LERU](#)

^{xi} https://ec.europa.eu/education/education-in-the-eu/european-education-area_en

^{xii} Concepts, challenges and lessons learned from the higher education sector and beyond. Report presented to the Rectors Assembly of the CHARM-EU European University alliance. *Mirko Noordergraaf, UU, 2020.*

^{xiii} Skills that graduates need in the 21st century. See [Educate-it | 21st Century Skills \(uu.nl\)](#)

^{xiv} [Strategic Plan 2025 – Utrecht University \(uu.nl\)](#)

^{xv} [What is the European Credit Transfer System \(ECTS\)? | Study.eu](#)

^{xvi} A hybrid Active Learning Classroom is an Active Learning Classroom that enables students/groups in situ to collaborate online with other students/groups who are studying remotely. See [Hybrid Active Learning Classroom | Utrecht University \(uu.nl\)](#)

^{xvii} Skills that, generally speaking, are not specifically related to a particular job, task, academic discipline or field of knowledge and that can be used in a wide variety of situations and work settings (e.g. organisational skills). See [Transversal skills: what are they and why are they so important?: Skills and Education Group](#)

^{xviii} [Educate-it | Strengthen your education | Homepage \(uu.nl\)](#)

^{xix} [Centre for Academic Teaching – Utrecht University \(uu.nl\)](#)

^{xx} Knowledge Creating Teams are collaborative groups of academics, researchers and extra-academic actors formed around a common expertise/interest in a sustainability theme. See [Knowledge Creating Teams | CHARM-EU](#)

^{xxi} <https://www.nvao.net/nl/european-approach-for-quality-assurance-of-joint-programmes>

^{xxii} [European Universities Initiative | Education and Training \(europa.eu\)](#)

^{xxiii} Micro-credentials are mini-qualifications that demonstrate skills, knowledge and/or experience in a particular field. They can be obtained both within and outside of a formal educational setting.

^{xxiv} [HOME TORCH | CHARM-EU](#)

^{xxv} [Horizon 2020 projects | Horizon 2020 \(europa.eu\)](#)