

# Celebrating Five Years of European Bioeconomy Excellence

Written by Andreas Pyka<sup>1</sup> and Iris Lewanowski<sup>1</sup>, with the contribution and layout of Damiano Cilio<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>University of Hohenheim, <sup>2</sup>BOKU University

The modern knowledge-based bioeconomy plays a key role in successfully managing the transformation towards greater sustainability in the economy and society and in achieving climate targets. For the bioeconomy, it is particularly important to focus on sustainability and the circular economy as well as the use of bio-based renewable resources in order to accelerate the phase-out of the fossil-based, climate-damaging economy in the provision of resources on the one hand, and to significantly increase resource efficiency in line with the planetary boundaries by avoiding waste on the other. To this end, six universities that play a leading role in the field of bioeconomy in their respective countries of origin joined forces in July 2019, five years ago, to form a scientific bioeconomy alliance.

## The establishment of the European Bioeconomy University

The idea for this inter-university network was inspired by the "Initiative for Europe", which French President Emmanuel Macron called for in

September 2017. To further develop its internationalization, research and teaching strategy, the management of the University of Hohenheim took the initiative and looked for potential European partners in the field of bioeconomy, which would also ensure broad coverage of all bioeconomic research areas. The approached partners welcomed the initiative with open arms and great efforts were invested to pursue this plan and support the corresponding preparations with financial and human resources.

A name was quickly found for the university network that was thus being created. Indeed, with the "Initiative for Europe" speaking of European universities that could and should make an important contribution to the future of Europe, the alliance was conceived under the name "European Bioeconomy University" (EBU). The collaboration was officially established with the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding in Brussels on 3 July 2019, less than two years after Emmanuel Macron's speech.



Fig. 1 - Representatives from all EBU founding universities together in Brussels, Belgium for the signing of the Memorandum of Understanding on 3 July 2019

EBU was established with the mission of becoming Europe's leading intellectual institution in tackling the enormous environmental, economic and societal challenges of the 21st century, promoting a necessary and just transformation in Europe.

Since its foundation, the alliance was designed to act not only as a think tank for knowledge generation but also as a creative hub for knowledge exchange to transform diversity into creativity, support the European approach of democratic, transparent, and participative processes and foster actual change innovatively and sustainably. As a new form of inter- and transnational university, EBU was meant to build a bridge across disciplines, connecting students and researchers in their efforts to create a knowledge-based bioeconomy in Europe.

### An Alliance of Leading Institutions

The founding members were AgroParisTech (France), the Universities of Bologna (Italy), the University of Eastern Finland (Finland), the University of Hohenheim (Germany), BOKU University (Austria) and Wageningen University and Research Centre (Netherlands). The EBU Alliance aims to exploit synergies and complementarities in the diverse European bioeconomy landscape and has been open to collaborations beyond the original alliance from the outset. It is therefore not surprising that EBU has now grown to eight universities in its first five years with the addition of two further excellent universities. Since 2022, the Warsaw University of Life Science (Poland) and the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences (Sweden) have been enriching the alliance with their expertise and knowledge as affiliated universities, to then join as core members in 2023. Due to the proximity to application and the high political relevance of the bioeconomy in Europe, EBU has attracted great interest from other stakeholders outside academia since its foundation, which has led to the inclusion of other large alliances such as BIOEAST, the industry association European Bioplastics and the international organization European Forest Institute in its network as Associated Partners.

The EBU's partners share the EU's ideas as set out in its bioeconomy strategy and ultimately in the Green Deal. They are convinced that new bioeconomic knowledge and specific skills are needed to fully exploit the opportunities, requiring interdisciplinary cooperation. The Alliance has the power to drive Europe's transformation towards a knowledge-based bioeconomy by uniting expertise in the fields of the production of biological resources, their conversion into high-quality food,

biobased products and services, as well as the economic and sustainability assessment of these processes. Building on the complementarities and existing successful collaborations, the eight universities have decided to further intensify their cooperation with the European Bioeconomy University and jointly tackle the central challenges of the bioeconomy in Europe.

### Building Expertise: EBU's Joint Education Strategy

The transformation towards greater sustainability requires important new scientific findings, as well as the people who are willing and able to implement the new knowledge in companies, start-ups, and civil society organizations, including consumers and policymakers. Considering that both technical and social innovations must drive the transfer of knowledge from research to business and society, the training of a new generation of experts to join forces with becomes a necessity. In these regards, an important and concrete step taken by EBU to achieve this has been the development and implementation of a joint education strategy.



*Fig. 2 - FOEBE+ students during the study week at WUR in April 2024*

As part of this strategic and cooperative approach to education at all levels and to deliver the skills required for the transition to a sustainable European bioeconomy, the EBU has indeed developed educational formats spanning from both Master and PhD levels to lifelong learning and public education, which are supported by EU funding. After five years, it is clear that the strategic considerations made, addressing the needs of scientific and policy arenas in Europe, were correct. During these 5 years, important research projects have been carried out and new bioeconomy-related knowledge has been created. Several cohorts of students have taken part in EBU's educational programmes and, particularly important for rapid implementation of innovative solutions, numerous start-ups and university spin-offs have been founded and have been working in close contact with the network.



## EBU's Adapting Governance: Steering the EBU towards the future

The governance of the Alliance has also evolved and adapted to the constantly changing environmental conditions. One major challenge was certainly the pandemic, which made cooperation processes more complicated, considering that it happened shortly after the network was founded. Thanks to the strong commitment of all partners involved, EBU overcame the crisis thriving even more than before. During these times, the Chair of the Presidency Alliance, initially held by the University of Hohenheim with its Rector Professor Stephan Dabbert for two years, was extended by one year to face the demands forced upon the Alliance by the pandemic, following the founding phase; this enabled EBU to build a solid foundation. The Presidency Chair then passed to BOKU University in Vienna in 2022 with the new Rector Professor Eva Schulev-Steindl entering into force for 2022- 2024, whose guidance has promoted further development with expertise and the provision of resources with a wide range of support and ideas. In this anniversary year, the Chair of the Presidency will then be passed on to the University of Eastern Finland (UEF) at the end of 2024 and we can already look forward to new accents from one of our northernmost partners in the alliance.



Fig. 3 - The Coordination Group at an in-person meeting in Warsaw in June 2024

At the heart of EBU is the Coordination Group, which is made up of scientists and internationalisation strategists from all partner universities, responsible for planning joint activities, coordinating joint efforts and setting up internal and external communication processes.

The official in-person general meeting of all European Bioeconomy University Alliance's (EBU) representatives is held biennially in combination with a scientific forum. The EBU's Scientific Forum provides a European platform to strengthen EBU's network and engagement, while also fostering collaborations between the different stakeholders involved in the bioeconomy field on the European level, especially the youth. Although the first event at the University of Hohenheim had to take place online due to the pandemic, the second EBU Scientific Forum with over 220 participants from science, politics and practice took place in September 2023 at the BOKU in Vienna. The next EBU Scientific Forum will take place in Joensuu in June 2025 under the next EBU Presidency Chair of the UEF.



Fig. 4 - One of the sessions of the European Bioeconomy Scientific Forum 2023 that took place in Vienna, Austria