

Beyond Borders The SEA-EU Alliance

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*SEA-EU is a University Alliance forging a strategic partnership among coastal universities across Europe. **THINK's Jonathan Firbank** speaks to **Prof. Alan Deidun**, UM Rector's Delegate for SEA-EU, about the many rewards of this partnership – from the academic to the cultural and beyond.*

Despite being relatively recent initiatives, European University Alliances are increasingly gaining recognition as a strategic priority for the European Union, particularly for strengthening long-term transnational cooperation in higher education, research, innovation, and societal engagement. This flagship initiative creates networks across higher education institutions in pursuit of joint initiatives, including those in education, internationalisation, and research, to build impactful networks that not only link campuses but also connect countries in deep and demonstrable ways.

The University of Malta is a founding member of the European University of the Seas (SEA-EU) Alliance, an initiative that commenced in 2019 to connect coastal universities from around the continent. The SEA-EU Office at UM falls under the Pro-Rectorate for Strategic Planning and Sustainability, led by Pro-Rector Prof. Valerie Sollars, with Prof. Alan Deidun serving as the UM Rector's Delegate for SEA-EU and the SEA-EU Association Treasurer. They are both closely involved in the integration and strategic development of the Alliance at UM, while Senior

Manager Maria Grima Calleja, who oversees the SEA-EU office and its team, drives this crucial endeavour.

As Deidun explains, 'SEA-EU is one of 73 European University Alliances being supported by the EU through the Erasmus+ funding programme. These alliances incorporate over 650 universities, a substantive chunk of European universities, which number around 3000. SEA-EU itself has nine partner universities.' In addition to UM, these include Cádiz (coordinators), Brest, Kiel, Gdańsk, Split, Algarve, Parthenope in Naples, and NORD in Norway. 'Their locations stretch from the border of the Arctic Circle to the central Mediterranean, from westernmost Portugal to as far east as Poland. SEA-EU covers quite a few latitudes and longitudes; we're quite representative!'

SHARING VALUES

Alliances such as SEA-EU build and strengthen inter-university networks. 'Through shared governance structures involving rectorates, various boards, and committees with representation from the alliance members, universities are



able to establish joint initiatives, align strategic priorities, and develop shared tools and services,' Grima Calleja says. The mobility of staff and students, a bedrock of higher education, is also facilitated by university alliances. Deidun describes this as a 'cardinal point' of these collaborations. The EU has set a target for 50% of alliance-member students to benefit from mobility, which typically involves a blend of 'virtual mobility' via communications infrastructure and physical mobility for people who want to teach or learn in a new country. Being able to share resources and knowledge is clearly a massive boon to academia.

But there are subtler benefits that, over time, prove just as important. A key part of the alliance's mission is to strengthen shared values. 'Qualifying yourself as European isn't just about citizenship; there are core European principles. These tend to come to the fore when a potential new member state applies to join the EU; it will have to meet certain criteria. While we maintain our own identities, we share common principles that connect people from the Mediterranean to the Arctic Circle.' European identity is challenging to articulate

due to this pluralism. It is so pluralistic that it is not wholly confined to Europe's borders. But this pluralism, along with other foundational ideals like egalitarianism, humanism, and liberty, remains powerful in spite of this complexity.

University alliances both represent and give structure to these common values. On the one hand, 'this common set of principles allows us to move forward, they provide a solid starting point for future collaboration'. On the other hand, the 'principles we adhere to reinforce a sense of cohesion, of European identity.' The EU's immensely popular Erasmus+ programmes are visible demonstrations of Europe's best qualities. Visibility has a quality of its own. A University Alliance can advocate for these values as an institution. Deidun has recently represented SEA-EU at a panel on the European Ocean Pact, which seeks to strategise and then legislate Europe's Blue Economy – the economy around marine infrastructure and ecosystems – in a bid to render it sustainable. This is just one of several opportunities in 2026 that SEA-EU can harness to ethically influence EU marine policy. ➔



Left: From left to right: Prof. Alan Deidun, Rector's Delegate for SEA-EU, Prof. Alfred J. Vella, Rector of the University of Malta, and Prof. Valerie Sollars, Pro-Rector for Strategic Planning and Sustainability, celebrating the 5th anniversary of the SEA-EU Alliance, a partnership they have been instrumental in supporting and advancing at the University of Malta.

Right: Celebration of the 5th Anniversary of the SEA-EU Alliance – Friday, 21 February 2025

Photos courtesy of UM's SEA-EU Office

SEA LINKS

A commonality of SEA-EU members is, of course, their maritime heritage. Each university is close to a major harbour. As Deidun explains, 'This is the gel, the nexus that connects these partner universities.' Thus, the sea proved to be a starting point for the SEA-EU Alliance. Marine and maritime fields tend to be resource-intensive and dependent on collaboration, and were central to SEA-EU's initial mission in 2019. In addition to accredited intensive programmes that offer micro-credentials, 'SEA-EU has launched three joint education programmes, a bachelor's and two master's degrees, and we are *en route* to having a joint PhD.'

The undergraduate degree on sustainability in the Blue Economy – created and delivered collaboratively by seven SEA-EU members – is the SeaBlue programme. This allows students to move through countries and engage with projects and industry as they study this definitively international subject. SEA-EU has also launched MIPMAL, a joint master's in port management and logistics, which offers a similar degree of mobility. If, for example, a student is learning how to make this space more sustainable, they will need to interact with the private sector. 'SEA-EU has a number of councils. It has a Student Council, for example, but also a Stakeholders

Group and a Cities and Ports Council. There are people from transport authorities, and people from aquaculture.' This means that SEA-EU facilitates mobility beyond universities. 'Stakeholders get to speak to their peers from other countries within these bodies. This creates additional societal impact beyond campus, while still widening our capacity for research.'

The third, equally mobile education programme, STORM, is another master's degree, this time in organisational sustainability and resilience management. 'While the sea is a factor that has connected the participating SEA-EU universities, our mission and research go beyond marine and maritime studies and research. Four years ago, we opened up collaboration among the universities in other sectors. Several other academics and faculties have started joining forces.' Collaborations have extended to include the humanities, UM's Faculty of Theology, as well as the Faculties of Science and Engineering. 'We also have collaboration among people in medicine, sports, and communication... a lot of sectors. The Alliance, nowadays, is much more inclusive. And, of course, all faculties and disciplines are welcome to participate in this cooperation.'

Cooperation is not restricted just to joint education and research initiatives. Events are also front and centre – football tournaments, photo exhibitions, and musical performances



Left: Representatives from SEA-EU Alliance partner universities gathered for SEA-EU Governing Week 2025.

Right: From left to right: Rectors representing the SEA-EU Alliance members on the day the SEA-EU Association was established as the alliance's legal entity – Prof. Doctor Paulo Águas (University of the Algarve), Prof. Dragan Ljutić (University of Split), Vice President Prof. Ralph Schneider (University of Kiel), Prof. Alfred J. Vella (University of Malta), Prof. Antonio Garofalo (The Parthenope University of Naples), Prof. Casimiro Mantell (The University of Cadiz), Prof. Hanne Solheim Hansen (University of NORD), Prof. Piotr Stepnowski (University of Gdansk), Prof. Pascal Olivard (University of Brest).

Photos courtesy of UM's SEA-EU Office

are some notable examples of cultural exchange. Nor is SEA-EU just connecting academics and students. Administrative staff are equally well-positioned to engage with and exchange insights and practices with colleagues from other universities. 'For example, our library staff organised a SEA-EU Library Staff Week for SEA-EU staff employed in libraries. They exchanged perspectives and information about methodologies and policies that they adopt when addressing situations and challenges of mutual interest.'

MALTA'S PLACE

Malta was particularly well-positioned to play a key role in SEA-EU: as one of the very few European island nations and one of the even smaller number of countries with English as an official language. 'Perhaps the most challenging aspect of establishing SEA-EU was turning it into a legal entity.' Given that English is, at this point, the world's second most widespread language, it is also SEA-EU's 'operational language'. Registering it as an association in Malta was a far smoother process because of this, and UM holds the treasurer role for the same reason. 'This is a bit of a feather in Malta's cap. Not every University Alliance reaches this stage; it can be very tricky, but UM's legal office did a fantastic job. An association can employ staff and apply for funding

under its own steam' – a complementary institution that reduces rather than increases each university's workload.

As Deidun states, the 'reputational gain' from UM's contribution is just a fraction of how SEA-EU benefits Malta. 'For example, just before this interview, I was speaking with Kiel's Dean of Engineering, Prof. Dr Martina Gerken, who is organising a workshop or seminar here this autumn.' This venture is supported by SEA-EU research seed funds that are conditional on university collaboration. The subject could not be more useful to Malta. 'The event will focus on developing a probe to test water for its nitrate content. This is very relevant to Malta because our groundwater, which is used for irrigation, is too nitrate-rich from fertiliser runoff. Currently, the water is tested through a complicated and costly laboratory technique. A probe could test the water *in situ*, saving time and money. The seminar will invite local stakeholders working in water services, connecting not just academics and students but also other professionals who would be engaging with this emerging technology. This is a particularly telling example of the benefits that University Alliances like SEA-EU bring to Europe. Two universities at opposite ends of an entire continent are innovating, collaborating, and then disseminating their work at speeds once impossible, for the benefit of all. 