

How to make Europe more sustainable and competitive through higher education, innovation and research

Open letter to leaders of political groups in the European Parliament, ahead of the May 2019 elections

March 2019

Dear Group Chairs,

With the European elections in May, and Brexit swiftly approaching, Europe is at a crossroads. The new European Parliament and the next Commission will have a major responsibility for shaping the Union in these challenging times. The 2019 elections are important for universities, and the millions of students enrolled in higher education across the continent.

The European University Association (EUA) represents more than 800 universities in 48 countries with more than 18 million students. As the largest pan-European organisation of this type, we would like you to consider joining forces with us and engaging in a debate on key European higher education and research policies that are crucial for the future of Europe. We would be interested in your views and would like to see the new European Parliament collaborating with the university sector, addressing the many common societal challenges we share in our countries and regions.

The impact of universities is felt locally, nationally and internationally. As centres of knowledge production and dissemination, and incubators of innovative ideas, they have an important role to play. With half of Europe's youth, and many lifelong learners, entering higher education, universities are key to empowering new generations through skills and knowledge that enable them to contribute to society. Universities also generate the main body of research in most European countries, enhancing Europe's knowledge base. And, as part of their civic role, universities host many of the political and social debates that help shape the public's views.

Due to these various roles, universities are instrumental in realising the ambitions for a competitive, sustainable and strong Europe. To maximise their potential, though, universities need supportive national and European policies and funding frameworks.

We look forward to working together and have prepared some key questions that we kindly ask you to answer. We will disseminate your responses throughout our community. In addition, several of our national member associations are contacting candidates in their countries to start a similar discussion.

Sincerely yours,

Rolf Tarrach,

EUA President

1) European Education Area

Europe can improve educational opportunities by working together. The European Education Area, outlined in a [Commission Communication from November 2017](#), includes initiatives such as creating European Universities as networks of institutions from across Europe, as well as proposing concrete actions to increase mobility and the recognition of diploma and study periods abroad for the benefit of students, universities, and employers. These initiatives will facilitate cooperation and exchange across the continent, enabling universities to work closer together, thus improving the quality of both teaching and research. This in turn will enable universities to respond to the needs of society, solve global challenges and empower students for a changing world.

- **How can we make the European Education Area a reality and how do you see the role of the European Parliament in this regard?**

2) European research and innovation

We are living in an era of major technological change, with advances in research and innovation transforming societies profoundly. Europe is a global leader in research and should aspire to lead the world in innovation. Unleashing this potential requires substantial investment in both curiosity-driven research, that creates disruptive ideas, and in the innovation ecosystems where these ideas are applied to provide new solutions. It also requires a European Research Area with free flows of knowledge, not least through open science. Universities play a key role here as places where knowledge is created, often through partnership with bodies in the public, private sectors, and civil society, but they need a Europe that invests in and facilitates cooperation.

- **What do you think the EU can do to further European research and innovation?**

3) EU funding for cooperation and mobility

The EU funding programmes for higher education and research, Erasmus and the Framework Programme for Research and Innovation, are strong assets for Europe and its citizens. These are unique examples of truly multilateral programmes that give students and researchers the opportunity to learn and grow by moving around within Europe and collaborating with the very best. Universities have capitalised on these opportunities to deliver high quality education and cutting-edge research and innovation. However, both programmes have suffered from underfunding in the past, and the current European Parliament has rightly called for substantial increases for the next programme period (2021-2027), proposing 120 billion euros for Horizon Europe and 41 billion euros for Erasmus.

- **How can we ensure sufficient and sustainable funding for European cooperation and mobility in higher education and research?**

4) Academic freedom as a core European value

Across the world, universities and academics are under attack and find it increasingly difficult to research and teach due to political pressure. In Europe, academic freedom is a key value central to the Union and protected by the European Charter of Fundamental Rights. Without academic freedom and institutional autonomy, universities cannot fulfil their missions in education, research and innovation, citizens are denied access to knowledge, and policy makers are unable to act upon sound evidence.

- **How can we protect academic freedom as a core European value?**

5) European education and research in the world

In a time of changing geopolitical constellations, European achievements in education and research collaboration are regarded as models for international exchange, collaboration, and coordinated reform. Furthermore, Europe's innovation capacity, if developed strategically, can be a key asset to ensuring its independence. Universities contribute both to retaining and developing contacts between communities across the world, and they provide the knowledge and innovation to maintain Europe as an independent global player at the level of other knowledge societies.

- **How should Europe evolve its capacity in education and research to retain leadership at the global level?**