

POSITION

EUA response to the European Commission's New European Innovation Agenda

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Introduction

The European University Association welcomes the European Commission's [Communication on A New European Innovation Agenda](#) and its focus on some of Europe's key strengths in innovation. As stated in its [response to the Commission's call for evidence](#), EUA agrees that an overarching innovation agenda is needed to tackle specific bottlenecks which stunt Europe's innovation performance, and to achieve consistency and effective implementation of the various tools available for this purpose. The communication rightly highlights nurturing innovative talent and entrepreneurial skills, streamlining support systems and policies and boosting interregional cooperation as important facets of the innovation imperative. The vast potential to leverage existing strengths in these areas is essential to meeting the objectives of the green and digital transitions and addressing a wide array of societal challenges. Therefore, the Commission's Innovation Agenda should represent a major opportunity to take stock of available resources and to explore new ways of reducing the fragmentation of innovation ecosystems and the asymmetries between different innovation actors.

Nevertheless, EUA contends that despite the overall framing of the challenges ahead and the understanding of policies and funding as valuable instruments in this context, the Agenda is less effective in outlining concrete steps. While acknowledging the relevance of the issues highlighted in the communication and the basic premise that Europe can do more to unleash its innovative potential, EUA regrets that an often accurate diagnosis of the issues is met with a far too narrow prescription of the remedies. In EUA's view, this stems from a conceptualisation of innovation which is far too conventional to truly capture what Europe does best as an innovator and to legitimise the most appropriate measures for improving its performance.

Points of concern

THE CONCEPTUALISATION OF INNOVATION

As EUA argued in its recent report, [Universities as key drivers of sustainable innovation ecosystems](#), innovation entails knowledge co-creation and transfer that generates social, economic and environmental benefits by means of novel ideas, approaches, technologies or ways of organising. Ensuring that new solutions are the right ones, and that Europe embarks on an innovation path that is relevant and realistic, therefore depends on properly grasping societal needs and demands. Achieving this requires a conceptualisation of innovation as a process driven by co-creation, rather than as an outcome driven by technical solutions.

While the opening section of the Commission's communication refers to transformative innovation driven by systemic approaches, subsequent sections largely reduce innovation to technological development and deployment, with much attention devoted to deep tech start-ups and their financing. Further references to diversifying suppliers, businesses and markets, and a persistent emphasis on international comparisons and competitiveness, suggest a notion of innovation that is more transactional, based mainly on the creation of products and companies, rather than transformational, with an emphasis on processes across the whole innovation chain. Moreover, while the Agenda touches upon the role of place-based innovation and local ecosystems, it unfortunately conveys a sense of misalignment between expectations for very specific technical solutions for (global) market deployment and local particularities which are reduced to whether a region can produce and deploy such solutions.

A truly ecosystem-based perspective, such as the one promoted by EUA in its recent report, averts such a misalignment, because it takes as its starting point the open and systematic interactions between academia, government, the private sector and the general public which are at the core of innovation ecosystems. The question of what kind of excellence hubs or value chains are most conducive to developing deep tech in particular areas is secondary to whether all these different actors are properly acknowledged for their valuable expertise and insights into what their communities need. Technological and industrial solutions may well respond to some of these needs, but it is just as likely for social innovation and social entrepreneurship, or for perspectives from the Social Sciences, Humanities and the Arts, to help unleash Europe's innovative potential. EUA strongly recommends a conceptual broadening of the Commission's plans, to avert an overemphasis on innovation as a product, and to recognise different stakeholders' contributions to the implementation of this Agenda.

THE ROLE OF UNIVERSITIES

EUA's 2022 innovation survey report demonstrates that innovation draws on the entire research and development chain. This ranges from curiosity-driven research to applied research and development activities, as well as the sphere of education and training, and depends on capabilities and resources for innovation uptake determined by political, cultural and socio-economic systems. The complexity of this process illustrates the instrumental role of universities in connecting different knowledge communities, different sectors and the many disciplines that help define the best approaches to current and future societal challenges. Against this backdrop, the relatively few references to the higher education sector in the communication predominantly portray universities as providers of quantifiable inputs to industrial value chains. Customary references to patents, publications or number of talents trained over a fixed period of time serve to reinforce this limited understanding of what universities can do and are already doing for innovation in Europe.

The issue also goes back to the framing of the role of the public sector in the communication, as mainly a procurer, enabler or regulator of private innovation, and less as an innovator itself. This framing appears to privilege the adoption of a few cutting-edge technologies such as

artificial intelligence or blockchain in public administration, along with ensuring the interoperability of digital services. However, the development of radical, new ideas is not the preserve of private actors, and neither is their diffusion a one-way process, from private to public. As public institutions, universities demonstrate that blue sky ideas with transformative potential emerge from the sustained interaction of academics and students from different disciplines with various external partners, and that prospects for commercial deployment are not the only incentive for, or driver of, innovation.

Education and training programmes increasingly revolve around societal challenges, and new approaches such as problem-based learning and living labs can contribute to the emergence of new solutions. The EUA innovation survey report highlights that universities are ideal environments to tackle the green and digital transitions by bringing diverse disciplines together. More than 70% of respondents regard the creation of interdisciplinary institutes as either very important or important for innovation in the sustainable transition, while more than 90% consider interdisciplinarity to be either very important or important as an enabler of digital innovation.

The European Commission's Innovation Agenda should have been an opportunity to acknowledge these diverse assets of the European innovation landscape and to explore ways to further support them. However, with this communication such assets are secondary to an all-encompassing focus on technological solutions and economic competitiveness, which narrows the prospect for truly synergistic pursuit of societal benefits by all innovation stakeholders. This translates into a rather muddled array of new aims and schemes which lack clear prioritisation or credible commitment of means. It also obscures the link between a commitment to effective public regulations and the question of what kind of society Europe should ultimately be as compared to other world regions facing the twin transition. Hence, despite the visionary notion of fostering a truly pan-European Innovation Ecosystem, the Agenda unfortunately gives the impression that vision trumps implementation, especially as few resources are made available to address more fundamental innovation issues alongside newer objectives. EUA would therefore like to pinpoint several elements which should have been considered in drafting the Agenda and which can hopefully still be taken into account in its implementation.

Points for further consideration

- Innovation ecosystems thrive on new ideas, the disruptive potential of which is not an automatic result of mission-oriented approaches or directionality in the use of R&I funds.
EUA is a firm advocate of recognising the value of curiosity-driven research, which is all too often underestimated given the prevalence of economic measures for defining R&I impact.
- Boosting Europe's innovation performance will not be resolved unless the question of capacity building and inclusiveness is at the core of any initiative to close R&I gaps and reduce asymmetries.
EUA supports the pursuit of innovation while being mindful of inclusiveness, so that improved performance draws on improved capacity for all the different national contexts, institutional profiles and university missions.
- The steady flow of ideas between actors within the ecosystem has proven the merits of the Open Innovation paradigm, which has helped many European regions recover from crises and boost their resilience.
EUA believes in the value of multi-stakeholder coordination and calls for support to universities in interacting with companies and civil society to co-create a fertile environment for knowledge development and mutual exchange.
- Recognising staff innovation activities as part of career assessment is not yet common practice at many universities, in particular when innovation is considered in the broader sense, beyond IP commercialisation and establishing innovative businesses.
EUA calls for support to universities in reforming their academic career assessment with the aim of recognising a wide range of academic staff contributions, including innovation activities. Universities must be able to consider staff innovation in a broader sense, including its economic, social, cultural, ethical and environmental impacts.
- Universities contribute to the development of student entrepreneurial skills in various ways, but entrepreneurship training is often not embedded in the curriculum.
EUA argues for the further development of entrepreneurial mindsets, by integrating entrepreneurship training into all study programmes and developing transversal skills for a wide range of career paths. Moreover, this should be reflected in schemes for lifelong learning and intersectoral mobility offering topical depth and interdisciplinary breadth across academia, industry and public service.