EUA Innovation Agenda 2026

February 2023

Preface

With the publication of our first ever innovation survey report a year ago, EUA's extensive work in this area reached an important milestone: numbers could now support narratives about what universities, as innovators, do well and what they need to do even better. Earlier EUA initiatives at the nexus of research, innovation and regional development policy were successful in promoting our sector's contributions, firstly, to smart specialisation strategies, and later, to innovation ecosystems. The importance of that work was confirmed by the survey: innovation is now firmly embedded in the institutional goals of most universities, allowing them to drive innovation ecosystems effectively across Europe.

When one considers the almost endless complexity of the innovation process, it feels both remarkable and reassuring that our sector plays such a pivotal role. Innovation involves people, ideas, and their unique supporting cultures, as well as framework conditions, infrastructures, and the many diverse networks facilitating circulation and uptake of new solutions. The mission of universities to serve society is a true wellspring of the co-creation, mediation and partnership which nurture this process. And this is increasingly acknowledged by policy makers and other stakeholders.

Unfortunately, innovation is not yet fully embedded in the operation of all universities, even when they clearly identify it as a strategic priority. Much work still lies ahead, as we have outlined in the following pages. The promotion of universities' role in innovation is a key strategic objective for EUA, a cornerstone of our vision for the sector, highlighted in *Universities without walls: A vision for 2030*.

This Agenda proposes a scaling up of the Association's work in innovation and recognises that it will be a long-term endeavour, the success of which will be predicated on a comprehensive plan. The document draws on the guidance and input of our EUA Expert Group on Innovation Ecosystems, celebrates past achievements, highlights future needs and enabling factors and showcases existing good practices. There are sections on where we currently are as a sector and others outlining our objectives on key topics such as entrepreneurship, social innovation, or cross-sectoral collaboration. The Agenda emphasises the central role played by interdisciplinarity, robust and appropriate assessment systems and institutional leadership. Finally, the Agenda commits EUA to pursuing and implementing demands for better societal framework conditions for university innovation, and to raising awareness of the continued need for excellence in research as a bedrock for Europe's success as an innovator.

I salute the wise counsel of our Expert Group on Innovation Ecosystems and the ingenuity and hard work of our Secretariat team in shaping this Agenda. On their behalf I am pleased to share this document with you and to invite the university sector, policy makers, funders and other stakeholders to join together in what we hope will be a truly transformative endeavour for the coming years.

Michael Murphy
EUA President

Acknowledgements

Introduction

In this document, the European University Association (EUA) outlines its vision for the European higher education and research sector's approach to innovation until 2026. This Agenda will guide EUA's leadership and staff in developing a comprehensive approach to innovation for the benefit of universities across Europe. It will also support universities in furthering their innovation activities and social value creation, as well as inform critical decisions beyond the sector, i.e. among policy makers, funders and other stakeholders who play a key role in defining framework conditions for research and innovation in Europe.

The Association has selected three overarching priority areas for its work on innovation:

1	**2**	**3**
a comprehensive understanding of innovation	institutional innovation capacity, competence and culture	universities as honest brokers in innovation for a sustainable future

Through systematic engagement across these areas, the Association will ensure that the value of university innovation for society, the importance of intellectual curiosity and risk taking, and the civic role of universities are aptly recognised and strengthened by national and European policy makers, funding agencies, and universities themselves. This will be guided by the recognition of democratic values as critical to the academic freedom, university autonomy and spirit of inclusivity which enable all university missions, as stated in EUA's vision for the sector, Universities without walls: A vision for 2030.

EUA has been working in the area of innovation since 2014, exploring the role of universities in smart specialisation strategies and seeking to leverage the benefits that universities bring to regional innovation across Europe. In 2019, EUA conducted a major study on The Role of Universities in Regional Innovation Ecosystems. Then in 2021, the Association conducted its first survey on universities and innovation, providing a comprehensive picture of innovation at European universities. The survey's findings provided valuable insight on both universities' institutional capacity to engage in innovation activities and their specific contributions to the green and digital transitions.

In defining this Agenda, EUA and its Expert Group on Innovation Ecosystems have drawn on members' experiences of pursuing their innovation mission in line with local, national and European developments (cf. EUA innovation survey report, 2022). EUA has also taken into account the diversity of profiles and innovation activities among its membership and European universities at large (e.g. The Role of Universities in Regional Innovation Ecosystems, 2019).

The following sections further define the Association's priorities in this field and describe the current state of play and challenges ahead, as well as key objectives to be attained by the university sector itself and through joint initiatives with external stakeholders. As such, the Association will pursue key demands to national and European policy makers and funding agencies, as well as universities themselves. The actions EUA will take are outlined under each priority listed below, according to the four priorities of the EUA Strategic Plan: **effective advocacy, horizon scanning, enabling enhanced performance,** and **European solidarity**. These actions will be further translated into yearly activity plans that reflect both the high ambitions of EUA's members and the broader policy context. The latter is notably focused on the need for an enhanced EU Framework Programme for Research and Innovation and a more strategically autonomous and competitive Europe.

Unless otherwise stated, the figures and conclusions included in this document are taken from EUA's innovation survey report, 2022.

For the purposes of this Agenda, innovation is understood to be:

"a process of knowledge co-creation and transfer that generates social, economic, and environmental benefits by means of novel ideas, approaches, technologies, or ways of organising. It is based on open and systematic interactions between academia, government, the private sector, and the general public. It draws on the entire research and development chain from curiosity-driven fundamental research to applied research and development activities, on the sphere of education and training as well as on capabilities and resources for innovation uptake which are determined by political, cultural, and economic systems. It entails close, strategic collaboration between key stakeholders from these different spheres, and is usually rooted in local/regional nodes often known as innovation ecosystems.

The following examples are a non-exhaustive list of innovation achievements:

- Specific infrastructures, such as: start-up hubs, technology clusters, science parks.
- Strategic partnerships with companies, government agencies or civil society groups.
- Joint university-industry laboratories/institutes, industrial doctorates.
- Patenting and IP, technology transfer offices.
- Social innovations aimed at widening community participation in local development through enhanced cohesion and social equity.
- Innovation processes and outcomes stemming from interdisciplinary initiatives addressing societal challenges.
- Bottom-up mobilisation of multi-stakeholder networks addressing societal challenges.
- Promoting entrepreneurial and innovation mindsets and competences among students and staff.
- Educational approaches that enable more flexible learning paths, project and challenge-based learning, flipped and international classrooms, etc."

(Based on EUA innovation survey report, 2022)

Priority #1 – A comprehensive understanding of innovation

Definition

EUA seeks to promote a broader understanding of innovation activities among all relevant stakeholders. In particular, it is important to foster favourable conditions for innovation, rather than focusing purely on the outcomes of innovation processes (e.g. technologies resulting from radical innovation). This requires a critical engagement with the rising emphasis on mission-driven approaches and directionality, so that innovation is not seen as a fixed outcome of prevailing political objectives, but as a spontaneous process with unexpected and potentially radical effects.

State of play and challenges ahead

Universities engage in a wide variety of areas and activities related to innovation, which are often reflected in institutions' innovation strategies or mission statements. These may cover innovation mindsets and competences in education, research-based innovation, entrepreneurship, knowledge and technology transfer, intellectual property (IP) management, collaboration with innovation partners, innovation through multidisciplinarity, infrastructure (e.g. for prototype generation) and social innovation, as well as contribution to sustainability and regional innovation ecosystems (EUA innovation survey report, 2022).

Policy makers and other innovation stakeholders do not always recognise this multi-faceted nature of innovation, nor do they demonstrate sufficient awareness of it. Moreover, R&I policies increasingly focus on directionality and mission-driven approaches. This risks detracting from curiosity-driven research in favour of more utilitarian notions of impact. For these reasons, the wide array of university innovation activities is too often inadequately assessed in university innovation capacity assessment systems, which are in place at national or regional level.

For instance, nearly 50% of institutions that took part in EUA's innovation survey are in countries or regions where such systems exist, but where assessment typically focuses on university and knowledge exchange and commercialisation activities, patent activity, start-up and spin-off generation, and academic entrepreneurship. In the regional context, they also assess universities' role in smart specialisation, collaborations with partners in the innovation ecosystem, or knowledge transfer to regional companies. Although the survey shows that innovation also concerns better integrating research with education, or achieving societal impact through more than just marketable products, this is not yet widely recognised outside of universities and does not feed into the assessment of their innovation capacity.

A further consequence of a narrow conceptualisation of innovation is that entrepreneurship education - a key enabler of innovation activities at universities - risks being limited to a pure "start-up, for profit" message that obscures students' key role as early adopters of innovations. This tends to limit the appeal of entrepreneurship training to students from different disciplines, as it rarely focuses on developing transversal skills, which could make it more attractive to a larger cohort. Consequently, at many institutions such training is not embedded in the curriculum (EUA innovation survey report, 2022).

Key objectives for 2026

- Innovation processes that address major societal challenges should build on a systemic and multidisciplinary view, including insights from the Social Sciences, Humanities, and the Arts, and on a closer integration of the education, research and innovation missions.

- Long-term oriented research, including curiosity-driven research, should be recognised as the prerequisite of truly revolutionary, rather than purely incremental, innovation. The transferability of fundamental research to innovation should be improved in order to reap the full range of benefits that it can offer to innovation ecosystems across Europe.

- The effects of innovation on society and the value of social and policy innovation should be better recognised as part of a broader balancing between the transactional (e.g., commercial) and transformational (e.g., societal) aspects of innovation.

- Institutions should better use their achievements in fostering soft skills and interdisciplinary mindsets to promote a broader notion of entrepreneurship that goes beyond the for-profit mindset focusing only on business creation, economic impact, or product development. In turn, this broader notion should enable the integration of entrepreneurship training into all study programmes and staff support schemes.

EUA actions

- Raise awareness of the variety of universities' activities in innovation, highlighting the fundamental and mutually reinforcing roles of STEM disciplines, Social Sciences, Humanities and the Arts.
  effective advocacy

- Identify and showcase initiatives and good practices linked to universities' contributions to innovation through excellence in fundamental and applied research.
  effective advocacy | enabling enhanced performance | European solidarity

- Improve the understanding and visibility of social innovation among all sectors and promote successful approaches for its development and implementation at universities and among other stakeholders.
  enabling enhanced performance | European solidarity

- Facilitate inter-institutional dialogue and collaboration on boosting the role of entrepreneurship training for students and staff as a key channel for knowledge valorisation.
  effective advocacy | enabling enhanced performance | European solidarity

Priority #2 – Institutional innovation capacity, competence and culture

Definition

"Leading innovators" are institutions with high innovation capacity, a strong commitment to societal impact and mature innovation policies and processes that feature strong collaborations with external partners. On the other hand, "emerging innovators" are in the process of developing their innovation capacity. These institutions are strong in one or more innovation areas and eager to raise their innovation profile, e.g. by learning from others (EUA innovation survey report, 2022). One important facet of addressing this distinction is the promotion of a more multi-faceted innovation culture, where career incentives and assessment systems help to improve the pursuit of innovation and the competencies of all staff beyond technology transfer professionals.

State of play and challenges ahead

75% of institutions that took part in EUA's innovation survey rated their strategic attention to innovation as high or very high. However, only 60% of institutions rated their innovation capacity at a similar level. Institutional innovation capacity is most frequently assessed against indicators such as: access to resources, existence of a common institutional innovation culture, variety of innovation activities (e.g. research-based innovation, student-led innovation and entrepreneurial activities, social innovation, innovation in teaching), number of spin-offs, patents and innovation projects, effective staff incentives, effective and long-term partnerships and the existence of innovation and business support services.

Respondents attributed this divergence to resource constraints, such as limited staff available to fulfil all university missions and limited incentives to increase staff engagement, particularly through career assessment. 76% of universities reported that they required more staff with entrepreneurial experience, as well as the capability to deliver business-skills education or help students and researchers set up companies. However, recognising staff innovation activities as part of career assessment is not yet a common practice, in particular when innovation is considered in the broader sense, beyond IP commercialisation and establishing innovative businesses. Hence, additional resources can only partially improve the situation in the absence of more fundamental shifts in innovation culture which could also boost innovation competencies and engagement among existing staff.

Sufficient funding, especially for curiosity-driven research, and the lack of space for researchers, students and other innovation ecosystem actors to engage in co-creation were also identified as important factors in institutions' lower innovation capacity. In addition, the lack of a common institutional innovation vision, varying degrees of innovation capacity across departments, faculties and services (often depending on the discipline) and a lack of effective coordination between central leadership and other services were frequently cited.

While the importance of framework conditions to enhancing innovation capacity is apparent, institutions also overwhelmingly considered efficient institutional governance structures and institutional autonomy as necessary for the development of innovative and evidence-based solutions to societal challenges. Moreover, strong institutional leadership and individuals (e.g. high-level management positions and bodies dedicated to innovation, individual professors or small groups of staff) were mentioned as important aspects.

Key objectives for 2026

- For innovation to become a truly integral part of university activities, all university departments, faculties and services must engage strategically. This should be rooted in a common culture of innovation, where the entire university community as well as external partners are involved in dialogue and collaboration.

- The use of various instruments pertaining to career development, training, and incentives should be broadened and optimised to offer adequate conditions to engage in innovation and entrepreneurial activities to university staff and students.

- Universities should reform their academic career assessment approaches and be supported in doing so, with the aim of recognising a wide range of academic staff contributions, including innovation activities.

- Funding frameworks in national and European programmes should be strengthened in line with universities' pursuit of both bottom-up and challenge-driven projects, the vast potential for synergies between available schemes and the need to build capacity in innovation support services and knowledge and technology transfer offices (KTOs/TTOs).

- The development of efficient institutional governance structures and leadership positions dedicated to innovation should be further supported, while also promoting university autonomy as a fundamental value.

EUA actions

- Showcase activities and processes that have contributed to increasing innovation in universities or created more efficient institutional processes.
  effective advocacy | enabling enhanced performance | European solidarity

- Contribute to improving universities' capacity, autonomy and equal opportunities to develop and implement more responsible assessment approaches that take into account the broad scope of researchers' activities, including in innovation.
  enabling enhanced performance | European solidarity

- Advocate for responsible, transparent and sustainable assessment practices, including incentives and rewards for innovation activities throughout the research process.
  effective advocacy

- Identify and share best practices on universities' internal innovation processes and activities where the quality of top-level leadership and its continuous development have enabled successful knowledge valorisation.
  effective advocacy | enabling enhanced performance | European solidarity

Priority #3 - Universities as honest brokers in innovation for a sustainable future

Definition

It is important to promote universities' role as honest brokers, defined as "trusted providers of advice based on independent, neutral evidence, who enable the connection and mediation between different stakeholders' interests and perspectives" (EUA innovation survey report, 2022). At the same time, we must recognise that solving many societal challenges require more than advice and mediation, and that it is often necessary for the university sector to take a proactive role in articulating specific societal needs and being an agent of change in pursuit of deep-seated, sustainable transformations.

State of play and challenges ahead

Universities typically bring together perspectives from ethics, politics, technology and regulation. But feeding these into strategic, intersectoral partnerships depends on having a high convening power as well as the resources to engage in sustained collaboration and act as honest brokers. These conditions also allow universities to be recognised as open channels for novel ideas and approaches that can take a critical distance from more conventional innovation paths of policy makers or other stakeholders.

EUA's survey findings demonstrate that, to enable innovation, cooperation between different players in the innovation ecosystem is almost as important as qualified staff and funding. Relationships with actors outside the innovation ecosystem are also key, with over 80% of respondents considering connections to global innovation communities as very important or important. The most important innovation partners for universities are local/regional public institutions. This is due to their substantial role in various local hubs and infrastructures and in orchestrating regional innovation ecosystems, particularly the coordination of local/regional innovation strategies for sustainable transition or smart specialisation.

Regarding the private sector, the survey shows that universities work with large companies, small and medium enterprises (SMEs) and start-ups to a smaller extent than with public authorities, other universities in their countries and research organisations. These partnership structures depend on the strategic attention given to innovation: institutions that rate this more highly tend to work more with companies (large businesses and start-ups in particular) and generally engage in more regular partnerships with civil society organisations.

Finally, building capacity to engage in partnerships extends to individual staff members who may need support in understanding and managing the various issues related to collaboration with third parties and the ability of each sector/stakeholder to promote its interests while upholding its values. This is captured by different frameworks in which universities establish principles and practices, in particular those linked to research related engagement with industry, IP and research commercialisation activities, the formation of spin-off companies, secondary employment and any potential conflicts of interest. The survey revealed that 43% of respondents have this type of framework in place (as part of internal or external/national policies, codes of conduct, guidelines, etc.), whereas 56% are yet to establish one or are unaware of its existence.

Key objectives for 2026

- Universities' unique assets as custodians of innovation and as partners and mediators across sectors and borders must be better translated into long-term perspectives ensuring the sustainability of local communities and ecosystems.

- Wide adoption of an Open Innovation paradigm that enables the integration (and not just the engagement) of the public sector and citizens/end users in innovation processes, and in turn improves the deployment and uptake of innovations at local level.

- Greater strategic attention to innovation that broadens universities' pursuit of mutual interests with the private sector and facilitates the development of durable partnerships with companies of all sizes at both national and global level.

- Societal demands regarding key challenges must be embedded in a more sustained dialogue, not just with industry and public authorities, but also with citizens, via enhanced cooperation between universities and civil society and better use of tools such as citizen science.

- Universities should develop and adopt frameworks supporting staff in collaborating with external stakeholders and anticipating possible conflicts of interest. This should further boost institutions' role as an honest broker by enabling partnerships and the facilitation of different interests and perspectives.

EUA actions

- Improve universities' awareness of opportunities and support systems for collaboration across sectors.
  enabling enhanced performance

- Develop recommendations for universities on interacting with a variety of stakeholders in their innovation ecosystem.
  effective advocacy | enabling enhanced performance | European solidarity

- Support universities in improving their networking capacities within their innovation ecosystem.
  enabling enhanced performance | European solidarity

- Showcase Open Innovation platforms that demonstrate how the involvement of citizens in innovation activities can lead to successful local transitions.
  effective advocacy | enabling enhanced performance | European solidarity

eua EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY ASSOCIATION

The European University Association (EUA) is the representative organisation of universities and national rectors' conferences in 48 European countries. EUA plays a crucial role in the Bologna Process and in influencing EU policies on higher education, research and innovation. Thanks to its interaction with a range of other European and international organisations, EUA ensures that the voice of European universities is heard wherever decisions are being taken that will impact their activities.

The Association provides unique expertise in higher education and research as well as a forum for exchange of ideas and good practice among universities. The results of EUA's work are made available to members and stakeholders through conferences, seminars, websites and publications.

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