

POSITION

The new European Research Area: building capacity through dialogue

October 2020

EUA welcomes the European Commission's ambition to broaden and deepen the European Research Area (ERA) in the Communication "[A new ERA for Research and Innovation](#)" released on 30 September 2020. The Association is a longstanding partner in shaping the ERA on behalf of European universities and is pleased to see the renewed energy surrounding its development.

The new ERA comes at a critical time for European research and innovation (R&I). The digital and green transitions together with the Covid-19 pandemic have resulted in greater and more urgent expectations from society for universities and other R&I actors to provide new, innovative and evidence-based solutions.

In its Communication, the Commission proposes several important elements with a view to working together to build a stronger, research-based knowledge society. EUA welcomes the synergies that are highlighted between the new ERA and the [European Education Area \(EEA\)](#), as well as the importance of transitioning to Open Science, reviewing research assessment and investing in citizens' engagement. Also welcome is the attention on universities as indispensable actors where education, research, innovation and service to society all come together.

BROADENING AND DEEPENING THE NEW ERA THROUGH DIALOGUE

EUA urges the Commission and EU member states to involve universities and other R&I actors in a broad and transparent dialogue to clarify the means and ends of the new ERA. Specifically, the Association calls on the Commission and EU member states to:

- co-create with the R&I community a broad and forward-looking definition of **excellence** to guide the new ERA. Under no circumstances should research quality be limited to proxy indicators based on publications, as is notably the case in one of the key actions. The negative effects of such a narrow perspective are [well-documented](#) and have motivated the academic community to [develop and start implementing](#) more responsible academic career assessment practices. [EUA's Strategic Plan](#) offers a starting point for this co-creation by highlighting the transition to Open Science and other enhancements to the performance of European universities as important aspects of excellence.
- fully embrace **inclusiveness** with a view to closing R&I gaps in Europe. While the Association welcomes the continued importance of Widening Actions in the new ERA, the Communication's objective to promote "access to excellence" falls short of a clear strategy to strengthen R&I systems across Europe. EUA supports a balanced approach to inclusiveness that celebrates the diversity of national contexts, institutional profiles and missions as key strengths of European R&I. It is crucial for EU member states, universities and other R&I actors to play an active role in designing appropriate and tailored approaches to build capacity and improve performance.
- consult with universities and other R&I actors on the right balance between **investigator-driven and mission-oriented R&I**. Unforeseen and complex crises, such as the Covid-19 pandemic, highlight that frontier research needs effective support as the sine qua non for building and sustaining an indispensable reservoir of knowledge and skills. Resilient societies need an appropriate mix between investigator-driven and mission-oriented R&I, acknowledging them as mutually reinforcing contributors to both short-term solutions and long-term, sustainable development. Equally important is acknowledging the important and diverse contributions of different academic disciplines.

- adopt a positive and holistic approach to **equity, diversity and inclusion**. These issues are [strategically important for universities](#) as increased social and cultural diversity positively transforms societies. The inclusion of people from a broad range of backgrounds is a proven element in improving the academic environment, rather than a challenge to be solved.
- emphasise core values, such as **institutional autonomy and academic freedom**, as the underlying principles of the new ERA. Beyond the “Pact for Research and Innovation in Europe” that will be proposed for adoption by EU member states by the first half of 2021, these values should be integral to every stage of the renewed process. EUA [closely monitors](#) and [supports](#) these values in Europe and considers them as the foundation upon which universities and academics engage with society and contribute new, innovative and evidence-based solutions to current and future challenges. A foundation of core R&I values is especially relevant in cases where the new ERA is linked to the EU’s geopolitical policy priorities.

BUILDING CAPACITY FOR THE NEW ERA

Two key elements will determine the capacity of the new ERA to achieve its objectives for European R&I.

Firstly, the system of **governance** will determine the capacity of the new ERA to bring together the Commission, EU member states and other relevant stakeholders. EUA calls on the Commission and EU member states to take the lead in building a comprehensive dialogue with universities and other R&I actors, both within the European Research Area and Innovation Committee and the ERA Forum for Transition. Clarifying the elements highlighted in this position should be at the top of the agenda for this discussion. Equally important, the ERA governance should enable dialogue and synergies with the EEA. Universities should play a central role in this regard, as places where education, research, innovation and service to society come together.

Secondly, sustainable **funding** will determine the capacity of the new ERA to achieve its objectives for European R&I. EUA is concerned to see that the level of ambition for the new ERA is not matched by adequate financial investment. R&I are highlighted as key contributors to the green and digital transitions, as well as society’s recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic. However, [financial commitments as part of the new Multiannual Financial Framework and Next Generation EU recovery plan fall short](#) of offering sufficient resources by a large margin. The renewed call for national investment and associated targets is all the more necessary when considering the [long-term pressures on public funding for universities](#) at the national and regional levels. The [lessons learnt from the 2008 global financial crisis](#) must inform policy-making in this area in order to avoid aggravating the R&I investment gap in Europe. Better synergies and strategic alignment among funders and funding programmes will equally contribute to a more efficient funding landscape, paving the way for a successful new ERA.

CONCLUSION

EU Commissioner Mariya Gabriel, during the European Research and Innovation Days in September 2020, stated that excellence and inclusiveness are two sides of the same coin in the new ERA. The Commission’s Communication is a starting point to making this ambition a reality. EUA calls on the Commission and EU member states to build a comprehensive dialogue with universities and other R&I actors on the meaning and practical implementation of both excellence and inclusiveness. It also reiterates its call to EU member states to ensure sustainable funding for R&I both at European and national levels. The Association calls on the Commission, the German Presidency of the Council of the European Union and EU member states to consider this policy response while developing the new ERA and formulating the Council Conclusions later this year.