

POSITION

European Research Area: How to mobilise research-based knowledge for a better and more sustainable future

March 2020

The European University Association (EUA) welcomes the revival of the European Research Area (ERA), where research-based knowledge is mobilised for a better and more sustainable future. The continued development of a unified research area will support Europe's universities and their contribution to the free circulation of researchers, scientific knowledge and technology.

Universities are key players in Europe's research and innovation landscape. They employ an estimated 735,000 researchers (Eurostat, 2017) who empower societies by generating and disseminating research-based knowledge. Moreover, an estimated 1,484,000 people active as teachers in higher education (Eurostat, 2016) and 19,590,000 students participating in tertiary education (Eurostat, 2016) embody the important role of universities as providers of knowledge and skills for society.

The "[Opinion on the future of the ERA](#)" adopted on 17 December 2019 by the European Research Area and Innovation Committee (ERAC) provides a good starting point for the renewed discussion. Consultations with the ERA stakeholders should further strengthen the recommended objectives and priorities and embed them within the current reality of European research and innovation.

EUA calls for an ERA that is ambitious in delivering benefits to society, diverse and open to the world. The right mix of curiosity-driven and mission-oriented R&I and a clear set of shared core values should drive the new ERA. Open Science and interdisciplinary approaches should be mainstreamed. Partnership and collaboration with other sectors should be facilitated and public engagement should be encouraged. Academic career assessment structures and practices should evolve and contribute to a seamless research-based knowledge area. Crucially, for all this to become a reality, necessary framework conditions should be put in place, namely significant funding and shared political commitment and synergies between the European, national and regional policy levels.

To mobilise research-based knowledge for a better and more sustainable future, we must:

- **Provide ambitious support to research and innovation.** The stagnation of overall R&D investment in Europe is regrettable. Our governments must significantly step up their commitment to European R&I, both at home and at the European level, for an increased combined public and private effort to reach the EU target of the 3% of GDP.
- **Invest in both curiosity-driven and mission-oriented research and innovation for the benefit of society.** Research-based knowledge and curiosity-driven, blue skies research are indispensable for long-term sustainable development and of crucial societal benefit to European citizens and the rest of the world. Hence the "smart directionality" approach should contain the right mix of curiosity-driven and mission-driven R&I policy approaches that would reinforce each other for the benefit of society.
- **Place values at the core.** The ERA should be underpinned by a clearly defined, and commonly understood, set of core values that shape new objectives and priorities. Europe's researchers must recognise their responsibility to pursue high standards for research ethics and integrity. Developing a culture of open and self-critical discussion and good research practice is also a shared responsibility. For universities, academic freedom, as established in the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, is critical.

- **Promote multi-level governance for a more efficient ERA.** Shared political commitment and synergies between the European, national and regional policy levels will be key; attention needs to be given to how such a multi-level governance system should work. The efficient and effective delivery of a more coherent European research policy system requires appropriate framework conditions and sufficient funding at all levels. Spreading excellence and widening participation are essential to developing a truly unified research area in Europe, free from the continued divides between and within countries and regions. Widening actions of the EU Research and Innovation Framework Programmes are necessary drivers in this regard, as are adequate investment and support at the national and regional levels.
- **Shape an ERA that is open to the world.** The ambition of the ERA must be larger than the European Union. It should be open to the world and in particular involve the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) countries that share common research and innovation values.
- **Promote open science.** EUA believes in the value of an open and collaborative research process, including open sharing of research-based knowledge. Open Science and open innovation should be embraced as core principles of the new ERA narrative. In turn, it should be acknowledged that the transition to Open Science is a shared responsibility that requires a long-term commitment and a concerted approach involving many actors. EUA will be a key player in helping to facilitate such collaboration.
- **Encourage diversity.** Besides further efforts to advance gender equality in Europe's R&I system, promoting diversity should include other dimensions such as ethnic background and disability.
- **Facilitate partnership and collaboration.** The success of the ERA will depend on fruitful collaboration between the public, private and third sectors. Facilitation of knowledge exchange must be a key component of a healthy R&I system.
- **Encourage public engagement.** Engaging with the public, through the media and other outlets, is an essential component of a research system. Explaining the value of research investment, and encouraging general support for such work, should be embedded in the ERA.
- **Value all disciplines.** Society requires research across the full range of disciplinary areas. The economies of European nations rely on strengths in the primary, secondary and service sectors, and all these areas require innovation. New ways of managing public services and deeper understanding of the cultural and social divides within society are also needed. To harness the innovative potential of scientific and technological advances, social sciences and humanities (SSH) are key. The mainstreaming of interdisciplinary approaches in European research and innovation is the way forward.
- **Foster talent with attractive career structures.** Academic career development deserves special attention in the ERA, in particular for early-stage researchers. Seizing the opportunities of a changing European higher education, research and innovation landscape will require career assessment structures to evolve and contribute to a seamless research-based knowledge area. Aligning career structures with policies for higher education, research and innovation will strengthen Europe's talent base and increase the global attractiveness of the ERA.

EUA was one of the initial members of the ERA Stakeholder Platform and has been a formal partner in shaping the ERA since 2012. The Association's contributions to developing a unified research area have ranged from providing [policy input](#) and [reports](#), based on membership consultations, to formulating recommendations on the future of the ERA through stakeholder engagement with European policymakers.

Building the conditions for a strong and successful ERA will only be possible if all partners are on board. EUA is determined to continue this partnership, on behalf of Europe's universities. In anticipation of a Communication from the European Commission and Conclusions from the Council of the European Union planned in 2020, EUA is committed to contribute the voice of Europe's diverse and autonomous higher education institutions in the renewed discussion on the future of ERA.