

POLICY INPUT

Research and innovation as drivers of open international cooperation

EUA response to the European
Commission Communication on a Global
Approach to Research and Innovation

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The European Commission has published a Communication about a [wide-ranging and ambitious EU approach to global engagement in research and innovation](#). EUA welcomes the goal for the EU to promote global research and innovation cooperation built on rules-based structures and common values. The realisation that “science and technology [are] key drivers and enablers of foreign policy” (p. 19) could lead to a substantive, qualitative leap forward for global cooperation. However, international cooperation in research and innovation is aimed at knowledge creation first and foremost. While foreign policy and strategic autonomy are becoming increasingly linked to capacity in research and innovation, it is crucial to recall that the latter have intrinsic goals beyond this link.

Open by default

EUA welcomes that the Communication underlines openness as the default for global cooperation in research and innovation, which was a [core demand of EUA](#) in the consultation process. European universities thrive on international cooperation with a wide range of partners, and undue limitations to this openness would seriously harm their ability to continuously enhance their missions in research, education, innovation and culture. Universities’ interconnectedness and interdependence are positive characteristics of a global knowledge community that pushes the frontiers of knowledge and strives to solve global challenges together.

As underlined in the [EUA input to the Communication](#), and in the Communication itself, such openness must be applied responsibly and with reciprocity. The Commission’s planned guidelines on tackling foreign interference in higher education and research organisations are a positive step to create awareness and common understanding. A holistic approach to responsible openness would, however, require a nuanced approach to risk that goes beyond foreign interference and also looks at issues such as ethical challenges, the use of technology by international partners, risks related to intellectual property. This holistic approach must be developed by universities through the sharing of experiences and practices and in respect of institutional autonomy.

Openness as the default option must also apply to Horizon Europe. The exclusion of countries, and particularly of associated countries, should be used only in exceptional cases when there are clearly definable and serious threats to the EU’s strategic autonomy.

Global structures for open cooperation

The European Commission shows its highest level of ambition in those parts of the Communication that outline a “modulated” approach to global cooperation with different regions in the world. This vision, if successful, could both ensure the role of Europe as a hub for global research, as well as ensure a multilateral and rules-based approach to global research and innovation cooperation. However, this requires Europe to take responsibility. It is not enough to claim a leading role in promoting values or working against climate change; such claims must be grounded in action within the EU. Moreover, the structures should ensure that openness remains the default way of cooperating by embedding it in international agreements that promote common values and a level playing field.

Importantly, the Communication ignores the crucial role that universities play as international actors in their own right. As shown by the [EUA survey on strategic international cooperation](#), Europe's universities are engaged in partnerships around the world. Universities also play an important role in building bridges between different stakeholders and countries through common projects. Such an integrated international role for universities should not be seen only as instrumental for foreign policy goals. Universities as institutions must be taken seriously as a central, independent and active element in global research and innovation cooperation.

As a consequence, the voice of universities, as well as other stakeholders, must be integrated into the planned roadmaps and agreements. Moreover, it is crucial that cooperation in the social sciences, arts and humanities is fully recognised, providing critical reflection and innovation that is key for societal and technological progress towards sustainability.

At a time when the EU is strengthening its research policies through the renewed European Research Area and the upcoming strategy for universities, it will be important to create coherence between the priorities of internal EU policies and the global structures. This is especially true for the international promotion of Open Science, which already happens in a global setting.

Goals for global cooperation

The Communication rightly puts the common challenges that the planet is facing as the main focus for global cooperation. Universities are already deeply committed to this agenda, as made explicit through the [EUA vision for universities in 2030](#). It is positive that the Commission aims to use and strengthen the existing structures for cooperation, in particular regarding climate action and the environment. Likewise, the inclusion of development policies in the digital transition and support for better digital infrastructure is welcome.

Commitment to fundamental values and global goals

A pledge to a values-based approach to research and innovation must entail both promoting common values and goals globally in partnerships, as well as upholding these values within the EU. Adherence to multilateralism involves having ownership of globally agreed agendas.

The commitment to fundamental values in the Communication is crucial for building a global research and higher education community: "Academic freedom, integrity and institutional autonomy form the backbone of universities and higher education institutions" (p. 3). Here, it is important to refer to internationally recognised reference documents: Academic freedom is [an integral part of the freedom of expression](#) as recognised by the United Nations, [a precondition for evidence-based policies and for enabling progress in general](#).

Support of common, globally agreed agendas also regards the UN Sustainable Development Goals where the EU must promote the joint agenda for sustainable development as defined by the global community.

The Communication proposes a discussion on the underlying values of cooperation through the European Research Area Forum for Transition. As in other aspects of the Forum's work, it will be central that stakeholder organisations are included in the discussion. For a successful values-based approach, it is absolutely crucial that stakeholders have an equal voice in the more precise definition of what these values mean for global cooperation.

The role of education in global cooperation

The present Commission has committed to bringing research, innovation and education together. Consequently, in the Commission's annual work programme for 2021, the Communication was announced as including "research, education, innovation and youth". The present limitation to research and innovation is less satisfactory than the holistic approach presented in the work programme.

Education plays a key role in international understanding and is closely linked to research and innovation cooperation. Student exchanges are a main pillar of universities' international engagement and, given the importance of research-based learning and the increased recognition of experiential learning – including student innovation, it would be logical to underline the synergies between education, research and innovation in international engagement. Moreover, education prepares graduates for research and for implementing the findings of research results.

Leading by example and from a position of strength

It is crucial to reiterate the point from [EUA's input to the Communication](#) that Europe needs to act from a position of internal strength, ensuring that European higher education and research institutions remain attractive partners globally. Global ambitions must be backed by the necessary intra-European goal to raise investment in research, education and innovation, as well as improving the framework conditions in Europe. Successful system reforms that boost the capacity of institutions through increased investments, and by further dismantling barriers to cooperation and strengthening institutional autonomy, are a prerequisite for Europe to play a leading role in the world.

Likewise, Europe needs to lead by example, demonstrating the need to safeguard and promote academic values. The adherence to and protection of academic freedom, institutional autonomy, ethics and integrity are at the basis of Europe's capacity to achieve the complex goals set out in the Commission Communication.

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.