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Briefing from Europe's universities to the EU Council Presidency Trio
France, Czech Republic, Sweden

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European University Association asbl

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It is time to prepare for the future. During the next presidencies of the Council of the European Union, we must further build the foundations for jointly strengthening research, education and innovation in Europe and beyond. We must ensure that these foundations are solid so that we are able to work towards long-term system transformation.

Recent years have seen the launch of the European Education Area, a renewed European Research Area and the celebration the 20th anniversary of the European Higher Education Area. The European Universities Initiative and the experience of the pandemic have brought a new dynamic to European university policies. With EUA's "**Universities without walls**", Europe's universities set out their positive vision for 2030. It is time to make all these ideas come true, creating processes that are resilient and workable for the long term, as well as embarking on concrete and urgent reforms. There is hope that the upcoming European Strategy for Universities will provide further guidance for cooperation at the EU level, as outlined in **EUA's policy input**.

The willingness of member states to engage in further reforms is crucial in this process and the EU Council Presidency Trio of France, the Czech Republic and Sweden has an important role in fostering policy cooperation in the policy processes over the next year and a half. The key to European progress in areas touched by the processes often lies in national reforms. The framework of the EU Council presents an opportunity for the member states to articulate common ambitions and develop a common language in order to take the agenda forward in their own national contexts and, where appropriate, work towards joint targets and goals.

Develop coherent and efficient governance structures

Given the ambitions for research, education and innovation in Europe, it is central that these are steered through transparent and inclusive governance structures and processes. The Council can play a crucial role here by shaping the implementation of the new EU Strategic Framework for Education and Training 2030 and the new ERA governance in a way that strengthens dialogue and fosters synergies. The coherence with the Bologna Process will be of utmost importance for the national implementation of reforms, and the fora of the European Higher Education Area need to be part of the dialogue.

Foster transnational collaboration in Europe

Using the European Education and Research Areas with schemes like the European Universities Initiative will be instrumental in breaking down barriers to transnational cooperation, working towards a level playing field for all, and further enhancing research, education and innovation across Europe.

The Commission proposal for a Council recommendation on "Building bridges for effective European higher education cooperation" (forthcoming in early 2022) will be an occasion to foster policy cooperation. This is also an important occasion to remind member states to continue implementing existing Bologna tools, such as the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes adopted by ministers of European Higher Education Area (EHEA) member countries in 2015. Likewise, it is important to focus on systemic transformation through reforms that benefit the whole European university community. For example, concerning the discussions regarding a European degree, the systemic aspect is fundamental, and a proposal for a possible European statute for universities must have a clear and concrete added value.

As the representative of Europe's universities, EUA proposes the following for the main policy areas regarding universities:

Involve stakeholders systematically

Stakeholder organisations must be systematically involved as partners in the ERA and EEA governance structures. Given the autonomy of universities and national funding bodies, as well as the voice of students and others, true achievement of the goals cannot be done without including stakeholders representing diverse sectors in the processes.

Extend efforts across university missions

There must be a joint effort at European and national levels, together with universities, to systematically identify further barriers to transnational collaboration. Such efforts must build on existing evidence and aim towards solutions, enabling regulatory and funding frameworks with more flexibility for all institutions. Since **transnational collaboration takes place across university missions**, these efforts must extend beyond education and cover research, innovation and transversal issues such as interoperability of digital tools and systems and the further development of the European Open Science Cloud.

Reform academic careers

In EUA's vision of Europe's universities in 2030, "Universities without walls", reform of academic careers is identified as a priority area for action. Systems and practices vary in Europe, but there is no doubt that academics across the continent need to be better recognised for the full scope of their activities. This includes teaching, innovation with business, the public sector and civil society, and the recognition of Open Science practices. This is an area where the European Union as a whole needs to have a common discussion and understanding of career assessment that is holistic, , transparent and responsible. In connection to this, it will be important to strengthen the ambitions for diversity and equity for academics in Europe. Moreover, it remains necessary to continue to raise awareness about the precarity of academic careers in Europe, particularly for early-stage researchers, and find ways to meet this challenge. The pandemic has greatly impacted young researchers, underrepresented and underprivileged groups, and action for promoting diversity and diminishing precarity is needed.

Protect university values

Academic freedom and the institutional autonomy of universities are under pressure across Europe; in many instances this consists in isolated political attacks on scientific freedom, in other cases the threats are more subtle, taking the form of growing funding constraints or excessive regulation, which can nonetheless cause lasting damage to higher education and research systems and to intellectual life in general. Moreover, universities in Europe do not have the same degree of institutional autonomy, nor is there a uniform trend towards greater autonomy. Greater institutional autonomy is fundamental for universities' capacity to make strategic choices about organisational, financial, staffing and academic matters.

Support universities for career reforms

Support universities in their efforts to reform academic careers with appropriate financial, legislative and policy measures at EU and national levels, with attention to synergies between the European Research Area (ERA), the EHEA and the European Education Area (EEA).

Support reference framework for fundamental values

The EU Council Presidency Trio should support ongoing work towards a common European understanding or reference frameworks for fundamental values. There is a wealth of initiatives and processes in this space, but they require greater complementarity and coherence. Existing initiatives and processes should be evaluated in order to enable a structured approach involving all relevant actors (institutions, legal scholars, human rights actors and political decision-makers).

Ensure sufficient and sustainable funding

Investment in research, education and innovation is too low in Europe. Only a few countries have lived up to their commitment to spend 3% of GDP on research and development and 2% on higher education. For learning and teaching, in many cases universities are catering to rising numbers of students and other life-long learners without a corresponding increase in resources. It would be a strong signal from the Council to commit to sufficient and sustainable funding for higher education and research.

Although programmes like Horizon Europe and Erasmus+ have seen increases in the new multiannual financial framework, they are still not in line with the demand; many excellent projects in research and education will continue to go unfunded. Priority needs to be given to these EU programmes in the annual budget negotiations as they have high absorption capacity and added value for all Europeans. Particular attention must be given to support funding for basic research.

Synergies and complementarities between different European funding programmes will be essential. This can be done through coordinated drafting of work programmes, keeping in mind how different funding programmes can facilitate common goals. In general, better coordination between European and national programmes is necessary to increase the efficiency of funding. Particular attention must be paid to the implementation of national plans under NextGenEU.

Safeguard funding of fundamental research

Member states must give priority to funding for education and research in the Horizon Europe and Erasmus+ programmes, and ensure that Pillar 1 of the Horizon Europe Programme (in particular the European Research Council (ERC) and the Marie Skłodowska Curie Actions (MSCA) is sufficiently funded.

Foster engagement globally

Europe is still a world leader in research and education. It is also home to unique, international funding programmes. This must be leveraged to play an active role globally to promote international cooperation with openness to the world as the default option. Humanity as a whole is facing the challenge of achieving sustainable development; knowledge-based solutions developed together are an essential element to reach this common goal.

Europe must engage in a modularised approach to working with diverse partners. The 2021 European Commission Communication and the Council Conclusions on a global approach to research and innovation provide a good basis for this. Capacity building continues to be crucial in order to develop a truly global knowledge community. This also applies to the EU's neighbourhood, such as supporting the implementation of the Innovation Agenda for the Western Balkans. Global cooperation must also include close and open dialogue with high-capacity partners to facilitate academic exchange and create a common understanding of values, practices and purpose. EUA underlines the importance of a common, strong European voice for cooperation in research, education, innovation and culture, using the modulated approach of the Commission's Global Approach Communication.

Moreover, it is crucial that the agreement with the United Kingdom for association to Horizon Europe is swiftly finalised. Europe's universities trust that the Council of the EU will ensure that this is done as soon as possible. The association of Switzerland to Horizon Europe is likewise a high priority for Europe's universities; this agreement should be disconnected from other political negotiations between Switzerland and the EU.

The UNESCO World Higher Education Conference to be held in Spain in 2022 will be a chance for Europe demonstrate its support for resilient higher education systems around the world, making present and future partners stronger for the benefit of all.

Retain openness as default option for global cooperation

In the further development and implementation of the Global Approach to Research and Innovation, openness to cooperation with all partners should be a central part of the EU Science Diplomacy Agenda.

Association agreements with the UK and Switzerland should be reached rapidly and transition measures put in place to allow participants from the two countries to take part immediately.

Promote university capacity in the digital transformation

The impact of digitalisation on universities is gaining importance in EU policy discussions. This concerns many different aspects ranging from digital skills provision to digital education and digital regulation, as universities are undergoing a digital transition, as well as providing the knowledge and skills that drive it.

New regulations under negotiation between the European Parliament and the Council of the EU have relevance for universities, notably the Digital Markets Act (DMA), the Digital Services Act (DSA), and the Artificial Intelligence Act. It is important to have well working markets for digital services that give universities choice and control over the data they produce and generate. This should be the guiding principle for a strong Digital Markets Act. Also, digital regulation should enable – not hinder – universities in promoting Open Science. This should be done by recognising the differences between non-profit academic platforms and repositories from other types of digital services. Artificial intelligence has great potential for research practices, but its application to education must be done with great caution and awareness of the risks of having machines take life-changing decisions for human beings.

Regarding the topic of digital skills, evidence gathered by EUA points to the need to better promote digital skills in higher education learning, as well as skills regarding ethics, etiquette and safety regarding communications and data exchanges. Generally, Europe must further build its capacity in this regard, also to retain digital autonomy. This should be taken into account for the upcoming Council Recommendation on improving the provision of digital skills in education and training.

Digital education can be enhanced by investment in professional staff within universities – requiring sufficient funding of universities – as well as a regulatory environment that embraces the use of digitally enhanced learning in higher education. This will be important for the Council Recommendation on the enabling factors for digital education.

Ensure that EU digital regulation is enabling and protects universities in their missions

European regulation regarding digital issues must take into account the specificities, values and needs of the university sector, enabling Open Science and ensuring that universities can share and manage the data they generate.

Ensure that universities have the right framework conditions to build capacity in the digital domain.

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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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