

A renewed social contract for Europe and its universities

How universities and policy makers can
work together to shape a strong, open
and future-proof Europe

Why now?

It is time for a **renewed social contract** for Europe and its universities. Higher education and research form the backbone of European innovation and development, and with it Europe's global competitiveness and the European Union's long-term ambitions to tackle complex societal challenges. They are also unique spaces of innovative and critical thought and culture. We must be guided by a **common European ambition** to ensure this free and critical thought as a basis for knowledge, discovery and innovation.

Universities already play a major role in Europe's internal cohesion, democratic development and global position. Nonetheless, this renewed social contract should recognise **universities as crucial, independent actors**, fully engaged, at all levels of society, in our collective effort to meet the challenges of **economic, social and environmental sustainability**. To do so, and to foster a strong, resilient and future-proof Europe, we need open and transformative universities that are able to collaborate across borders. Research, education and innovation, which are uniquely combined in universities' missions, are vitally important if we are to meet these challenges.

To achieve the vision of universities with diverse profiles, engaged in society and working for sustainability set out in the European University Association's "[Universities without walls – a vision for 2030](#)" we need a long-term vision and governance for European university policies. Collectively, we must ensure sufficient and predictable **funding and investment** in education, research, and innovation, alongside **rules that enable rather than restrict**. Now is the time to **join forces at European, national and regional levels** - between universities, policy makers and wider society - to ensure that Europe has the knowledge base it needs to proactively shape its future.

Current challenges and drivers of change

Geopolitical conflicts, war and terrorism are shaking the foundations of international cooperation as we know it. These developments are also bringing European countries closer together and making EU enlargement a political priority once again.

There is notable **political polarisation, disinformation and distrust in experts** in parts of our societies. Moreover, **democratic backsliding** can be observed in several countries in Europe and beyond.

Demographic changes, such as ageing societies and migration and refugees, are making our societies more diverse, while increasing the need for integration, skills development and lifelong learning.

High inflation and new spending priorities, such as health and defence, are putting pressure on public budgets. In several countries this compounds a long period of scarce funding for universities.

Meanwhile, further **digitalisation, hybridisation and the spread of artificial intelligence** are changing the way we work, live and interact. This holds both opportunities as well as risks.

Above all, **climate change** and the **sustainability challenge** are forcing us to rethink how we structure our economies and create value.

If the EU is to effectively tackle these challenges and achieve its wider ambitions, education, research and innovation need to be part of its strategy in all policy areas.

The role of universities in the future of Europe

With their **unique combination of missions in learning and teaching, research, innovation and culture**, universities make a pivotal contribution to ensuring the resilience and prosperity of our societies. Indeed, high levels of higher education attainment correlate with greater levels of economic and social wellbeing, as well as civic engagement.

With 20 million students in Europe, and close to half of young Europeans enrolled in higher education, universities are a fundamental actor in fostering critical thought and scientific literacy, as well as developing a wide range of skills and competences. As such, higher education plays an important role in equity and the inclusion of a wide range of learners with diverse backgrounds and needs. This role will grow even more with the need for **lifelong learning, reskilling and upskilling**.

Through **groundbreaking research**, universities expand the frontiers of knowledge and lay the groundwork for innovative solutions (e.g. the research that enabled the quick development of Covid-19 vaccines). The relationship between applied and basic research is becoming closer as breakthroughs - in fields such as materials science or the biosciences - open up new solutions and innovation.

Universities **generate knowledge within and across disciplines and engage in cooperation** with a wide range of partners at local, regional, national, European and international levels. On top of that, they are major employers and crucial actors in Europe's regional innovation ecosystems. Therefore, they contribute to innovation in society, technology, the economy, culture and policy that is crucial for safeguarding the future of our planet and its people. For example, climate policy cannot be executed without investing in environmental research. Similarly, the rule of law cannot be properly safeguarded without legal scholars or historians. Indeed, new innovative solutions are indispensable in areas of public policy as diverse as agriculture, international development and cybersecurity.

Universities **engage in cultural activities, promote intercultural exchange and the study of culture**. This is important to both preserve and develop Europe's rich and diverse cultures, as well as to enable mutual understanding and peaceful cooperation across the continent and globally. This includes developing multilingualism, with a view to preserving linguistic diversity. Especially in times of crisis and conflict, universities can make an important contribution towards developing, promoting, living and reflecting on European values.

What Europe's universities need

For universities to remain resilient, they need to have the **strategic and operational capacity to work at scale, be innovative and take and manage risks**. This capacity can only be built with significant investment and funding at national and at European level. Next to EU investments, national governments must work towards the commonly agreed target of investing at least 3% of their GDP in research and innovation and 2% in higher education.

In addition, universities need **clear and predictable rules and regulations** and a regulatory framework that ensures their **institutional autonomy and academic freedom**. Stakeholders such as universities should be consulted on both policy formulation and implementation - to provide open feedback on regulatory processes. Importantly, regulations regarding universities must facilitate, not hinder, deep **transnational cooperation including and beyond the alliances of the European Universities Initiative**.

As Europe faces a major demographic challenge and rapid technological developments, universities need, more than ever, to be able to provide **opportunities for lifelong learning** for people of different ages and levels of educational attainment. They need to have the capacity to work with and be attractive to **diverse cohorts of students and staff**. This includes catering to the needs of university communities, including mental health, by fostering open institutional cultures and providing professional guidance and counselling services.

Universities must have a significant capacity to conduct **basic research in all disciplines** and engage in **interdisciplinarity**. This will be crucial to ensure the broad knowledge base that Europe needs, as well as to help Europe prepare for unknown future challenges. Applied research and innovation, including deployment, cannot exist in isolation. Due to an increased focus on application and demonstration, research with higher technology readiness levels (TRLs) has received more focus. However, more attention for lower and middle TRLs is needed to restore the necessary interaction and flow between the different types of R&I.

To act globally, universities need **diverse forms of cooperation** at different scales putting the academic purpose front and centre (form follows function). They need to be able to have flexibility in terms of the cooperation arrangements and how they achieve the goals of cooperation. Moreover, universities must have the **capacity to manage the risks of international cooperation** based on their values and needs.

To do all of this and navigate through turbulent times, universities need support to develop their leadership capacity. Current and future leaders must have support for the development of their **leadership skills and transformation capacities**. This also entails the capacity for professionalisation of staff in all areas of university management.

What needs to be done at European level

For the next mandate (2024-2029), the European University Association (EUA) - representing the breadth and depth of Europe's universities - asks the leadership of the European Commission, members of the European Parliament and representatives of EU member states in the Council of the EU to:

1. Strengthen the multilateral framework for cooperation

The EU must ensure that education, research and innovation policies are coordinated, making links and utilising synergies between the European Research Area (ERA), the European Education Area (EEA) and the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and learn from the experience of cooperation with the wider Europe through the Bologna Process/EHEA to prepare for possible EU enlargement.

2. Enhance the effectiveness of the European multilevel governance system

Improving coordination and links between national, regional and European policies and, at European level, facilitating national level reform implementation (e.g. the European Semester process), will foster cohesion and counter brain drain.

3. Introduce a 'university check' prior to developing EU legislation

To assess the impact of legislation on universities and their activities (e.g. in trade, migration, the digital transformation, rule of law or strategic autonomy), this check should actively involve universities and ensure that new legislation will not hinder education and R&I activities.

4. Budget for ambitious higher education, research and innovation

The next Multiannual Financial Framework must equip EU funding programmes in higher education, research and innovation with ambitious budgets that foster both excellence and inclusion. Moreover, the EU should pool resources where common European projects and initiatives add value, ensure synergies between programmes and with national and regional funding and ensure member states reach the 3% investment target for research and innovation and the 2% investment target for higher education.

5. Promote universities' global role as responsible bridge-builders and knowledge brokers

Open international cooperation should be the default option, while the higher education and research sector and policy makers must remain attentive through a case-by-case, fine-grained approach to risk assessment. Moreover, international openness is important for the role of universities in strengthening local and regional innovation ecosystems and connecting them to the world.

6. Uphold the core values of institutional autonomy and academic freedom

Guaranteeing universities' institutional autonomy is a prerequisite for modern universities to develop their institutional profiles and deliver efficiently on their missions. Protecting and fostering academic freedom is the single most important foundation for meaningful research and teaching which ultimately advances knowledge and, thereby, society.

7. Develop physical and virtual infrastructure

Learners, researchers, innovators and administrators need digital structures and regulatory initiatives that facilitate cooperation across borders for the whole European continent, such as a European electronic ID, the European Blockchain Services Infrastructure and the European Interoperability Framework.

8. Establish dedicated funding for university leadership development

This is crucial to support universities' institutional development and unleash their transformative potential. Leadership skills are also an important success factor in European and transnational cooperation among universities.

These are important priorities for European cooperation and policy making for universities, higher education, research and innovation for the years to come. On behalf of its members, EUA will continue to engage in all of these areas. The Association will also continue to contribute its wide range of expertise in different policy areas and data and analysis on university developments across Europe. Only if we join forces at all levels, will we be able to shape Europe's future - and that of our universities - in a positive direction.