

2026 EUA GENERAL ASSEMBLY & ANNUAL CONFERENCE

University cooperation in changing contexts

15-17 April 2026, Yeditepe University, Istanbul, Türkiye

All times are local (TRT/UTC+3)

Cooperation is a part of every university's DNA. Working across institutions, sectors and borders is a fundamental part of their vision, mission and operations. Indeed, cooperation in education, research and innovation, balanced with healthy competition, is a European hallmark of excellence. But are we at risk of taking it for granted?

In many parts of the world, the value of cooperation is increasingly being called into question. While universities work together in ever more original and effective ways, their relationships with governments and the public are increasingly strained in many countries.

The 2026 EUA Annual Conference, hosted by Yeditepe University in Istanbul, Türkiye, from 16-17 April, will shed light on how key drivers are shaping why, how and with whom universities cooperate. Such drivers include (geo)politics, technological advances, sustainable development and economic challenges.

The event will investigate the evolution of different types of university partnerships; between institutions, with the public sector, with industry and other partners – locally, nationally and internationally, through a mix of panel and interactive discussions.

Wednesday 15 April

16.00-18.00: **Leadership Roundtable** (invitation-only, registration required)

Changing demographics: challenges and strategies

[Room 3E01, Faculty of Design and Art building](#)

Across Europe, shifting population trends are reshaping the landscape of higher education. Many countries face declining student numbers and growing imbalances across regions, raising difficult questions about how universities can remain both sustainable and inclusive.

This year's Leadership Roundtable will facilitate an exchange between top-level university leaders on how institutions can adapt to demographic change. Topics will range from new recruitment and outreach strategies, changes to the academic offer and modes of delivery, as well as lessons learnt from integrating refugees into campus communities.

**The EUA Leadership Roundtable, which precedes the Annual Conference, is open to executive heads (Rectors, Presidents etc.) of EUA's individual and collective members. Participation is by invitation only and substitutes or representatives will not be accepted.*

18.00-19.00: **Leadership Meet & Greet**

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Thursday 16 April

08.00-09.00: Registration for General Assembly

[4th floor main hall, Rectorate Building](#)

08.30-17.15: Registration for Annual Conference

[4th floor main hall, Rectorate Building](#)

08.00-09.15: Welcome coffee

[5th floor main hall, Rectorate Building](#)

09.30-11.00: **General Assembly**

(*The General Assembly is reserved for EUA members. EUA affiliates may participate as observers.) To learn more about the EUA General Assembly, please visit the [dedicated event page](#).

[İnan Kıraç Conference Hall, Rectorate building](#)

11.00-11.30: Coffee break

[5th floor main hall, Rectorate Building](#)

11.30-12.30: **Conference opening**

[İnan Kıraç Conference Hall, Rectorate building](#)

- **Josep Maria Garrell**, President, EUA
- **Mehmet Durman**, Rector, Yeditepe University, Türkiye
- **Erol Özvar**, President, Council of Higher Education, Türkiye
- **Ekaterina Zaharieva**, Commissioner for Startups, Research and Innovation, European Commission (video message)

Keynote speeches

TRUST IN SCIENCE AND EDUCATION IN POST-TRUTH TIMES

- **Maximilian Conrad**, Professor of Political Science, University of Iceland

POLARIZED TRUST IN SCIENCE AND GROWING PUBLIC BACKLASH: CHA(LLE)NGING CONTEXTS FOR UNIVERSITIES AND THEIR ROLE IN DEMOCRACY

- **Niels Mede**, Assistant Professor of Science Communication, Wageningen University & Research, Netherlands

12.30-13.40: Lunch

[5th floor main hall, Rectorate Building](#)

13.00-13.30: **EUA in a Nutshell**

[Mavi Salon, Rectorate building](#)

This short, interactive session, held during the lunch break, will provide an overview of EUA and its activities. It will benefit both newly joined and more established EUA members who are looking to engage more actively with the Association.

- MODERATED BY **Clare Phelan**, Membership & Project Coordinator, and **Monika Steinel**, Deputy Secretary General, EUA

13.40-14.50: **Plenary Session 1 | Universities and democracy: rethinking relationships of trust**

[İnan Kıraç Conference Hall, Rectorate building](#)

Universities depend on the trust of the societies they serve. In turn, they should sustain that trust through knowledge, dialogue and openness. Yet in many places, this relationship is under pressure. As public confidence in institutions shifts, and political and social divisions deepen, how can universities best earn and maintain the trust they need to thrive – and fulfil their societal role?

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The opening plenary will take a critical look at how universities engage with external communities, and what these relationships mean for democracy today.

Speakers will share experiences and practices to build and rebuild trust in changing environments, and explore how cooperation, transparency and autonomy can reinforce universities' role as constructive actors in democratic life.

- **Maximilian Conrad**, Professor of Political Science, University of Iceland
- **Niels Mede**, Assistant Professor of Science Communication, Wageningen University & Research, Netherlands
- **Sjibolt Noorda**, Former President, University of Amsterdam, Netherlands, and Former President, Observatory Magna Charta Universitatum
- **Daciana Pop**, Vice-President, European Students' Union
- MODERATED BY **Angelika Epple**, Board member, EUA

14.50-15.05: Time to move to breakout sessions

15.05-16.15: **Breakout session 1A | *Nurturing cooperative academic cultures in highly competitive environments***

[Rooms 3E01 & 3E02, Faculty of Design and Art Building](#)

Cooperation lies at the heart of academia and is central to universities' missions. Yet, in today's context of growing competition for students, funding, resources and prestige, how can we sustain meaningful and authentic cooperation? In other words, how can universities reconcile the values of collegiality and collective engagement with the pressures of competition?

Building on EUA's work on academic careers and their assessment, this interactive fishbowl session invites participants to actively share their experiences and ideas, contributing to a collective reflection on how to foster cooperative academic cultures while remaining competitive.

- FACILITATED BY **Maria Kelo**, Director, Institutional Development, EUA, and **Gregor Majdič**, Board member, EUA

15.05-16.15: **Breakout session 1B | *How tech is transforming university cooperation***

[Architecture studios, Faculty of Design and Art building](#)

Digitalisation is no longer merely seen as a means to speedier, more efficient workflows, but understood for its potential to transform how universities cooperate.

This session will explore how sustained investment and concerted action among academic, industry and public sector bodies can inspire new and lasting forms of cooperation in the digital space. Presentations will showcase digitally-steered initiatives that reinforce institutional capacity to initiate and manage long-term change.

TRANSFORMING UNIVERSITIES SO THAT ONLINE, HYBRID AND BLENDED MOBILITY THRIVE

- **Patrick Crowley**, Project Manager, EuroTeQ Campus, Technical University of Denmark & **Ben Parker**, Project Manager, EuroTeQ Campus, Eindhoven University of Technology, Netherlands



BEYOND PHYSICAL BORDERS: REIMAGINING UNIVERSITY COOPERATION THROUGH ETHICAL METAVERSE AND AVATAR-BASED LEARNING

- **Barbara Domaradzka**, Managing Director, EUonAIR, Kozminski University, Poland
- MODERATED BY **Wim van de Donk**, Board member, EUA

15.05-16.15: **Breakout session 1C | Bridging sectors, boosting innovation: why cooperation matters in R&I**

[Rooms Uzeyir Garih & Mario Levi, Rectorate building](#)

In a policy context that strongly focuses on improving Europe's economic competitiveness, universities are crucial partners via their R&I collaborations with the private sector and other actors. Drawing on practice examples from EUA members, this session will explore challenges and success factors for universities and reflect on what this changing context for the third mission means for their R&I collaborations with non-academic partners. Due to the success of the call for contributions, two breakout sessions will be held on this topic.

Session 1C (a): [Room Uzeyir Garih](#)

BORONGAJ SCIENTIFIC AND EDUCATIONAL CAMPUS: A UNIVERSITY-LED CROSS-SECTOR INNOVATION PLATFORM

- **Tomislav Josip Mlinarić**, Vice-Rector for Innovation, Technology Transfer and Industry Cooperation, University of Zagreb, Croatia

THE CO-CREATION NEXUS: ORCHESTRATING QUADRUPLE HELIX R&I ECOSYSTEMS AT ITU

- **Lütfiye Durak-Ata**, Vice-Rector for Research, Istanbul Technical University, Türkiye
- MODERATED BY **Manuel Tuñón de Lara**, Board member, EUA

Session 1C (b): [Room Mario Levi](#)

UNIVERSITIES IN KOSOVO LINKING WITH INDUSTRY, CIVIL SOCIETY, AND GOVERNMENT: THE ROLE OF SMART4ALL

- **Kimete Canaj**, Vice-Dean for International Cooperation and Projects, University Fehmi Agani Gjakove

BRIDGING SECTORS TO BOOST INNOVATION: BUILDING COOPERATIVE TRAINING CAMPUSES THROUGH LOCAL AND INTERNATIONAL ECOSYSTEMS

- **Swen Seebach**, Vice-Rector for Quality Assurance, Abat Oliba CEU University, Spain

UNIVERSITIES AS HONEST BROKERS IN EUROPE AND BEYOND: BRIDGING POLICY, INDUSTRY, AND SOCIETY

- **Jamie Arrowsmith**, Director, Universities UK International, United Kingdom
- MODERATED BY **Sunniva Whittaker**, Board member, EUA

15.05-16.15: **Breakout session 1D | Policy update: the Union of Skills**

[Mavi Salon, Rectorate building](#)

In March 2025, the European Commission published a Communication on the Union of Skills, which puts increased policy attention on 'upskilling and reskilling' in order to shape an economically and technologically more competitive Europe.



The session will provide an update on this highly relevant policy initiative for universities, briefing participants on EUA's work in this area and the potential impact of the Union of Skills on EU and national policies and funding.

- **Susanne Conze**, Head of Unit, Higher Education, DG Education and Culture, European Commission (online)
- **Michael Gaebel**, Director, Higher Education Policy, EUA
- MODERATED BY **Maurizio Tira**, Board member, EUA

16.15-17.00: Coffee break

[5th floor catering area, Rectorate building](#)

17.00-18.00: **Plenary session 2 | *Championing internal cooperation across faculties, cultures and backgrounds***

[İnan Kıraç Conference Hall, Rectorate building](#)

Cooperation is often associated with external engagement, but it begins within the institution. Internal cooperation is just as critical as building partnerships beyond the university. Not least because universities are among the most diverse institutions, encompassing a wide range of disciplines, cultures, and communities.

This session will explore how leadership can foster meaningful internal collaboration across faculties, departments, and administrative units, reconcile competing interests and build alignment around shared institutional goals.

- **Pio Fenton**, Vice-President People & Culture, Munster Technological University, Ireland
- **Eva Waller**, President, RheinMain University of Applied Sciences, Germany
- MODERATED BY **Ivanka Popović**, Vice-President, EUA

19.30-22.00: **Networking Reception and Dinner**

[Istanbul Marriott Hotel Asia](#)

Friday 17 April

09.30-10.30: **Plenary session 3 | *European Universities alliances, leadership and the future of international cooperation***

[İnan Kıraç Conference Hall, Rectorate building](#)

European Universities alliances have opened new possibilities for cooperation, deepening partnerships and testing approaches to how universities jointly deliver on their missions. Yet, their long-term sustainability also depends on each member's strategic choices and available resources. As alliances vary in maturity and purpose, this session asks how university leaders decide to integrate them in their institutional strategy.

This plenary session will reflect on what alliances enable, where their limits lie and how institutions can shape sustainable, purpose-driven cooperation strategies for the future, with input from three university leaders on their experiences both within and beyond the alliance format.

- **Henric Johnson**, Vice-Chancellor, Blekinge Institute of Technology, Sweden
- **Silja Bára Ómarsdóttir**, Rector, University of Iceland, Iceland
- **Pedro Arezes**, Rector, University of Minho, Portugal
- MODERATED BY **Amanda Crowfoot**, Secretary General, EUA



10.30-11.05: Coffee break & time to move to breakout sessions
[5th floor catering area, Rectorate building](#)

11.05-12.15: **Breakout session 2A | *Futures thinking workshop: the European Universities Initiative in 2035***

[Room 3E01, Faculty of Design and Art building](#)

This interactive session will apply futures thinking methodologies to three distinct forecasts for European Universities alliances in 2035.

It is 2035. Your university still operates within the framework of the European Universities Initiative, but the landscape around you has transformed. Alliances may have become the backbone of a truly integrated European Education Area, or symbolic frameworks with little real impact. The future we will experience in 2035 is being shaped by today's choices. Back in 2026, the question is: what are the implications of each possible future for your university/alliance?

- FACILITATED BY **Thomas Jørgensen**, Director of Policy Coordination and Foresight, EUA

11.05-12.15: **Breakout session 2B | *Supporting at-risk higher education institutions and academics***

[Konferance salon, Faculty of Design and Art building](#)

Support for at-risk academics is an important expression of solidarity and university values, but that is not all. It also helps to foster international research talent, benefits internationalisation at home, and can build bridges with our counterparts in challenging geopolitical contexts.

As many EUA members host and support researchers with an at-risk background, this session will facilitate an exchange about institutional strategies and approaches, funding and cooperation opportunities, as well as lessons learnt and some of EUA's work in the field.

- **Gemma Irvine**, Vice-President Equality & Diversity, Maynooth University, Ireland
- **Henriette Stoeber**, Senior Policy Analyst, Higher Education Policy, EUA
- **Massimiliano Zattin**, Vice-Rector International Relations, Doctoral and Postgraduate Studies, University of Padua, Italy
- MODERATED BY **Ivanka Popović**, Vice-President, EUA

11.05-12.15: **Breakout session 2C | *Strength in diversity: cooperating across sectors to serve society***

[Rooms Uzeyir Garih & Mario Levi, Rectorate building](#)

Universities increasingly need to ensure and demonstrate their positive impact on the wellbeing and development of their local, regional and national environments.

To establish relevant objectives and a targeted approach to universities' service to society, well-designed cooperation initiatives between higher education institutions and non-university actors are often the most suitable path to take. This session will highlight notable examples from across Europe and the lessons learned by the universities that initiated them. Due to the success of the call for contributions, two breakout sessions will be held on this topic.

Session 2C (a): [Room Mario Levi](#)

TRANSFORMATIVE HIGHER EDUCATION PATHWAYS FOR UNDERSERVED COMMUNITIES

- **Colm Downes**, Project Manager, South East Technological University, Ireland



FROM PARTNERSHIPS TO IMPACT: THE AFRICA-EUROPE YOUTH ACADEMY AS A CROSS-SECTOR COLLABORATION MODEL

- **Martina Altea Bellinzona**, EU-Project Coordinator, University of Pavia, Italy & **Andrea Pichelli**, Director, Center for Global Strategic Engagement, University of Pavia, Italy

REFRAMING HIGHER EDUCATION CURRICULUM: CROSS-SECTOR COOPERATION AS A STRATEGY FOR SOCIETAL RELEVANCE IN THE HUMANITIES

- **Irine Darchia**, Academic Programmes Director, Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University, Georgia
- MODERATED BY **Maria Kelo**, Director, Institutional Development, EUA

Session 2C (b): [Room Uzeyir Garih](#)

GAMEON: A GAMEFUL WAY BACK INTO EDUCATION OR THE WORKFORCE

- **Rune Andersen**, Associate Professor, University of Agder, Norway

WITH GREAT POWER COMES GREAT RESPONSIBILITY

- **Ioannis K. Panoussis**, Vice-President International Development, Catholic University of Lille, France

EUROPE, THE UNIVERSITY OF MANNHEIM AND THE REGION: CONNECTING EUROPEAN FRAMEWORKS AND LOCAL IMPACT

- **Francesco Leone**, Research Manager, University of Mannheim, Germany
- MODERATED BY **Monika Steinel**, Deputy Secretary General, EUA

11.05-12.15: **Breakout session 2D | *Policy update: the future of EU funding programmes***

[Mavi Salon, Rectorate building](#)

Following the publication of the European Commission's proposals for the EU's next long-term budget in July 2025, this session will provide an update on the future of funding programmes for 2028–2034. With the EU institutions engaged in a crucial phase of the co-design process, participants will gain insights into the latest policy developments shaping Erasmus+ and Horizon Europe, as well as the latter's relationship with the new European Competitiveness Fund. The session will also highlight EUA's advocacy efforts and outline the next steps.

- **Michael Gaebel**, Director, Higher Education Policy, EUA
- **Marita Hilliges**, Secretary General, Association of Swedish Higher Education Institutions, Sweden
- **Kamila Kozirog**, Deputy Director, Research & Innovation, EUA
- **Koen Verlaeckt**, Secretary General, Flemish Interuniversity Council, Belgium
- MODERATED BY **Marcin Palys**, Vice-President, EUA

12.15-12.30: Time to move to plenary session

12.30-13.15: **Final plenary session | Conference wrap-up & closing**

[İnan Kırac Conference Hall, Rectorate building](#)

- **Luciana Vaccaro**, Rector, University of Applied Sciences and Arts of Western Switzerland, and President, swissuniversities
- **Sunniva Whittaker**, Rector, University of Agder, Norway, and Board member, EUA

- MODERATED BY **Josep Maria Garrell**, President, EUA
- **Mehmet Durman**, Rector, Yeditepe University, Türkiye
- **Host of the 2027 EUA Annual Conference**

13.15-14.30: Lunch

[5th floor catering area, Rectorate building](#)

14.30-16.15: **Hot topic session | *Spotlight on Sustainability: taking stock of the SDGs and looking beyond 2030***

[Mavi Salon, Rectorate building](#)

The UN's 2030 Agenda to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is coming to an end. This agenda has mobilised universities across the world to work towards planetary and social sustainability. But it is now time to take stock and look forward to the next decades, a time that will be crucial for the future of humanity on planet Earth.

Since last year's Annual Conference, EUA's Spotlight on Sustainability campaign has mapped and highlighted practices from universities across Europe. And over the past months, experts and leaders from EUA's members have worked towards a vision for universities' role beyond 2030.

MODERATED BY **Maurizio Tira**, EUA Board member

**While this session is separate to the conference programme and follows its official closing, it is open to conference participants at no extra charge.*

