

POLICY INPUT

A European Innovation Act that builds a truly European innovation culture

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INTRODUCTION

The European Union's efforts to enhance its economic competitiveness are at a critical juncture. Here, the involvement of all actors across society is necessary to devise the systemic measures that can ensure success. Of particular importance is the need for a European innovation culture, which universities, with their fundamental, curiosity-driven science base, are essential to building.

As the first major piece of EU legislation solely dedicated to innovation, the European Innovation Act is an opportunity to acknowledge [universities' needs and challenges](#), not just those of industry or small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs).

The prospect of commercialising a product or service is not the only incentive for innovators, and universities are uniquely well positioned to align innovation with societal benefit in order to achieve wider, non-commercial impact. The talent pipeline connecting companies and universities can embed this holistic perspective into a truly European innovation culture that is not merely extractive and technological but also enhances alternative pathways to new solutions.

In order to achieve its full potential as a centrepiece of the broad nexus of EU initiatives on innovation, the European Innovation Act should focus in particular on the following aspects.

FOSTER A SHARED INNOVATION CULTURE

Europe needs a shared innovation culture that rewards the wide-ranging contributions to society of European innovators through flexible, supportive career frameworks, while still allowing for varied innovation practices.

This should include not just deep tech startups, but also other types of enterprises and sectors, including social innovation and student entrepreneurship. Moreover, it should enable process and organisational innovation, not just product or service innovation. Crucially, it should heighten the agility and responsiveness of regulatory and administrative frameworks, so that the adoption and implementation of new solutions can keep pace with an increasingly competitive world.

PROVIDE CLARITY AND GUIDANCE ON INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY

The EU should ensure clear intellectual property (IP) usage rights so that existing IP at universities can be used most effectively. The decision to license, spin out, or share knowledge through collaborative projects or in other ways that respect the principle of 'as open as possible, as closed as necessary', ultimately determines whether and how innovative companies emerge and grow.

Universities would benefit from guidance and examples to upgrade their internal regulations so as to achieve the best outcomes in negotiations with investors and academic inventors. In this respect, EUA looks forward to the blueprint for IP licensing mentioned in the [EU Startup and Scaleup Strategy](#) and its articulation with the European Innovation Act.

These initiatives should also recognise that innovation outcomes cannot be measured solely through patents, licences and spin-offs. Many forms of societal, organisational and service innovation generate significant impact without resulting in formal intellectual property assets.

FULLY LEVERAGE THE RESULTS OF EU-FUNDED RESEARCH

At the same time, even if legal provisions offer good IP protection, the opportunity to use patents stemming from EU-funded projects should be enhanced.

One way to do so is by fostering universities' capacity to translate knowledge into societal and economic value. Innovation support structures within universities play an important role in this process by connecting researchers, companies, investors and public authorities. In addition, the follow-up to innovations generated with EU funding should be more consistent: for example, project results will often have to be combined with results from other funding streams to generate scalable IP that can be exploited in Europe.

This is where skills and inclusive, partnership-driven ecosystems matter. If there is a lack of innovative talent, career incentives and skilled orchestration of stakeholder collaboration, projects will often close with results and key performance indicators (KPIs) reported but little discussion of commercialisation. This challenge is frequently linked not only to technology readiness but also to the absence of entrepreneurial leadership, business expertise and dedicated innovation support within these ecosystems to carry promising results beyond the project lifecycle.

SUPPORT PROFESSIONAL KNOW-HOW AND ENTREPRENEURIAL SKILLS

Closely related to this, more and more innovation nowadays consists of know-how and entrepreneurial capabilities alongside and beyond patents. [As shown by a survey of EUA members across Europe](#), the main challenge in promoting entrepreneurial mindsets is how to teach entrepreneurship to students from different disciplines by focusing on transversal skills (e.g. networking, creative thinking), rather than a pure 'start-up, for profit' message.

The EU should be careful to not put legal form before content, especially when the latter consists of critical skills that can be transferred by experienced mentors to aspiring innovators. For example, the European Innovation Act must recognise the distinction between IP and the skills/expertise related to a project, particularly since creating startups is not just about patents but also about various forms of tacit knowledge and sector-specific expertise. The latter can be developed especially well when [frameworks for academic career assessment are broad](#) enough to offer adequate conditions for staff engagement in innovation and entrepreneurship. As the EU Startup and Scaleup Strategy recognises, such frameworks are crucial to supporting the best talent in Europe, and the Blue Carpet Initiative is an important step in this direction.

Moreover, the contribution of innovation professionals, technology transfer specialists, entrepreneurs-in-residence and business developers should be explicitly recognised as part of Europe's innovation capacity. The latter can be developed exceptionally well when universities and companies establish two-way mobility

of students and staff, including doctoral researchers, and without administrative or regulatory barriers. Indeed, intersectoral mobility schemes such as entrepreneurs-in-residence are a valuable tool to enhance awareness of innovative ideas and the capacity to develop them in academia and the private sector.

In addition, dedicated proof-of-concept and maturation funding mechanisms are essential to bridge the gap between academic discovery and market deployment and should therefore form an integral part of the framework created by the Act.

ENABLE LOCAL AND INTERNATIONAL COLLABORATION

Finally, the territorial dimension of innovation both within local hubs and between hubs in different countries is a vital element of collaboration.

A place-based approach to innovation can facilitate the crucial lifeline connecting innovative ideas and entrepreneurial staff and students at universities with the surrounding ecosystem of startups and scaleups. Universities are often the anchor institutions of regional innovation ecosystems and should therefore be recognised not only as knowledge producers but also as long-term ecosystem builders.

Importantly, innovation ecosystems across Europe operate at different levels of maturity. A place-based approach can help avoid one-size-fits-all solutions and better reflect regional strengths and challenges.

Furthermore, the transfer of good practices between member states must also be accelerated. Numerous innovation achievements are already spurred by relatively uncomplicated mixes of IP regulations and career incentives for researchers at national level. The European Innovation Act should further build on such examples and allow for mutual learning through interconnected ecosystems.

CONCLUSION

As EUA argued in [its response to the New European Innovation Agenda](#) in 2022, the development of novel ideas is not the preserve of private actors, and idea diffusion is not a one-way process, from private to public. If Europe is to embark on a relevant and realistic innovation path, societal needs and demands must be reflected in a conceptualisation of innovation as a process driven by co-creation, rather than as an outcome driven by technical solutions.

We look forward to a European Innovation Act which takes this message on board by recognising the deep interconnection between startups, scaleups, innovative SMEs and university research and innovation, as well as by weaving this link into all relevant innovation initiatives in the next Horizon Europe programme (2028-2034), the European Research Area Act and the ERA Policy Agenda. Equally important is nurturing the organic link with Europe's lifelong and continuous learning capacities, which must be at the core of the Union of Skills and the Competitiveness Compass. The EU will thus have a comprehensive framework that also factors in more long-term and indirect effects on skills acquisition, partnership development, spin-off creation and follow-on funding.