

Universities are ready to contribute to the Future of Europe

What can the university sector do for the future of Europe? In the past months, the European Commission has issued a series of papers on the future of Europe, including a White Paper on what the governance model and tasks of the Union should be, and several reflection papers on how the EU should deal with immediate, serious challenges.

Two issues seem clear from these papers: 1) EU institutions and investments need to be fit-for-purpose, enabling strong action in areas that Europeans want to face together; 2) the EU needs to meet common problems with concrete initiatives, and here, education, research and innovation are a crucial part of the solution to the challenges we face.

Dialogue with Civil Society

Universities as institutions have a long history of European integration that has primarily been driven by self-regulation, and more recently facilitated and supported by the institutions of the European Union. While providing high-level education, research, and innovation is their core mission, universities are also civil society actors in their own right. The European University Association (EUA) believes that in order to achieve a strong Europe, civil society needs to play its part. Only a continuous dialogue with sectors such as universities will generate the ideas and provide the evidence needed to bring the European project forward. Only by involving universities in a systematic way will Europe gain the capacity to tackle its shared challenges in a determined and efficient fashion.

Meeting the Challenges through Knowledge

The university sector is convinced that education, research, and innovation are key drivers for the future success of Europe, and crucial to solving many of the issues addressed in the reflection papers. Neglecting them will therefore endanger the European project as a whole.

“One key feature is the need to modernise our education and training systems and expand lifelong learning programmes to facilitate greater occupational mobility and deal with problems of skills mismatches” (EC reflection paper on the *Social Dimension of Europe*, p. 19)

With more than 30% of each cohort entering higher education and an increased need for lifelong learning, a well-functioning university system is fundamental to enabling citizens to reach their career objectives in rapidly changing labour markets and to contribute to Europe’s civic and cultural life. Universities are a place for breeding societal innovation and setting up life-long networks. Furthermore, Europe needs innovation in learning and teaching, which requires efforts from the university sector in cooperation with the member states, the European Union and the European Higher Education Area.

In order to create new jobs and sustain growth, Europe also needs thriving innovation ecosystems. The recent European history of de-industrialisation and the creation of knowledge economies demonstrate the central role of innovation in making Europe resilient and ensuring the welfare of its citizens. The reflection paper on *Harnessing Globalisation* points specifically to the importance of regional collaboration to create growth and jobs:

“Innovation clusters linking up companies, universities, start-ups, investors and local governments must be further developed and linked up across Europe.” (EC reflection paper on *Harnessing Globalisation*, p. 19)

Universities play a central and well-documented role in innovation ecosystems, providing high-skilled graduates and ensuring the knowledge base for innovation through both basic and applied research. There are many excellent examples of such ecosystems where local governments, companies and universities work together closely.

The Added Value of Europe

EUA firmly believes that universities are among those institutions which provide the highest level of European added value as they increasingly work beyond national borders to fulfil their research and teaching missions. The university sector and its use of competitive research funding is a clear example of how European instruments can bring about projects and cooperation that are not feasible at the national level. For example, EU-funded research would often not be possible through national funding alone. Likewise, the Erasmus Programme for student mobility offers opportunities that go far beyond the possibilities of any single member state.

Together for the Future of Europe

What do we need to ensure that Europe develops its universities so that universities offer the European society their best service?

All stakeholders must ensure the free flow of ideas and people in Europe and promote it throughout the world. Universities today have a large potential to support Europe and are some of the most efficient promoters of European values. The European Research Area with its goals to truly integrate European research, promote excellence, build capacity and facilitate mobility, should be a central project for the future of Europe.

Universities, for their part, must continue to fulfil their central missions in close exchange with business, governments, citizens and civil society at large.

Finally, we need a systematic dialogue between universities and European decision-makers. Universities, with the help from governments and other stakeholders, have the capacity to adapt efficiently to quickly changing circumstances and challenges. In this way, they can contribute to a number of topics, reflecting their wide range of activities, from regional development to science and academic diplomacy. EUA would welcome an exchange of evidence and ideas going forward, both for the benefit of European education, research, and innovation and the European project as a whole. We look forward to working together.

EUA has made previous statements in the following areas:

- [FP9 vision](#)
- [Renewed Higher Education Agenda](#)
- [Ambitious Funding](#)
- [Erasmus+ Recommendations](#)

