

## A European Strategy for Universities<sup>1</sup>

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### Policy document summary

The Commission Communication titled "A European Strategy for Universities" outlines the goals for creating outstanding and inclusive universities that are capable of fostering skills, knowledge, and innovation while addressing societal challenges. The Communication aims to establish (1) a new framework to enhance the European dimension in higher education and research, (2) support the unique characteristics of the higher education sector in Europe as part of the European way of life, focusing on i. quality and relevance for future-proof skills, ii. diversity and inclusion, and iii. the promotion of democratic practices, (3) empower universities to act as agents of change in the dual green and digital transitions, and (4) strengthen universities as key players in advancing the EU's global influence and leadership.

### Disclaimer

This brief overview is intended to summarize the essential points from the EU institutions' policy document that are relevant for research performing and innovation institutions, without providing the full extent of information available in the original document. The focus of the overview is put on initiatives regarding circulation of highly qualified staff, especially researchers, relevant to the European Research Area. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Commission.

### Objectives of the European strategy for universities

The Commission Communication announces the following four key objectives of the European strategy for universities and sets the goal to achieve them by the mid-2024:

- **(1) strengthening the European dimension in higher education and research** (involves implementation of a set of flagship initiatives for transnational cooperation that will reflect the distinctive nature of European approach to higher education and research)
- **(2) supporting universities as lighthouses of our European way of life** (the Commission acknowledged that higher education and research in Europe support our European way of life through their threefold focus on 1) quality and relevance for future-proof skills, 2) diversity and inclusion 3) democratic practices, fundamental rights and academic values and freedom of scientific research; the Commission further called for promotion of flexible and attractive academic careers, valuing teaching, research, entrepreneurship, management and leadership activities)
- **(3) empowering universities as actors of change in the twin green and digital transitions** (the Commission supports the full engagement of universities in green and digital transitions; the Commission calls for giving a stronger voice to higher education sector for the development of digital skills and skills for the green transition as well as developing green solutions through technological and social innovation)
- **(4) reinforcing universities as drivers of the EU's global role and leadership** (the Commission Communication emphasizes that through international cooperation, universities in Europe contribute to making the EU competitive on the global scene, strengthening of higher education systems in partner countries and boosting Europe's

<sup>1</sup> You can access the original text here: [European Commission. \(2022, January 18\). Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on a European strategy for universities \(COM\(2022\) 16 final\).](#)

attractiveness not only as a study destination, but also as an attractive global partner for cooperation in education, research and innovation)

### **(1) A new framework for enhancing European cooperation**

The Commission Communication presents **four flagships to boost the European dimension in higher education and research** and strengthen the **excellence** and **inclusiveness** of European universities. These four flagships that shall work in synergy and contribute to a framework for European cooperation in the higher education sector include:

1. The Erasmus+ **European Universities initiative** (in combination with Horizon Europe, Digital Europe and other EU and national instruments) will support ambitious transnational alliances of higher education institutions to develop and share a common long-term structural, sustainable and systemic cooperation on education, research and innovation, creating European inter-university campuses where students, staff and researchers from all parts of Europe can enjoy seamless mobility and create new knowledge together, across countries and disciplines.
2. **A legal statute for alliances of higher education institutions** – for European Universities and other types of alliances – would allow them to mutualise their strengths together, make common strategic decisions, act together with a legal personality, and facilitate pooling together resources, activities and data. Such statute would facilitate deeper, long-term and flexible transnational cooperation, allowing the sharing of capacities, exchange of staff and the implementation of joint programmes, with the aim to award at the level of the alliance joint degrees, including a joint European degree.
3. **A joint European degree** (to be delivered at national level) would attest learning outcomes achieved as part of transnational cooperation among several institutions, offered for example within European Universities alliances, and based on a common set of criteria. A European degree should be easy to issue, store, share, verify and authenticate, and recognised across the EU. As a first step, the Commission will work towards developing European criteria for the award of a European Degree label. Such a label would be issued as a complementary certificate to the qualification of students graduating from joint programmes delivered in the context of transnational cooperation between several higher education institutions.
4. The **generalised use of the European Student Card initiative for all mobile students across universities in Europe** will facilitate their access to transnational mobility at all levels. It will make the management of mobility easier, more efficient and greener. Ensuring that each European student can be uniquely identified across borders and across digital tools, will facilitate the roll out of European Student Cards across Europe and enable the complete digitalisation of the management of Erasmus+ student mobilities from application to issuing of study credentials

Moreover, the Commission proposed further development of the **European Quality Assurance and Recognition System** that aims for assuring quality of qualifications and making the qualifications digitised and recognised automatically across Europe and hereby facilitates mobility, access to further learning and training or entering the labour market.

In addition, the Commission Communication:

- recognized that achieving inclusion and excellence requires **appropriate** funding for universities at local, regional, national and European levels and highlighted that the EU's higher education sector shows signs of significant underfunding, especially in the light of

the increase of numbers of students and growing responsibilities of universities (currently, the Member States spend, on average, 0,8% of their GDP on tertiary education, ranging from 0,3% to 1,7%);

- stressed that although **European funding** is important to universities and as a platform for European and international academic cooperation, it must **not replace national funding**, but operate in addition to sufficient national public funding and other public and private investments

## **(2) Supporting universities as lighthouses of our European way of life**

### Strengthen quality and relevance for future-proof skills

The Commission, in close cooperation with the stakeholders and the Member States, will:

- Propose by 2023 a **European framework for attractive and sustainable careers in higher education**, in synergy with the research career framework developed under the ERA.

- Support the **future-proof skills development** and entrepreneurship competences of graduates and co-design of curricula between industry - including SMEs - and higher education institutions in strategically important industrial sectors identified in the updated industrial strategy, implemented by the Erasmus+ Alliances for Sectoral Cooperation on Skills and contributing to the transition pathways of eco-systems.

- **Extend the EIT label to lifelong learning activities** such as mentoring, re-skilling and up-skilling modules and programmes, and open the EIT label beyond academic education.

- Support the **uptake of the joint EU/OECD-INFE financial competence framework** to support adults' financial wellbeing throughout their lives.

- Boost **Erasmus+ traineeships abroad**, reaching more than 100 000 trainees every year, through student peer reviews and traineeships in start-ups and entrepreneurial organisations.

- Mainstream new **innovative approaches to learning and teaching, including 'living labs'**, at Bachelor, Master and Doctorate levels, through the Erasmus+ and Horizon Europe programmes.

- Develop a **transition toolbox for universities and Member States: Eurograduate tracking surveys, HEInnovate 2.0 and Acceleration Services** for universities under Horizon Europe.

- As part of **the ERA Hubs**, reinforce universities' role in local innovation ecosystems, such as strengthening and sharing of technology transfer capacities, through spin-offs and through promoting joint investment in synergy with InvestEU.

- **Strengthen the role of universities in implementing ERA4You** by promoting intersectoral mobility, in particular between academia and businesses.

- Provide European support as from 2023 for **Innovators at school**, for school partnerships to involve leading personalities from start-ups to act as ambassadors and mentors to inspire young people, and invite them to develop new ideas and solutions.

- Provide European support as from 2023 - including a toolkit for universities - for the development of **incubators** within higher education institutions, in close cooperation with the entrepreneurial sector, to help student entrepreneurs to develop their ideas into businesses.

- Organise an annual **European Talent Fair** bringing together students, early career researchers, scholars, start-ups, industry and investors promoting talent, business and job opportunities across the EU, starting with the first edition under the European Science in the City in Leiden 2022.

### Foster diversity, inclusiveness and gender equality

In its Communication, the Commission has pledged that it will (in close cooperation with the stakeholders and the Member States):

- Develop a **European framework for diversity and inclusion, including on gender gaps**, identifying challenges and solutions for universities, and the needed support of public authorities.
- Address the **underrepresentation of women in STEM fields** through a roadmap that includes a manifesto from STE(A)M-oriented universities on gender-inclusive STE(A)M education.
- **Support for researchers at risk** with guiding principles for universities to facilitate their inclusion.

In addition, the Commission called on Member States:

- To encourage universities to implement institutional change through concrete measures for diversity and inclusion, including **voluntary, quantified targets for inclusion** and inclusive gender equality plans, building on the Rome Communiqué.
- To develop national support schemes and support **access to higher education of refugees and individuals seeking asylum**, including the establishment and scaling of complementary pathways for refugee students and the related support, in line with the Commission Recommendation on legal pathways to protection in the EU.

#### Promote and protect European democratic values

In its Communication, the Commission has pledged that it will:

- Roll-out and monitor the **new Erasmus Charter for Higher Education** and the **new Erasmus Student Charter**, integrating academic freedom and integrity.
- Create new opportunities to **foster academic debates and exchange of best practices on values and democracy** as part of the Erasmus+ **Jean Monnet Higher Education activities**, including in third countries.
- Propose in 2024 **guiding principles on protecting fundamental academic values**, based on the Rome Communiqué, in synergy with the action developed under ERA, which aims at developing an action plan for protecting academic freedom and the freedom of scientific research in Europe, based on the Bonn Declaration
- Provide support for **implementing the guidelines on foreign interference in research and innovation**.

In addition to the above, the Commission calls on Member States:

- To support the **diversity within the European higher education sector**
- To strengthen and **respect university autonomy** in its various dimensions
- To promote and **protect academic freedom and integrity**.

### **(3) Actors of change in the twin green and digital transitions**

#### Develop skills, competences and technological innovation for the green transition

In its Communication, the Commission has pledged that it will:

- Support Member States' efforts through peer learning and sharing best practices in promoting whole-institutional approaches to **sustainability, climate and environmental literacy**. Foster innovative teaching and learning approaches. Support universities through the Erasmus+ Programme to mainstream environmental sustainability across their infrastructure and operations.
- Support the development by universities in cooperation with socio-economic actors of short learning courses on **skills for the green transition leading to micro-credentials**
- Support **Higher Education Climate Frontrunners**, a platform for transnational partnerships between students, academics, universities, employers and communities on climate challenges, building on the Education for Climate Coalition and the European Climate Pact Ambassadors.
- Encourage '**green villages**' as a way to open up university campuses to communities, to bring science closer to citizens, with the support of Horizon Europe, including its missions.
- Promote and monitor the new **Green and Blue Erasmus+** to boost environment and climate change-related action. Monitor the implementation of the **new Erasmus Charter for Higher Education and the Green Charter for the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Action programme**.
- Provide support to the **European Battery Alliance (EBA) Academy** run by the European Institute of Innovation and Technology, for training, up- and reskilling the workforce in the battery industry value chain.
- Supporting the **implementation of strategic research and innovation action plans** that deliver on the green energy transformation and the greening of key industrial ecosystems.

In addition to the above, the Commission calls on Member States:

- To support universities in their whole-institutional approaches to sustainability, including on green skills, as well as the key role of universities for innovation and new green technologies; and universities to lead in green transition.

### Develop skills and competences and promote innovation for the digital transition

In its Communication, the Commission has pledged that it will:

- Provide support to transnational cooperation to develop the digital skills and competences of students of all ages, staff and researchers, in line with the **Digital Education Action Plan**.
- Through the **Digital Europe Programme**, provide support to specialised education and training programmes in cutting-edge digital technologies and for multi-disciplinary courses in artificial intelligence, cybersecurity, microelectronics and high performance computing.
- As a follow up to a feasibility study conducted in the context of the **Digital Education Action Plan**, support the launch and rollout of a targeted European platform to promote cooperation between higher education institutions, compatible with the **European Open Science Cloud (EOSC)** and interoperable with other European standards.
- As part of the Erasmus+ Jean Monnet activities, support dedicated measures to recognise at **EU level the efforts of universities driving the digital transformation across the EU**
- Lead universities in **co-developing guidelines and principles** for allowing mutual access to services and enabling **seamless knowledge and data exchange**, reflecting the need for interoperability and openness.

In addition to the above, the Commission calls on Member States:

- To support the development of digital skills of students of all ages, staff and researchers, **the digital capacity of universities**, as well as the key role of universities for innovation and new **digital technologies, and universities to lead in digital transition**

#### **(4) Drivers of Europe's global role and leadership**

With the Communication on a European strategy for universities, the Commission offered to:

- work jointly with Member States to promote Europe's higher education offer and international cooperation in higher education in a Team Europe approach that involves developing the 'Study in Europe' portal to foster international exchanges; strengthening peer-learning among universities and agencies on internationalisation; strengthening partnerships with priority regions, such as Western Balkans, the Neighbourhood and Africa, based on reciprocity, and better engaging and relying on alumni networks.

Moreover, the Commission, in close cooperation with the stakeholders and the Member States, will:

- Foster mobility between Europe and other regions of the world: call on Member States to organise in particular the relevant procedures in view of the timely issuance of permits/visas to third-country students so they can start the academic year in the EU on time, respecting the Students and Researchers Directive.
- Support consortia of worldwide leading universities to develop and implement Master programmes, through Erasmus Mundus Joint Master calls addressing global challenges.
- Support transparent and fair recognition of third country qualifications, including those of refugees, through the network of academic recognition centres and the EU transparency tools (European Qualifications Framework, European Digital Credentials for Learning)

The Commission Communication specified that the progress in implementing this strategy will be reported on through **the European Education Area strategic framework** and the **European Research Area governance**. The Commission will take stock of the state of play in its Progress Report on the European Education Area (EEA) and through the **European Research Area monitoring system**. This will enable the Commission, the Member States and the stakeholders to engage in a strategic dialogue on progress accomplished and where to focus our policies and support. In 2023, the Commission will set-up a **European Higher Education Sector Observatory** as part of this process in order to provide evidence on the progress made. This Observatory will combine the best of the current EU data tools and capacities in one single place, while further enhancing their use and relevance for policy makers, universities, students and researchers. One of the Observatory's deliverables will be a **European Higher Education Sector Scoreboard** to yearly assess the progress made across the EU towards the key priorities of this strategy: inclusion, values, quality and relevance, mobility, green and digital skills, employability, transnational cooperation, technology transfer and knowledge valorisation.