



## BACKGROUND PAPER

**Subject: Joint meeting of ERAC and DG HE - *Background paper for discussion***

**Working title: European Strategy for Universities<sup>1</sup> – building synergies between higher education, research and innovation**

### 1. Introduction

The unprecedented extent and pace of changes of European society in the last decade, especially combined with the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, challenged the education and research systems (together with other sectors) to respond to the emerging issues in a collaborative, innovative and timely manner. In response, the Presidency trio (Germany, Portugal and Slovenia) joined forces in the area of research and higher education and is working with the European Commission to set in motion an ambitious plan to bring forward European higher education by, among other measures, jointly creating critical mass and implement institutional transformation strategies towards the higher education institutions of the future, involving also surrounding ecosystems, including businesses, civil society, national and regional authorities, non-academic research centres and the innovation sector.

Synergies and complementarities between the European Education Area (EEA, notably its higher education part), the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and the European Research Area (ERA) must be strengthened to jointly achieve the modernisation, internationalisation and transformation of European higher education institutions.

### 2. Enhancing synergies between higher education, research and innovation – a priority of the Presidency trio

Before commencing the trio presidency, Germany, Portugal and Slovenia published their programme *Taking forward the Strategic Agenda 18-month Programme of the Council (1 July 2020 - 31 December 2021)*<sup>2</sup> in which the trio expressed the need to seek synergies between education and research systems. In the preparation period, the trio discussed building bridges and enhancing synergies between education and research and innovation wherever possible to increase their effectiveness and added value.

Since 1 July 2020, the Trio partners have been working together with the common objective to foster a strong, more resilient, digital and knowledge based Europe that promotes equal opportunities among its citizens - a sovereign, inclusive, cohesive and more sustainable Europe. This work is carried out in relation to the requests for more synergies between education and R&I, as laid down in key reference documents on the European Research Area (ERA), European Education

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<sup>1</sup> Previously referred to as the higher education transformation agenda.

<sup>2</sup> <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-8086-2020-INIT/en/pdf>



Area (EEA) and the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). See **Annex 1** for an overview of these.

### 3. Towards a European Strategy for Universities, bringing closer together education, research, innovation and service to society

The European Union needs a strong higher education sector, as an engine of innovation and promotor of skills and knowledge. As the conditions in which the EU operates are changing, there is broad consensus that higher education institutions have to face up to these changing conditions and adapt to them, but also be part of and contribute to shaping the society's transformation. The sector is embracing this challenge and has embarked in a process of re-thinking and renewing itself.

It is therefore necessary to **support and enable the higher education sector with all available tools at European level**, whether policy or investment related. As such, the EU level should support European higher education institutions to accelerate this development and unlock their full potential in tackling societal challenges and contributing to the European policy agenda.

In its [Communication on Achieving the European Education Area by 2025](#) and its [Communication on a new European Research Area for Research and Innovation](#), the Commission announced its intention to initiate the co-creation of a transformation agenda for higher education.

In its [Resolution of 26 February 2021 on “a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training towards the European Education Area and beyond \(2021-2030\)”](#), the Council has identified the establishment of an agenda for higher education transformation as a concrete action in the priority area of higher education, with the general objective to ensure a future-proof and sustainable top-quality higher education offer in Europe with **a focus on inclusion, innovation, connectivity, digital and green readiness, international competitiveness, fundamental academic values and high ethical principles, employment and employability**.

The **Council Conclusions on the New European Research Area**, adopted on 1 December 2020, stresses *“that stronger synergies and interconnections between the ERA, the EHEA and the higher education related elements of the European Education Area (EEA), are to be developed”* and identifies that *“institutional transformations, research careers, science education, training, international cooperation and knowledge circulation as possible fields of a more determined cooperation”*.

Against this background, **the Commission is currently preparing, in close cooperation with Member States and stakeholders, a European Strategy for Universities**. For this purpose, the Commission is conducting targeted consultations.

**Recent consultations with Member States and stakeholders** point to a need for further action at European level, in full respect of the competences of Member States and institutional autonomy. The COVID-19 pandemic has shown the value of deeper cooperation in higher education and research, but **transnational**



**cooperation** between higher education institutions in Europe needs to be further facilitated to pool resources, knowledge, infrastructure, education and R&I strategies. There is a need to **strengthen higher education institutions and their surrounding ecosystems** across the EU to improve access to excellence for all institutions, closing the innovation divide. By cooperating more systematically, institutions can also boost the supply of knowledgeable, well-trained people with skills necessary to address Europe's **twin green and digital transitions**. At the same time, there are still many shortcomings when it comes to addressing the sector's social dimension, in particular fostering **more diversity and equal opportunities**. The sector also has a responsibility to safeguard **fundamental values** in higher education. In all of these fields the EU could bring value through its policies and programmes, and thereby support efforts in Member States and by institutions.

The European Strategy for Universities will address the main challenges and **propose support measures to the benefit of the sector**. The Strategy will aim to bring closer together the four missions of higher education institutions - **education, research, innovation and service to society** - into a true **knowledge ecosystem approach**.

**Annex 2** gives an indicative overview of possible building blocks of the European Strategy for Universities.

#### 4. Putting synergies in practice

While preparing for the European Strategy for Universities several discussions have taken place during the consultations on how to practically put in place the synergies between education and R&I. These discussions have shown that **EEA, EHEA and the ERA share common principles** – such as inclusivity, connectivity, mobility – and jointly aim at boosting the interaction between education, research and innovation to empower Europe's citizens, while contributing to a democratic, ethically responsible, well informed, resilient and cohesive European society and competitive social market economy.

**Synergies can bring reciprocal benefits for education and R&I**, through strengthening education institutions' capacity to deliver high-quality outputs, enhancing the involvement of students and academic staff in research, promote knowledge transfer and better exploitation of research results into teaching and learning, encourage parity of esteem between research and education, facilitate collaboration in transdisciplinary teams, etc.

For this to happen, we need action both at the policy and the programme levels. This at all levels, from the local, to the regional, national and European level.

**At policy level**, we need to address challenges that are common to both education and R&I e.g. obstacles for educational innovation, shortage of transversal skills, barriers to mobility/limited knowledge flows, insufficient mainstreaming of open science practices, suboptimal industry-academia collaboration, balancing 'brain circulation' and investment needs. At EU level, this is what the European Strategy for Universities will be aiming at.



At **programme level**<sup>3</sup>, synergies need to materialise through complementary and targeted support for higher education institutions bringing together the different missions of higher education institutions. At EU level, this means putting at work all the EU instruments targeted at higher education institutions (e.g. Erasmus, Horizon Europe - including MSCA and EIT KICs, structural funds, DigitalEU, InvestEU, etc), to make sure they will contribute in a synergetic and complementary way to support higher education institutions in their transformation. The funding sources need to complement each other - work in the same direction without overlapping -, bearing in mind their respective objectives. Complementarity of EU and national funding should be encouraged to achieve a critical mass to support higher education transformation.

The **European Universities initiative** is an unprecedented test-bed for implementing synergies, bringing the EEA and ERA closer together and helping to materialise their strongly interconnected objectives. The initiative is putting synergies in practice, both from the policy and funding side, with the support of both Erasmus+ and Horizon Europe.

## 5. Discussion on the way forward

The Slovenian Presidency supports the discussions on the European Strategy for Universities, currently being co-created with various stakeholders in the fields of research and higher education. In order to guarantee an inclusive, green, well-coordinated and efficient co-creation process and an efficient implementation of this European Strategy for Universities, we should provide the opportunity for an open discussion about a more systemic approach and sustainable links between education and research and innovation, including a discussion on future working methods and structures at all levels of decision-making.

The Slovenian Presidency is committed to provide an opportunity for timely and open discussion about the vision of a future European higher education and future working methods and structures, facilitating synergies between higher education and research.

An Ad Hoc Task Force to increase Synergies between the European Higher Education Area, the Higher Education Dimension of the European Education Area and the European Research Area has been set up under the Bologna process. This temporary task force is (t)asked to report back to the Bologna Follow Up Group (BFUG) by end of 2021, with a proposal allowing for concrete synergies between the European Higher Education Area (Bologna context), the higher education dimension of the European Education Area (EU context) and the European Research Area (EU context), building on the respective cooperation structures. The proposal should describe how the cooperation can be done in a fit-for-purpose and flexible manner, for example in the form of joint meetings or working groups. This will help in determining the way forward on how to concretely work on a

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<sup>3</sup> See overview of synergies Erasmus+ and Horizon Europe in the background



strengthened cooperation. Meetings of the Task Force will take place in autumn 2021.

With facilitating open discussions in mind, we invite the participants of the joint meeting of ERAC and DG HE to share views on the following questions:

### European Strategy for Universities – building synergies between higher education, research and innovation

#### Guiding questions for discussion:

1. Which **measures** should be promoted in the European Strategy for Universities for creating synergies between higher education, research and innovation, by the Union, Member States, and higher education institutions?
2. How can the creation and implementation of a European Strategy for Universities, including synergistic links between higher education and research, help in bringing **the governance structures** of EEA, EHEA and ERA closer together, building on the already existing respective cooperation structures (for example special/dedicated joint structures)?



## Annex I:

### Key references to synergies between education and R&I under the European Research Area (ERA), European Education Area (EEA) and the European Higher Education Area (EHEA)

#### 1. References under the European Research Area (ERA)

Synergies between the ERA, the EEA and the EHEA have been on the research policy agenda for some time. The topic appeared prominently in the context of the review of the ERA advisory structure in 2018, when the ERAC Opinion of 21 September 2018 called on ERA-related groups to "*foster exchanges and discussions about common policy interests between ERA and the EHEA*"<sup>4</sup>.

In November 2018, Research Ministers underscored the need to improve ties between the ERA and the EHEA. In its Conclusions on the governance of ERA, the Council explicitly invited ERAC and the ERAC Standing Working Group on Human Resources and Mobility (SWGHRM) to "*strive for better synergies between ERA and the EHEA on issues related to higher education, training, research careers and the knowledge triangle*"<sup>5</sup>.

ERAC adopted an Opinion on the future of ERA in December 2019, recommending "*more holistic and comprehensive policy approaches encompassing research, innovation and education (including training and skills development), in particular with respect to higher education (EHEA)*"<sup>6</sup>.

At the February 2020 informal meeting of the Competitiveness Council in Zagreb, Croatia, Mariya Gabriel, the Commissioner for Innovation, Research, Culture, Education and Youth, stressed the notion of a "*European Knowledge Area*" as a comprehensive approach to address education, higher education, science, research and innovation under one heading.

At the informal ERAC meeting on 4 June 2020, a discussion on synergies between ERA and the EHEA showed that there is a need for stronger and more effective cooperation between the two areas under the possible umbrella of a "*European Knowledge Area*".

In the Commission Communication "*A New ERA for Research and Innovation*", the Commission presented the ERA priority Action 11: "*The Commission will, together with the Member States, develop a roadmap of actions for creating synergies between higher education and research*"<sup>7</sup>. This would build on a comprehensive transformation agenda to be developed in synergy with the European Education Area (EEA).

<sup>4</sup> "ERAC Opinion on the 2018 review of the ERA advisory structure", document ERAC 1209/18 and 1209/18 ADD 1, 21 September 2018.

<sup>5</sup> Council conclusions on the governance of the European Research Area, document 14989/18 RECH 512 COMPET 833, 30 November 2018. <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-14989-2018-INIT/en/pdf>

<sup>6</sup> "ERAC Opinion on the future of the ERA", document 1201/20, 23 January 2020. <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-1201-2020-INIT/en/pdf>.

<sup>7</sup> Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions »A new ERA for Research and Innovation«, COM/2020/628 final. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=COM%3A2020%3A628%3AFIN>.





ERA aims to support the R&I dimension of universities through a strategic agenda together with the EEA to strengthen universities across the entire EU by: “leveraging research excellence in universities in less competitive research systems; supporting transformation of universities and surrounding ecosystems;” and “raising the international profile of European universities”.<sup>8</sup>

Germany, Portugal and Slovenia as the Trio Presidency have agreed to pursue a common roadmap on education, research and innovation, which will target synergies between ERA and the EHEA, including the future role of European Universities. The *Council Conclusions on the New European Research Area*, adopted on 1 December 2020 under the German Presidency, stress the need to develop stronger interconnections between ERA, the EHEA and the higher education-related elements of the EEA, identifying “*institutional transformations, research careers, science education, training, international cooperation and knowledge circulation*” as possible areas of cooperation.<sup>9</sup>

The need to further develop and strengthen synergies and interconnections between the ERA, the higher education-related elements of the EEA and the EHEA, was once more emphasised in the Portuguese Council conclusions on deepening the European Research Area, adopted on 28 May 2021, under the Portuguese Presidency. The Conclusions highlighted that synergies between the “New ERA” and the EEA could potentially “*be realised through a comprehensive Higher Education Transformation Agenda, developed together with Member States and stakeholders*,”<sup>10</sup> and that “*strengthening research careers and reinforcing research links with learning and teaching and supporting research-based education should be a major component of this Agenda*”<sup>11</sup>.

## 2. References to synergies under European Education Area (EEA) and the European Higher Education Area (EHEA)

Going back to 2017, the *Council conclusions on a renewed EU agenda for higher education*<sup>12</sup> recognised that there is a need to **strengthen collaboration and synergies**, both within education sectors and between higher education and research, innovation and the world of work.

According to the *European Skills Agenda*<sup>13</sup>, higher education is essential to provide students with the skills they need in the future. The **fast-changing labour market and societal transitions** require answers from tertiary education institutions and an improvement in their alignment with the economic environment, to ensure that

<sup>8</sup> Commission Staff Working Document Accompanying the document Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions A new ERA for Research and Innovation; <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=SWD%3A2020%3A214%3AFIN>.

<sup>9</sup> Council conclusions on the New European Research Area, document 13567/20 RECH 483 COMPET 611, 1 December 2020. <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-13567-2020-INIT/en/pdf>

<sup>10</sup> Deepening the European Research Area: Providing researchers with attractive and sustainable careers and working conditions and making brain circulation a reality – Council conclusions, document 9138/21 RECH 267 COMPET 424 EDUC 215 SOC 352 EMPL 261, 28 May 2021. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/49980/st09138-en21.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:52017XG1214\(01\)&from=EN/](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:52017XG1214(01)&from=EN/)–

<sup>13</sup> <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1223&langId=en>



graduates have the education and skills required by the labour market - especially those needed for the twin transitions.

The 2020 *Commission Communication on achieving the European Education Area by 2025*<sup>14</sup> highlights higher education as one of the six dimensions of the EEA. In the Communication, the Commission offers to work together with the higher education sector and Member States to **co-create incentives for an accelerated transformation of higher education institutions** in Europe.

Under the Portuguese Presidency, the Council responded with the *Council Resolution on a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training towards the European Education Area and beyond (2021-2030)*<sup>15</sup> in which reinforcing the European higher education institutions is one of six strategic objectives. The resolution encourages higher education institutions to find new forms of deeper cooperation, including through the full roll-out of the European Universities Initiative. The resolution agrees to create **further and stronger synergies with the ERA**, to reinforce higher education institutions' cooperation and mobility.

The Resolution was accompanied by the adoption of the *Council conclusions on the European Universities initiative - Bridging higher education, research, innovation and society: Paving the way for a new dimension in European higher education*<sup>16</sup>. Building on the European Universities initiative, the Conclusions aim to contribute to the **transformation of higher education and synergies between education and research**, by setting the political vision and proposing concrete activities.

The **Bologna process** as an intergovernmental process currently involves 49 member countries, the European Commission and several consultative members and partners. 27 EU Member States cooperate in a voluntary process with 22 non-EU countries that are party to the European Cultural Convention to create the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). Through this process, countries, institutions and stakeholders of the European area continuously adapt their higher education systems making them more compatible and strengthening their quality assurance mechanisms. In the 2020 Rome communiqué the ministers reaffirmed the aim **to build an inclusive, innovative and interconnected EHEA by 2030** and committed to **strengthen cooperation with the European Research Area**. They asked the Bologna Follow-up Group (BFUG) to work closely with the European Research Area and Innovation Committee (ERAC) to enhance synergies and alignment between education and research and innovation policies, focusing inter alia on developing research-based learning, guaranteeing academic and scientific freedom, and contributing to achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.

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14 [https://ec.europa.eu/education/resources-and-tools/document-library/eea-communication-sept2020\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/education/resources-and-tools/document-library/eea-communication-sept2020_en)

15 [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=CELEX:32021G0226\(01\)](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=CELEX:32021G0226(01))

16 <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/49659/st08658-en21.pdf>





## Annex 2: Possible building blocks of the European Strategy for Universities

*Below an overview of the possible building blocks around which the European Strategy for Universities could be developed, to increase attractiveness, long-term resilience and sustainability of the wide range of higher education institutions across the EU. The overall objective of such strategy is to support and enable them to be transformative, innovative, inclusive, inter-connected, sustainable and engaged in society. There is no one-size-fits-all model, it is up to each of them to decide, based on the principle of institutional autonomy, where they want to focus on, how to adapt and transform, and develop approaches that fit their specific context. These building blocks are inspired by the outcomes of the numerous consultations with Member States and stakeholders over the past year. They should be seen as indicative only.*

### **A framework for European cooperation in higher education and research**

Transnational cooperation in education and research has been a strategic issue and an integral part of activities of most higher education institutions in Europe for many years. Now comes the time to further deepen such transnational cooperation between higher education institutions in Europe on all their missions to tackle European and global challenges, to build resilience and build back better from the Covid-19 pandemic. Studying, working and cooperating across borders in the higher education sector is of utmost importance in view of skills development, inclusive and excellent education and research. There is also a need to strengthen higher education institutions and their surrounding ecosystems across the EU, both from an education and research (from curiosity-driven research to higher Technology Readiness Levels) perspective. This will support and enable all institutions to improve inclusion, access to excellence and closing the innovation divide.

### **EU investment into the higher education sector**

Financial support is needed for the institutional (green, digital, inclusive) transformation efforts of higher education institutions, to ensure sustainable knowledge creation, to train future and current generations and to strengthen circulation and use of knowledge across borders, disciplines and cultures for a resilient, inclusive and sustainable society. There are numerous EU instruments and financial support available to higher education institutions that could be more and better used by the sector. There is also a need to reinforce synergies with national and other sources of funding.

### **Green transition**

Higher education institutions play an essential role in adapting attitudes, perceptions and values to live in a different world, more respectful of our planet. Many universities have put their missions in education, research, innovation and culture into the service of achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, with a special focus on the green transition. They increasingly act as role models by acting green. However integrating education and research for environmental sustainability requires a whole-institutional approach that integrates sustainability into all programmes, disciplines and levels of higher education. Grand societal challenges such as climate change will best be tackled



through transdisciplinary education and research approaches, and by increasing cooperation across the whole sector.

### **Digital decade**

While digitalisation will remain key also in the post-pandemic period, physical presence on campus is a core feature at most institutions. The pandemic showed that higher education institutions had a high level of preparedness, compared to other sectors of education. However, a digital divide was exposed. Students and researchers did not always have equal access to digital infrastructure or the support they needed to switch to online learning, and academics have called for more professional development opportunities. The digital capacity and infrastructure of higher education institutions varies widely. There is still some way to go to foster holistic approaches towards hybrid campuses. Despite the developments of learning platforms and digital tools, universities are calling for more interoperability between systems. When universities co-operate in alliances, students and staff have to navigate a complex landscape where access is restricted or cumbersome. Higher education institutions in Europe are often reliant on large multinational companies offering educational solutions that do not always take into consideration data use and protection, ethics and privacy.

### **Global Europe**

Europe aims to be an actor of solidarity and peace, of enforcing international standards and promoting a global level playing field, that contributes to global governance and to jointly advancing knowledge and solving societal challenges. While increased internationalisation of higher education offers opportunities to universities in Europe and while Europe has many strong higher education institutions, very few of them make it to the world's best in international rankings. Attracting and retaining talented students, academics and researchers is key for knowledge creation, skills development and diffusion across the EU. Developing countries need to strengthen their capacity to create and apply knowledge through well-trained graduates and relevant research. Boosting international cooperation and supporting capacity is key. Well-performing systems and knowledge driven societies in third countries will help addressing existing and emerging global challenges.

### **Industrial and Innovation Ecosystems**

Europe needs to recapture its competitive edge, and bridge the skills gap for the young Europeans but also for those who need to up-skill and re-skill and join the new challenges on the labour market. For this, the European ecosystems need well-trained talents with skills to address the twin digital and climate transitions. Responsiveness to societal needs, engagement with society and innovation have to become an integral part of the university/campus environment. Innovative pedagogies could be more widely applied, including by a research informed education.

### **Diversity, equal opportunities**

Although social inclusion has been a priority for European cooperation in higher education and the Bologna Process for some time, much remains to be done. Students, staff and researchers from disadvantaged backgrounds are still less represented in the higher education and research sector; a persistent gender gap



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remains in some fields of study and research and in decision-making positions. There are geographical differences in the production of excellent results for students and researchers.

### **Values and democracy**

While the fundamental principles of academic freedom and institutional autonomy have not changed in the last 30 years, their context has, with these core values being threatened to differing degrees, both in the EU and beyond. At European level, fundamental academic values are at the core of the Bologna Process, highlighted in the 2020 Rome Ministerial Communiqué Statement on Academic Freedom. Important as well is the Bonn Declaration on Research Integrity and Foreign Interference Guidelines.