

EUA response to the European Commission's Work Programme 2018

On 24 October the [work programme](#) of the European Commission for 2018 was adopted. It contains a restricted, yet ambitious set of priorities for the year to come. Europe's universities benefit from the strong, multi-lateral framework that the European Union provides for their activities, and a focussed work programme with clear European added value, as is the current programme, is generally in their interest. Universities represent a key sector for Europe with millions of students and staff, playing an active role for economic growth, cultural enrichment, and well-being across society.

However, as with previous work programmes of the European Commission, the European University Association (EUA) regrets that the present programme does not include visible efforts to further develop the European Research Area (ERA). Realising Europe's potential in research and innovation by working seamlessly across borders and closing the innovation divide between the member states would in itself be a powerful factor for realising the ambitions of the Commission, creating sustainable growth and jobs for our continent and retaining a competitive industrial base.

EUA acknowledges that the Commission recognises the importance of education and training in order to deal with the legacy of the economic crisis, and supports the prominent role of education and, particularly, of life-long learning, in the European Pillar of Social Rights. As the labour market is changing, particularly due to the loss of opportunities for mid-skilled labour and increasing demand for high-level skills, the discussion about social rights should not be limited to vocational education, but include inclusive paths to high-level skills and competences. As EUA has stated in its response to the [Renewed Agenda for Higher Education](#), there is still a need for robust evidence for policies that equip Europe's citizens for these changes.

In relation to immigration, EUA supports the Commission's ambitions to foster free movement of talent through instruments such as the [blue-card](#). Universities need to be able to recruit highly specialised researchers on a very competitive global market. Higher education also provides an important vehicle for integration of refugees, providing them with the skills and competences to contribute fully to European society, something that the EU should further facilitate.

Concerning the priority 'Europe as a stronger global actor' it is highly surprising that Europe's strong asset in terms of soft power, including higher education and research, is not mentioned in the work programme. Europe functions as a unique model for international cooperation through the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), which provides a formal platform for the whole continent. Exchanges with neighbouring countries alone amount to more than 250,000 students each year. Moreover, Europe contributes in a significant manner to building higher education and research capacity in developing countries. The EU could well use these soft power assets in a more explicit way to become a stronger global actor.

Higher education and research should also be a crucial element in providing a credible perspective for EU enlargement in the Western Balkans. Through programmes like Erasmus+ and Horizon 2020, neighbouring states are able to take early steps to a closer association and integration in the EU, not least through the person-to-person contacts provided through student and staff exchanges and research cooperation.

EUA agrees with the Commission that the Union needs a budget that can help achieve its ambitions and that a focus should be on efficient spending. In this regard it is indeed important that the negotiations on the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) start early and can be completed within the mandate of the current Commission and Parliament. This would allow important EU funding programmes such as FP9 and the future Erasmus programme to be up and running as of 2021, and make possible the continued participation of the UK in these programmes.

