



**EUA**

European University Association

**EUA'S RESPONSE TO THE  
RENEWED EU AGENDA  
FOR HIGHER EDUCATION**

**JULY 2017**

Copyright © European University Association 2017

All rights reserved.

This information may be freely used and copied for non-commercial purposes, provided that the source is acknowledged (© European University Association).

European University Association asbl

Avenue de l'Yser 24 · 1040 Brussels, Belgium

info@eua.be · Tel: +32-2 230 55 44 · Fax: +32-2 230 57 51

**EUA'S RESPONSE TO THE  
RENEWED EU AGENDA  
FOR HIGHER EDUCATION**

# EUA's Response to the Renewed EU Agenda for Higher Education

EUA is the umbrella organisation of 33 national rectors' conferences and 800 individual universities in 47 European countries. EUA is active in European policy making, both in the European Higher Education Area and the European Research Area. It is also engaged in international dialogue and cooperation with partner organisations around the globe.

With this statement EUA responds to the [Communication](#) of the European Commission on a Renewed EU Agenda for Higher Education published on 30 May 2017. The Renewed Agenda is a follow-up to the 2011 Modernisation Agenda, and is the first major communication by the Juncker Commission focusing exclusively on higher education, setting the discourse for higher education in the EU and proposing concrete actions.

EUA welcomes the Agenda, as it provides a broad vision on the role of higher education, with a strong emphasis on topics of critical importance for the European higher education sectors, such as the enhancement of the study experience, transition into the labour market, social inclusion and the wider contribution of higher education to society. It presents a good basis for discussion and collaboration for the sector, for the EU, the European Higher Education Area and the European Research Area, as well as for the global higher education community. EUA is looking forward to taking the issues raised by the Agenda further through in-depth discussions with its members.

To open the debate, EUA would like to make the following points regarding the four priorities proposed by the European Commission:

## **1. Tackling (future) skills mismatches and promoting excellence in skills development**

- EUA agrees with the Agenda that the skills challenge posed by changing labour markets must be met through innovative curriculum development and teacher training, including further development of lifelong learning and digital enhancement of learning.
- EUA supports the Graduate Tracking Initiative as a means for a European evidence-based discussion.
- The proposed STEAM Coalition does not adequately take account of the diverse disciplinary and interdisciplinary landscape. The approach must go beyond the consideration of humanities, arts, and social sciences as an add-on to STEM.

Skills development is central to universities' missions and to the future of Europe. The changes in labour markets and the need for more high-skilled labour is a challenge that universities must meet. As the Agenda and the staff working paper point out, skills mismatches may be particular to certain systems, regions and/or professions. EUA therefore suggests to first better understand what "skills mismatches" actually cover, provide evidence for supporting claims of mismatches, and support collaboration across European institutions and with other stakeholders to address the situation. The European Graduate Tracking Initiative may contribute to the evidence base.

The Agenda should play a key role in disseminating and upscaling innovative good practice that already exists in individual systems and institutions. This is valid in particular with regard to teaching enhancement and institutional strategies, where EUA, in collaboration with members and partners, is currently developing European approaches<sup>1</sup> which also encompass digital enabled education and open education resources. These are of crucial importance with regard to student-centred learning, and flexible learning paths. By promoting digital enhancement and open educational resources, EUA seeks to emphasise the importance of continuing professional development, and of extending the scope of lifelong learning at a time when European higher education institutions are more than ever under pressure to respond to learners of all ages and diverse backgrounds, including migrants. Lifelong learning is also crucial for social inclusion (priority 2), and for mitigating the risk of “skills mismatch” and “skills shortage” that the Agenda points to so prominently.

Study and career counselling indeed play an important role in this regard and universities are well-placed to provide this in collaboration with employers and schools. EUA would however like to underline that steering student choices towards one particular career based on short-term and current labour market needs would hardly be effective. Therefore, guidance and counselling should rather aim at building awareness of the breadth and diversity of graduates’ employment opportunities.

EUA is also convinced that STEAM (which is STEM plus arts) is not an adequate concept to include the unique contributions of arts, humanities, and social sciences. EUA would prefer to see greater recognition of the value of a diverse disciplinary and interdisciplinary landscape, including small and rare disciplines. This diversity is in line with the wider purpose of preparing graduates to make a broad contribution to society,<sup>2</sup> and should be cherished as the hallmark of the quality and success of European higher education and research, and its international attractiveness.

## **2. Building inclusive and connected higher education systems**

- EUA welcomes the high priority given to these areas; they are central to the role of universities in society at large.
- European discussion and cooperation on the topic should be supported.
- Lifelong learning must be a key element for social inclusion.

The ability to support the study experience and careers of diverse students is clearly an important criteria of the quality of learning and teaching. The university sector has long been very active in this field through the Bologna Process. Universities have gained a considerable experience in working towards inclusion and diversity through their activities in their cities and regions and through their role in integrating refugees. Erasmus+ support to institutional strategies is a particularly positive and logical step to enhance leadership, mainstreaming and sustainability, but also to fuel European level discussion and cooperation on the issue. Such a European discussion could also boost the visibility of institutional activities, which is currently often minimal beyond the range of immediate stakeholders and beneficiaries.

---

<sup>1</sup> See [EFFECT project](#) mentioned in [EC Staff working paper](#)

<sup>2</sup> See [EUA Response](#) to revision of the EU Framework of Key Competences for Lifelong Learning

Again, lifelong learning should be seen as a key strategy with regard to inclusiveness, in particular also in view of a better transition from vocational to higher education. Given the demographic and social challenges facing much of Europe, it is imperative to address the subject of continuous education to ensure that citizens can update their skills in rapidly changing labour markets, as well as contributing socially, culturally and politically as citizens to society at large.

### **3. Ensuring higher education institutions contribute to innovation**

- Universities play a key role in regional innovation ecosystems and in smart specialisation strategies. This role goes far beyond marketable products, including innovation in education, culture, and social welfare.
- EUA is a strong supporter of the Marie Skłodowska Curie Actions (MSCA) as an excellence-based programme for researcher training; it should keep this well-defined mission.

EUA shares the view that universities' contribution to innovation is critical and that they play an essential role in tackling societal challenges. However, the association has reservations concerning the emphasis on market-driven innovation in the Agenda. Translating research outcomes into marketable innovations is only one of the outcomes of research activity; the contribution of university research to innovation goes well beyond this, as it generates societal well-being of an economic, social, educational and cultural nature, with long-term benefits for social welfare.<sup>3</sup>

Innovation requires scientific freedom, autonomy and ethical behaviour, and stimulates close cooperation between universities and other stakeholders. In this regard, the Strategies for Smart Specialisation are proving most effective where there is strong co-operation between government, enterprise and universities working together at both strategic and operational levels, with well aligned objectives to strengthen regional innovation. Political support is needed to build platforms for dialogue and promote strong co-operation among relevant stakeholders.<sup>4</sup>

EUA agrees that creativity and innovation are important elements of learning and teaching in universities as they are necessary for the training of innovative and entrepreneurial graduates. These characteristics are also important for doctoral education and over the last decade profound changes in the provision of doctoral education have taken place, particularly with the establishment of doctoral schools and the development of collaborative doctoral education with industry partners. This has not only resulted in larger numbers of doctorate graduates, but also in more diversified career paths, with a step increase of graduates working in industry.<sup>5</sup> In EUA's view, MSC Actions are an important part of these developments, and set a high-quality benchmark for research excellence and good management of doctoral programmes. EUA supports the strengthening of the MSCA programme as long as it preserves its excellence-based criteria for the selection of proposals.

---

<sup>3</sup> [EUA Vision for FP9](#)

<sup>4</sup> [EUA Response to Smart Specialisation consultation](#)

<sup>5</sup> [Collaborative Doctoral Education in Europe: Research Partnerships and Employability for Researchers – Report on DOC-CAREERS II project](#)

## 4. Supporting effective and efficient higher education systems

- Higher education systems with adequate resources, efficient incentives, and enabling regulatory systems are essential for universities to deliver their missions. EUA welcomes the inclusion of these topics in the Agenda.
- Building effective systems must rely on a broad, evidence-based dialogue.
- While supporting funding diversification, EUA underlines the fundamental role of public funding for sustainability.
- EUA has concerns regarding unwarranted expectations towards performance based funding.

EUA is convinced that meaningful progress in this area requires concerted policy dialogue between public authorities, sector representatives and institutions, including adequate system benchmarking and comparative analysis. This is an area where ample evidence from the sector exists which should be a good basis for a deep discussion of issues and goals.

The Agenda rightly points at ways to target and balance investments. While public funding remains the cornerstone of universities' financial structures and a guarantor of its sustainability, EUA believes that funding systems should contain complementary parts, including a reasonable degree of diversification of funding sources, taking into account that the capacity for diversification varies across different systems.

In the past, EUA has already warned against excessive expectations towards performance-based funding. While it may increase overall transparency and accountability, it requires full clarity and a global vision as to the objectives pursued by the system.<sup>6</sup> EUA recommends that discussions in this area are held to continue building on this existing evidence, bearing in mind that enabling, rather than restricting regulatory frameworks is the key to the capacity of institutions to profile themselves strategically, and to achieve the objectives above.<sup>7</sup>

EUA agrees that cooperation and resource management at the institutional level are of high importance. There is also good evidence in this area to be used as a point of departure, and universities are already discussing this.<sup>8</sup> EUA's work on university mergers, for example, brought forward good practice in fostering internal cooperation and efficient management.

EUA looks forward to using the knowledge already at hand from recent studies to further a trust-based dialogue, for instance through peer-to-peer counselling, leading to commonly-shared goals and to successful policy reforms.

---

<sup>6</sup> [EUA report](#): Designing strategies for efficient funding of universities in Europe (2015)

<sup>7</sup> See latest update of the [EUA University Autonomy Scorecard](#)

<sup>8</sup> [USTREAM Project](#)

The European University Association (EUA) is the representative organisation of universities and national rectors' conferences in 47 European countries. EUA plays a crucial role in the Bologna Process and in influencing EU policies on higher education, research and innovation. Thanks to its interaction with a range of other European and international organisations EUA ensures that the independent voice of European universities is heard wherever decisions are being taken that will impact their activities.

The Association provides a unique expertise in higher education and research as well as a forum for exchange of ideas and good practice among universities. The results of EUA's work are made available to members and stakeholders through conferences, seminars, website and publications.



European University Association asbl · Avenue de l'Yser 24 · 1040 Brussels, Belgium

Tel: +32 2 230 55 44

Fax: +32 2 230 57 51

www.eua.be

