

Joint Statement: Research and Education are the Foundation of European Competitiveness and Resilience

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German Rectors' Conference (DE), France Universités (FR), Universities of the Netherlands (NL), Conference of Rectors of Academic Schools in Poland (PL), Flemish Interuniversity Council (BE), The Rectors' Council of the French-speaking universities of Belgium (BE), Conference of Rectors of Spanish Universities (ES)

Introduction

Research, education, and the innovation that stems from this represent the foundation of Europe's position as a credible global actor. This foundation is being eroded by funding cuts and attacks on academic freedom from inside Europe, as well as by pressure from strategic rivals. Recent developments have made it clear that Europe can no longer take its geopolitical environment, partnerships, or security for granted. Signals coming from the global stage have underlined how quickly long-standing assumptions can be overturned. European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen has framed this moment as one in which Europe must seize greater strategic autonomy and 'take ownership' of its economic and geopolitical power.

The scientific community is not exempt from this turn towards hard geopolitics. Knowledge and research capacity are increasingly treated as strategic assets, contested and protected in a time of geopolitical tension and economic competition. All the while, polarised public discourse in our societies is weakening democratic standards and academic freedom. In this context, European cooperation in research and higher education takes on renewed strategic importance. **No Member State can address today's scientific, technological and societal challenges alone. A strong and coherent European commitment is essential to safeguard excellence, maintain global competitiveness, and ensure that knowledge remains a common good that serves society as a whole.** As the European Union prepares the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) and shapes key initiatives such as the successor to Horizon Europe, the European Competitiveness Fund (ECF), the European Research Area (ERA) Act, and the future Erasmus+ programme, the choices made will determine Europe's capacity to act collectively and compete in an increasingly fragmented world.

Research & Innovation

Recent reports have reaffirmed what the scientific community already knows: **Europe's competitiveness and capacity for innovation rest on a strong and diverse knowledge base, built through long-term support for excellent research across all disciplines.** The next Framework Programme for research and innovation (FP10) must therefore remain well funded, autonomous and firmly anchored in excellence, with ample room for fundamental research alongside applied and policy-driven activities. Fundamental research is a precondition for future breakthroughs and long-term innovation across Pillar 1 and Pillar 2. Similarly, collaborative research is vital for driving European scientific cooperation, allowing us to solve societal challenges that cannot be tackled by a single country. **The social sciences and humanities should be an integral and well-funded part of such collaborative ecosystems and FP10 as a whole,** contributing essential insights into political disinformation campaigns, societal preparedness, and democratic governance, while being vital for governing and developing innovative technologies – from large language models to biotechnology. New initiatives such as the ECF, aimed at strengthening competitiveness, should reinforce these foundations, not subsume them, and should be designed to complement and accelerate existing instruments that have proven their value.

Europe's capacity to innovate has been built through long-term investment in knowledge across all disciplines, supported by open competition and peer review. **A strong and sufficiently funded FP10 provides continuity and predictability,** allowing researchers to take risks, develop ideas over time and contribute to Europe's scientific, societal, and economic objectives. **FP10 should remain the key source of European funding for research and innovation,** while the ECF will translate these innovations into concrete applications that enhance Europe's well-being, economic strength, and independence. To achieve this, we call for a governance structure in which FP10 remains shaped, governed, and operated by the R&I community across all its pillars, while FP10 and the ECF jointly contribute to strengthening the impact of European R&I and to attracting additional resources through (bottom-up) collaborative research.

Education

Education is just as important for European solidarity, cooperation and long-term economic resilience.

Erasmus+ has become one of the most tangible symbols of Europe for millions of students and staff. In the next MFF, its **budget should be significantly increased** to respond to rising demand and costs, ensure broad participation, and strengthen cooperation across the European Higher Education Area. This will help students develop vital skills to contribute to European cooperation and a rapidly changing labour market. Simultaneously, **Erasmus+ and the broader practice of international student exchange and cooperation allow for personal development and educational insights** that cannot be gleaned in just one country. Mobility and exchange foster critical thinking, creativity, and intercultural understanding – outcomes that go beyond immediate economic benefits and contribute to the cohesion and resilience of European society and culture.

ERA Act

As the negotiations on the new MFF proceed, the European Research Area (ERA) continues to be developed, including via a proposed ERA Act. Ideally, the European Research Area can provide the structural foundation on which programmes such as FP10 depend. For research, innovation, and high-quality education, a culture of openness, academic freedom and trust-based cooperation have long been vital prerequisites. Preserving and strengthening these principles is essential at a time when knowledge is increasingly instrumentalised and mobility is under pressure. **The ability of researchers, students and ideas to move freely across borders, and the free circulation of knowledge in all its forms, are core conditions for excellence, creativity, and innovation.**

While research security and the goal of European economic sovereignty are vital, they should be addressed in ways that preserve collaboration as a core objective. **The values of openness and international collaboration must remain central as the ERA Act is developed and implemented**, because as important as European cooperation is, Europe remains alone if it is not open to the rest of the world. **International collaboration – including with associated and partner countries beyond the EU in programmes such as FP10 – is essential for scientific excellence, economic competitiveness, and for Europe’s credibility as a global actor.** Even as these times of global uncertainty and conflict push states to look inward, we emphasize that scientific advancement will always be a process of global cooperation.

The ERA Act represents an opportunity to reaffirm our shared commitments. **Its implementation should strengthen mutual trust among Member States, reduce structural barriers to cooperation, protect researchers’ ability to work freely across borders, and realise a “fifth freedom”.** European cooperation must continue to provide a space in which these freedoms are protected and actively promoted. At the same time, care should be taken that the ERA Act reinforces existing instruments, practices and national legislation rather than adding unnecessary administrative complexity. **A strong ERA is not another policy layer, but a collective commitment to the principles that allow Europe’s knowledge system to flourish.**

The European University Alliances can act as a link in this knowledge chain, deepening the goals of the ERA, the European Education Area (EEA), and the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). They create systemic, diverse, cross-border partnerships in education, research, and innovation, and play an active role in regional development, attracting talent, building capacity, and connecting innovation ecosystems. Yet the alliances need perspective and long-term investment to become pioneers and share their knowledge with other European stakeholders. It is important that we work on developing long-term funding mechanisms so that the alliances can deliver on the high expectations that are projected on, and expected of, them.

Conclusion

Europe must treat knowledge as a strategic asset while also recognizing its intrinsic value: investing in research, education, and mobility is essential not only to safeguard autonomy and maintain technological leadership, but also to ensure that scientific advancement continues to generate societal benefit, drive innovation, and reinforce Europe’s credibility and influence on the global stage. To do so, it is essential to provide sufficient, dedicated funding to both research and education programmes and to recognize R&I and education as key building blocks of European values and broad societal welfare.

In that respect, in keeping with other national and transnational umbrella organizations from the European academic sector, we jointly call for a budget of €220 billion for FP10 and €60 billion for Erasmus+. This would send a signal to the global scientific community that Europe is and will remain a major player on the international scene, and is doing everything it can to preserve its status as a knowledge hub. To do so, Europe must be willing to invest in research, innovation and education in order to attract and retain top researchers and students from all over the world.