



EUA's Response to the Consultation on the Revision of the EU's Modernisation Agenda

Full Statement

INTRODUCTION

With the present statement the European University Association (EUA) responds to the consultation on the revision of the Modernisation Agenda launched by the European Commission on 30 November 2015. EUA has developed this response in close collaboration with its members including 33 National Rectors' Conferences (NRCs) which have endorsed this document. In addition, NRCs have responded to the consultation on an individual basis.

EUA supported the European Union's 2005 and 2011 Modernisation Agendas, which have been of importance for the development of the European higher education sector. EUA's response to the 2011 consultation can be found [here](#).

SUMMARY

EUA and its members welcome the revision of the Modernisation Agenda as changes that have taken place since 2011 require an adjustment of strategies at European, national and institutional levels. Its view on this can be found in Section A. "Changing context and challenges" of this document.

EUA also welcomes the three priorities (relevance; regional innovation; and linking research and education) proposed by the European Commission, and is pleased to provide suggestions on how to best address each of them to ensure European added value. These can be found in Section B. "EUA's response to the priorities proposed by the EC".

In addition, EUA would like to draw attention to four major areas, where Europe has developed strength, but that urgently need to be prioritised in order to continue and further develop. These priorities can be found in Section C. "Building on Europe's achievements".

A. CHANGING CONTEXT AND CHALLENGES

Since 2011, major changes have taken place in the higher education sector and new challenges are emerging. Major European structural reforms and goals, such as the Bologna Process and ET 2020, have been implemented in most European countries and institutions. And many universities have actively contributed to this implementation while also focusing on the development of their individual profiles. Meanwhile, student numbers have increased, as have institutional collaboration and exchange. Plus, innovation in learning and teaching has gained in priority.

In order to build on these achievements, EUA welcomes the present review of the

Modernisation Agenda. But it would also like to point out current and emerging challenges that have weighed on EUA's response.

- The future of European integration is uncertain with Schengen under pressure; the Brexit issue; financial crises; and instability in Europe's Eastern and Southern neighbourhoods.
- There is a growing social and economic divide within and between member states, bringing with it high unemployment rates, especially in Eastern and Southern Europe. Graduate unemployment, in particular, is of concern to universities.
- Due to budget consolidation, in most systems funding levels are either decreasing or stagnating, impacting institutions, their staff and students, as [EUA's Public Funding Observatory](#) shows. To date, the EU target of 3% GDP invested in R&D is being missed, which is crucial to ensure that innovative ideas can be turned into products and services that create jobs and growth.

These complex challenges put progress made and the potential for future development at risk. As they impact European higher education and research, the sector needs to have a central role in overcoming the integration crisis. Therefore a revision of the Modernisation Agenda is both timely and urgent.

B. EUA'S RESPONSE TO THE PRIORITIES PROPOSED BY THE EC

EUA is pleased with the three priorities proposed by the EC and offers the following suggestions on how to take them forward:

Priority 1: "To seek for ways to further enhance the relevance of learning and teaching, e.g. through system-level intelligence and steering, promotion of more student centred learning approaches, better use of ICT, more and better links between HEIs and employers"

A European-wide prioritisation of the relevance of learning and teaching would boost the development of new approaches and further enable dissemination and adoption of existing innovative approaches and good practices.

Suggestions:

- Priority should be given to a more precise and shared understanding of how to prepare graduates for diverse careers, including entrepreneurship and self-employment. Reaching a more differentiated understanding of how universities equip graduates with knowledge, research skills, disciplinary rigour, the ability for self-learning, and a wide set of generic and transversal skills, would be key.
- It is important that the mission of higher education goes beyond the provision of the knowledge and skills that the labour market requires and include also active citizenship, and social skills.
- The lifelong learning potential of European higher education could be enhanced with regard to continued professional development and professional reorientation.
- As experimentation in ICT and digitalisation is underway at the national and institution level, developing a stronger European approach would encourage greater convergence of structures and collaboration across boundaries.
- Support for European structures dedicated to these issues, such as platforms and regular conferences, would be key as bringing together various stakeholders would

promote new developments and facilitate exchange - which would also complement the work done in the Bologna Process.

Priority 2: “Helping HEIs become strong regional innovators”

Regional innovation should be understood in a broad sense. It comprises cooperation with industries and SMEs, but also other contributions by universities to economic, social and technical innovation in collaboration with a wide range of public and private institutions.

Suggestions:

- The increasing recognition by political actors of the key role of higher education institutions in regional development, as e.g. in the Research and Innovation Strategies for Smart Specialisation (RIS3), is welcomed by EUA. But more needs to be done to leverage the benefits institutions bring to it.
- It is important to keep in mind that universities can have a significant and diverse impact on regional innovation when playing a central role. This is particularly true in promoting enterprise, developing human resources, businesses and growth, and in enhancing social equality. Depending on the local economy, this type of impact is seen in industry formation and transplantation, as well as in diversification of tech-industries and in industry upgrades.
- Continuous political support is needed to ensure ongoing dialogue among relevant stakeholders in regional innovation. Therefore, platforms for dialogue bringing together universities and public authorities at national and regional levels should be fostered.
- Decision-making processes, specifically in the RIS3 area, and regional innovation should be characterised by evidence-based and transparent processes. Activities and initiatives aimed at showcasing good practice examples should be established.
- An integrated and combined use of diverse funding mechanisms can boost regional competitiveness and innovation. However, the synergetic use of funds can only be effectively achieved with higher levels of strategic and practical alignment of different funding mechanisms.
- Monitoring and assessing the effects is important for further policy development. However, relying on simple quantitative indicators will provide an incomplete evaluation. Regions should use diverse approaches and multi-dimensional measures to capture local characteristics and effects.
- While physical infrastructures are necessary to stimulate short-term innovation, human talent is the fundamental driver of innovation, and essential for long term success.

Priority 3: “Ensuring education and research activities within higher education are mutually reinforcing”

Universities uniquely combine research and teaching missions. They expose students to research-based teaching, educating them to become independent knowledge producers and innovators, and provide the human resources necessary to foster Europe’s scientific and technological bases and the prosperity of our society.

Suggestions:

- Doctoral schools have proven to be efficient in ensuring that training through research is conducted in excellent and inclusive environments and imbedded in institutional strategies, as proposed by the Salzburg Principles and Recommendations. The EC has set a good benchmark through the MSCA Initial Training Networks. However, more needs to be done in implementing existing policies.
- Collaborative research activities are an important asset for tailoring education to the evolving needs of the job market, contributing to maximise the employability of graduates and creating and sustaining academic, technical and support staff positions.
- The interrelation between education and research depends on national systems, institutional profiles, academic cultures and specific disciplines. Therefore it is important to be aware that asymmetries and disconnect occur and would benefit from further analysis.
- The achievements and strengths of the classic research university should be reconciled with provision of student-centred education for large and diverse student bodies and complex societal missions.
- It is essential that the development of the European Research Area (ERA) goes hand in hand with the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). Universities are motors for economic recovery and key stakeholders in meeting Europe's education, research and innovation objectives.

C. BUILDING ON EUROPE'S ACHIEVEMENTS

In addition to the three topics addressed above, EUA proposes including in the revision of the Modernisation Agenda the following priorities. In our view, these must be addressed in order to ensure the cohesion and further development of the European Higher Education and Research Areas and their international competitiveness. Therefore, they are indispensable for the success of the Modernisation Agenda.

Priority 1: "Strengthen universities for Europe"

The Modernisation Agenda can only be successful if institutions are in a position to actively respond, at local and national levels, and in cooperation with partners across Europe and globally. However, current development trends may negatively impact their ability to do so: Public funding for European universities has decreased as a consequence of the economic crisis. And while creative responses and institutional change have resulted from budget constraints, this can negatively affect institutional autonomy and strategic action, as well as undermine quality, positive innovation and their ability to respond to societal needs. Lower funding and decreasing autonomy also threaten the completion of the European Higher Education and the European Research Areas, and Europe's long-term international competitiveness. Meanwhile, the mission of universities is becoming increasingly complex as institutions are engaging in a wider range of issues and with more partners, in order to demonstrate their societal relevance and benefit. Finally, efficient university management requires a broad set of professional skills reflecting the increased complexity of university activities. It is for this reason that EUA has consistently pointed to the need for further professionalisation of university staff, especially at the senior and leadership levels. All this is of crucial importance for maintaining and enhancing the quality of higher education.

Suggestions:

- Governments should work with the university sector to improve regulatory and funding frameworks and make sure that sufficient funding is delivered in an efficient way, balancing accountability and institutional autonomy. Universities should seek to improve management and activities and develop income diversification strategies.
- Governments and institutions should set up processes for the professionalisation of staff. This requires the development of better defined and more attractive career paths, but also training. Universities should develop HR strategies adapted to a rapidly changing environment.
- The EU should continue to foster the exchange of good practice and policy dialogue across Europe with regard to the common challenges of funding models, efficiency and system governance. Such exchange has proven to be useful in supporting reforms.
- The EC should support the development of policy tools and platforms for improved regulatory and financial frameworks. This can facilitate benchmarking and foster discussions among public authorities and higher education stakeholders, as well as broaden the adoption of policy outcomes.
- The EC should continue its efforts to further simplify and improve EU funding programmes. Administrative procedures should be reduced, flexibility broadened and national and institutional accounting practices and costing methodologies considered. The current mid-term review of funding programmes is an opportunity in this regard.
- The EC, the European Parliament and Council should join forces to strengthen the funding base and protect EU funding programmes from cuts or transformation into loans.

Priority 2: “Maintain and develop open higher education and research”

Open higher education and research is one of the hallmarks of the Union, and an important framework condition for quality, and for facilitating Europe-wide exchange and collaboration. It requires a strong lead at the European level, otherwise it will be fragmented by national regulations and protocols. This is a broader issue linked in particular to the earlier remarks made on digitalisation.

Suggestions:

- Build on the “Opening up Education” communication and further develop the common legal framework. The copyright directive is a step in the right direction.
- Stimulate and facilitate exchange and collaboration on the development of national and institutional approaches in digitalisation, which would enhance the chances of compatible structures, able to communicate and collaborate across boundaries.
- All measures should take into account the rapid progress of Science 2.0/Open Science. These ongoing developments have an impact on how universities function and how teaching and research are conducted and evaluated. This will also entail reflection on governance and administrative structures, and create and employ new staff profiles.
- Several reports and studies on teaching and learning commissioned by the EC now need follow-up. This should be done in discussion with national governments and the

higher education community and include concrete actions for Europe, as well as plans for future research on the issue.

Priority 3: “Foster inclusiveness and societal relevance”

Inclusiveness is a core European value and a goal of EU policies, which have identified higher education as a core means for inclusive growth, political stability, innovation and economic growth. At the same time, access to and achievement in higher education in Europe is still highly dependent on socio-economic status. Europe’s future will depend upon its ability to maintain and further enhance social and economic inclusiveness, by providing educational opportunities and employment for intra-European migrants, and also international migrants and refugees.

Suggestions:

- Universities can play a central role with regard to inclusiveness, by enhancing access to migrants and minorities to research and education opportunities, providing training on inclusiveness for teachers and other multipliers, collaborating with local communities, and conducting interdisciplinary research on the issue to inform policy makers and society.
- Regarding refugees, EUA has stated that in order to make universities more inclusive, the following is necessary: information provision on the various educational opportunities, foundation and bridging courses, language teaching and recognition and flexible approaches towards entry and study requirements. Universities have to be enabled to follow up on these issues, which will also require funding support from national sources, Erasmus+, Horizon 2020 and the European Social Fund.
- The EC should contribute to capacity building at the system and institutional level to respond to mobility and migration of all types and levels. This is a task that clearly goes beyond education, and requires consultation and collaboration across different sectors, at the EC level, but also at the national level. Recognition, also of prior learning, is clearly one, but not the only, aspect. Equally important is the contribution of higher education to LLL and adult education.
- The EC should contribute to the promotion and support of engaged universities that, through collaboration with local governments, industries, schools etc., seek to ensure that young people are properly informed about study possibilities, and that higher education institutions are better prepared to include students from diverse backgrounds.
- The EC should continue to support this priority through policies, data collection and benchmarking, exchange of good practices and peer-learning. Promoting these goals will also require coordination and collaboration between different DGs, and also support from national and institutional levels of all EU member states.

Priority 4: “Collaborate with Europe’s neighbours and international partners”

Over the past two decades, Europe has become an example for structured system-level internationalisation, both with regard to the European Research Area and the European Higher Education Area. It is also perceived as a role model for systematic and sustained regional convergence in education and research, ensuring high visibility for all. The EU has played an important role in developing highly acclaimed, innovative approaches and instruments for international mobility and interinstitutional collaboration, e.g. the concept of ECTS and joint degrees.

Suggestions:

- Given that the EC continues to contribute to international exchange through its funding programmes, and also engages in dialogue with countries and regions outside of Europe, higher education and science diplomacy should be an integral part of EU foreign policy, and therefore reflected in the Modernisation Agenda. This also correlates with the strategic priorities of Europe's universities¹.
- The inclusion of third country mobility and collaboration into Erasmus+ was a good start, but in order to make it a success, there needs to be a better understanding of the needs of the different partners inside the EU and the neighbouring countries. This is a task that requires interagency collaboration within the EC, but also the support of member states.
- The EC should support interregional platforms for exchanges and collaboration between universities. This would further people-to-people exchanges, but also build strategic links for research and education collaboration and become an element to support EU policy dialogue. While potentially valid for all regions, EUA has highlighted specific opportunities of importance for the Neighbourhood Policy.

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¹ TRENDS 2015 p 93: "The Trends 2015 results confirm the pre-eminence of both internationalisation and ICT in the development and improvement of learning and teaching. Their importance is expected to grow further. The answers suggest that the quality of learning and teaching has improved thanks to student and staff mobility while ICT developments are expected to contribute to increasing the flexibility of access to the learning provisions and the effectiveness of classroom time.