

Can the European Commission transform Higher Education?

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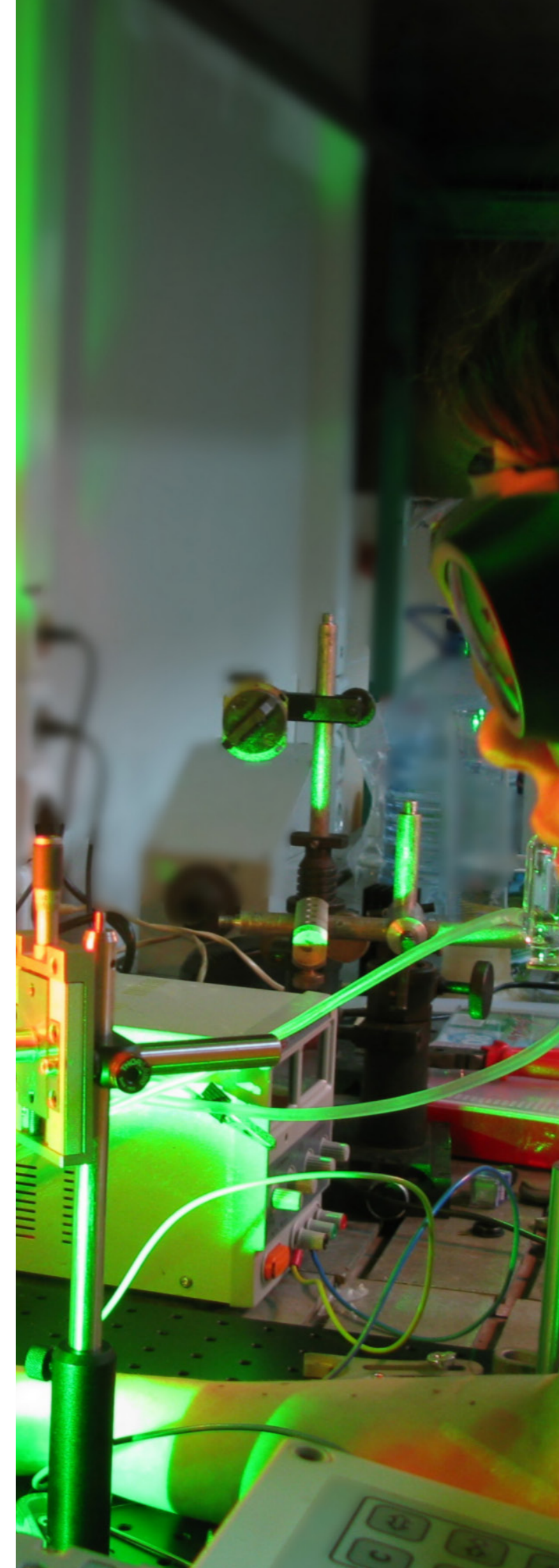
As an example of the high-quality research and policy updates that the ResearchConnect team reports on, Rob Kelk, Policy and Research Officer at Idox explores the newly launched initiatives for higher education in Europe, including the **European Strategy for Universities** and the **Council Recommendation on Building Bridges for Effective European Higher Education Cooperation**.

The challenge

The European Commission recently launched two initiatives intended to launch a transformation agenda for higher education in Europe. Sitting at the 'crossroads of research and innovation', the Commission believes that higher education has a key role to play in not only meeting challenges such as climate change, an ageing population and the impact of COVID-19, but can also align with wider European Union goals to make the Union 'greener, more inclusive and more digital'.

Europe is home to almost 5,000 higher education institutions, 17.5 million tertiary education students, 1.35 million people teaching in tertiary education and 1.17 million researchers. Stemming from the **Bologna Declaration of 1999, the European Higher Education Area (EHEA)** comprises 49 countries, ensuring not only that higher education systems across Europe are compatible, but also that students, researchers and academics can collaborate and study or work abroad more easily.

The Commission first signalled plans for a 'transformative' agenda in 2020, publishing a **Communication on Achieving the European Education Area by 2025** and a **Communication on a New European Research Area (ERA)**, the second of which was adopted by the European Council on 1 December 2020. In **Conclusions on the New European Research Area**, the Council noted that stronger synergies and interconnections between the ERA, the EHEA and the higher education-related elements of the European Education Area (EEA) should be developed.



Two initiatives: One goal

On 18 January 2022, Commission Vice-President Margaritis Schinas and Research Commissioner Mariya Gabriel, unveiled a **European Strategy for Universities** and a proposal for a **Council Recommendation on Building Bridges for Effective European Higher Education Cooperation**. The European Strategy for Universities is described by the Commission as taking 'transnational cooperation to a new level of intensity and scope' and developing a 'genuinely European dimension in the higher education sector, built on shared values'.

It will implement several flagship initiatives supporting Europe's universities to achieve four key objectives: strengthening the European dimension of higher education and research; consolidating universities as lighthouses of the European way of life; empowering universities as key actors of change in the twin green and digital transition; and reinforcing universities as drivers of the EU's global role and leadership.

The flagship initiatives are:

- Further roll out of the **European Universities Initiative** to 60 more European Universities, making more than 500 universities by mid-2024 supported under **Erasmus+**, with an indicative budget of €1.1 billion for the period 2021-2027.
- Working towards the establishment of a legal statute for alliances of higher education institutions by mid-2024.
- Examining options and necessary steps towards a joint European degree by mid-2024 to recognise the value of transnational experiences in the higher education qualification the students obtain and cut the red tape for delivering joint programmes.
- Scaling up the **European Student Card Initiative** by deploying a unique European Student Identifier available to all mobile students in 2022 and to all students in universities in Europe by mid-2024, to facilitate mobility at all levels.

Published alongside the European Strategy for Universities, the Council Recommendation aims to 'enable deeper and more sustainable transnational cooperation among higher education institutions' to address current challenges and ensure more effective implementation of joint educational programmes and activities, pooling capacity and resources, or awarding joint degrees.

It also serves as an invitation for Member States to set more coherent and compatible policy priorities and create appropriate conditions at national level for enabling such closer and sustainable transnational cooperation. This would lead to more effective implementation of joint educational and research activities, as well as of the EHEA tools, and a commitment to investments at EU, national, regional, and institutional levels.

Margaritis Schinas, Vice-President for Promoting the European Way of Life, said:

'European Universities of excellence and inclusiveness are both a condition and a foundation for our European Way of Life. They support open, democratic, and fair societies as well as sustained growth, entrepreneurship, integration, and employment. With our proposals today, we seek to take transnational cooperation in Higher Education to a new level. Shared values, more mobility, broader scope and synergies to build a genuinely European dimension in our Higher Education.'

Commissioner for Innovation, Research, Culture, Education and Youth, Mariya Gabriel, added that the proposals would: '...benefit the entire higher education sector, first and foremost our students. They need modern transnational campuses with easy access to mobility abroad to allow for a truly European study path and experience. We stand ready to join forces with the Member States and higher education institutions across Europe. Together we can bring closer education, research and innovation in service to society. The European Universities alliances are paving the way; by mid-2024 the European budget will support up to 60 European Universities Alliances with more than 500 universities across Europe.'



Reactions from the Higher Education sector

The European University Association (EUA) welcomed both initiatives, describing them as an ‘important step forward in connecting the university-related elements of the European Education Area and the European Research Area, building on the European Higher Education Area’.

While welcoming acknowledgment of the links between higher education and research and innovation, EUA suggested this could have been even stronger, notably the push for a reform of academic careers and assessment towards parity of esteem of university missions and mainstreaming of Open Science.

The Guild of European Research-Intensive Universities welcomed the strategy as recognising the potential and contribution of Europe’s universities to society through research, education and innovation. However, the Guild expressed concern over whether the strategy is sufficiently ‘visionary’ to truly be transformative. It called for the strategy to focus on strengthening universities at a global level, particularly their capacity for world-leading research and education.

While recognising that the new strategy had highlighted the importance of attractive career paths and working conditions for academics and researchers, the European Trade Union Committee for Education (ETUCE) expressed concern that the Commission had not properly addressed issues including guaranteeing sustainable public funding to universities, effective protection of institutional autonomy and academic freedom, ending precariousness and bad working conditions of academics, and ensuring the involvement of social partners in decision making.

Next steps

The Commission has invited the European Council, Member States and higher education stakeholders to discuss the proposed policy agenda and work jointly towards future-proofing universities and the wider sector. A formal response by the Education Council of the European Council is expected in April 2022. Once adopted, the Commission will support Member States and relevant partners in implementing the Council Recommendation.

ResearchConnect will continue to report on the Commission’s efforts to bring transnational cooperation to a higher level and unlock the full potential of the higher education sector. Meeting this challenge will require not only alignment of policy priorities, but also further investment at EU, national, regional, and institutional levels. Our team will closely monitor how EU Member States respond to the Commission’s calls to develop further synergies with national financing to ensure adequate funding mechanisms for Europe’s universities.



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