



The new ERA Communication through the eyes of young universities

The Young European Research Universities Network (YERUN) warmly welcomes the publication of the Communication “A New ERA for Research and Innovation” and believes in its potential to push the European Research Area forward. In particular, YERUN strongly supports the European Commission’s will to:

- **Strengthen the national investments in R&I** by supporting Member States in the coordination and prioritisation of national R&I funding and reforms, between countries and with the EU. Achieving the 3% EU GDP R&D investment target is long overdue.
- **Further promote Open Science practices**, including the advancement in the development of the European Open Science Cloud and the launch of an Open Research Europe publishing platform.
- **Recognise that the current research assessment system is largely based on indicators** that are associated with publications on high-impact journals, rather than on the individual content and added-value of the research outputs themselves.
- **Promote diversity and inclusiveness**, for example by encouraging citizen science practices as well as by fostering gender balance in universities (e.g. increasing women’s representation in academic leadership positions and their participation in STEM fields). It is important to approach inclusiveness in a holistic way.
- **Engage citizens, local communities and civil society** in order to achieve greater impact, promote trust, and facilitate the update of science, technology and innovation.
- **Increase the cooperation between higher education and research** by further incentivising synergies between EU, national and regional actions.
- **Strengthen synergies between EU programmes**, including Horizon Europe, Erasmus, European Social Fund Plus (ESF+), European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and private investments.

YERUN considers the aforementioned points to be a good basis for taking the ERA forward. At the same time, some aspects deserve further attention. Hereby, YERUN invites EU policy-makers to further complement the vision of the new ERA by considering the following recommendations when implementing its strategic objectives.

I. Securing adequate funding for universities by providing basic operational means

YERUN welcomes the overall objective of increasing the public investment in R&I from 0.8% to 1.25% of EU GDP by 2030. More investment efforts are needed both at Member State and EU levels – especially when financial commitments under the New Multiannual Financial Framework and the Next Generation EU recovery plan fall short of providing the necessary resources to match the level of ambition of this Communication.

Nevertheless, YERUN believes that further attention should be given to **ensuring a level playing field for universities by providing adequate operating means**. The overall lack of adequate funding is a stark reality for many universities. Only by providing universities with the adequate funding they need, can they be in a position to be game changers. High expectations should be matched with an adequate allocation of funds. This is even more relevant in the context of the current COVID-19 pandemic and in how universities have had to adapt to the numerous challenges they are facing.

II. Ensuring that synergy goes hand in hand with complementarity

YERUN supports the will of increasing synergies between the different European funding schemes and schemes in member states, as well as of reaching a strategic and practical alignment of policies. However, when seeking alignment, YERUN considers that it is **equally important to achieve good complementarity in the design and objectives of programmes** in order to avoid duplicated actions. This may be especially challenging for the (new) programmes aimed at innovation such as the European Innovation Council (EIC), the European Institute of Innovation and Technology (EIT), the Digital Europe programme, and the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF).

III. Avoiding further discrepancies by supporting excellence horizontally across Europe

In the ERA Communication, “excellence” is understood as “the commitment to supporting the best possible research teams and projects, irrespective of any considerations”[1]. However, a clear explanation of how this goal will be achieved seems to be missing. YERUN believes that:

- The pursuit of excellence should be meticulous and inclusive, avoiding the use of methods that may exacerbate already existing discrepancies among universities across Europe. In fact, **excellence should be supported in a horizontal manner**, allowing the whole European higher education system to flourish, rather than super boosting a few institutions. For this reason, it is important to **refrain from (only) using proxy indicators based on publications to evaluate research quality**. YERUN encourages a more comprehensive approach, which focuses on other indicators such as open access, stakeholder engagement, impact, or research income[2]. Similarly, when analysing the impact of publications, it is important to take into account qualitative indicators such as societal impact and diversity and inclusion aspects, inter alia.

[1] Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions [A new ERA for Research and Innovation](#), COM/2020/628 final, p. 3, footnote 18.

[2] Research income should be seen here in perspective to the number of researchers at a university. Young universities are often smaller. Thus, a smaller absolute research income can nevertheless mean a very high relative research income per capita.

- **Access to excellence should be improved everywhere in Europe.** The ERA Communication focuses very much on how to improve excellence in widening countries but falls short in explaining how it should be achieved across the whole EU. Likewise, more attention should be given to the discrepancies existing across Europe, e.g. between the regions of the same country or even between higher education institutions in the same region. The "Knowledge Exchange Platform" and the "Science meets Regions initiative" proposed can already be a first good step, but more should be done in this regard.
- In addition to the initiatives aiming at reducing brain drain YERUN believes that the need to **foster talent circulation between universities and other sectors of society (private sector, civil society organisations, public administration, etc) is equally important.** In order to achieve talent circulation, adequate rewarding systems are to be put in place, which implies the need for sufficient operational means for universities, so that they can ascertain the best teaching and research capacity available to instruct and develop students and young researchers.
- **Researchers should be better integrated in smart specialisation strategies in cooperation with different sectors,** and not only with industry as mentioned in the Communication. Cooperation activities with other sectors such as public institutions or city councils can be equally beneficial for researchers.

IV. Impactful R&I results through knowledge valorisation

The Communication's objective of **updating the Guiding Principles for Knowledge Valorisation** is very relevant. In fact, YERUN universities cherish excellence in research, but frame their research in impact strategies. However, in order to ensure that data, research results, and innovation have a true impact in our society, so that people can benefit from knowledge produced in universities, YERUN recommends the following to be taken into account at EU level:

- Updating the Guiding Principles for Knowledge Valorisation is welcomed, but before embarking on such an exercise, it would be necessary to carry out a **thorough evaluation on how the 2008 Code of Practice^[3] is being implemented across the EU.** Based on such an assessment, it will be possible to produce updated Guiding Principles that can lead universities further.
- **This high-level aim should be accompanied by proper implementation mechanisms** that tackle the following challenges:
 - In order to have efficient knowledge valorisation strategies in universities, **critical mass in expertise is needed.** Most universities lack people with adequate skills to implement knowledge transfer systematically and professionally. **Action is needed in universities with support at EU and member states level to** (i) foster training among researchers so that they can develop knowledge transfer skills, (ii) create incentives for universities to work on knowledge valorisation strategies and (iii) develop proper instruments to ensure regional and national support, for example through the European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF).

[3] [Commission Recommendation of 10 April 2008](#) on the management of intellectual property in knowledge transfer activities and Code of Practice for universities and other public research organisations (C(2008) 1329).

- **Sharing best practices** among researchers and between universities on knowledge valorisation strategies is not yet mainstreamed across the EU. This is why YERUN strongly supports the EC's intention to **foster an interconnected valorisation ecosystem across Europe**. For this to become a reality, knowledge transfer offices in universities could be supported by experts at regional/national level, or by experts in the co-location centres of the Knowledge and Innovation Communities (KICs) of the European Institute of Innovation and Technology (EIT). The new EIT instrument to boost innovation capacity of higher education (Strategic Innovation Agenda 2021-2027) is to be used for this purpose.

V. Diversifying career opportunities for researchers

YERUN highly supports the actions aiming at further developing career opportunities for researchers as proposed in the Communication, but considers that the following points should also be taken into account in order to reach effective solutions:

- While the development of a "European Framework for Research Careers" has considerable potential, **a taxonomy of researchers' skills** can only benefit researchers if it is stakeholder-driven, with researchers and their employers at the core, and if it can be embedded in related actions such as:
 - **tracking and registering researchers' employability**;
 - **encouraging universities to further work on developing doctoral schools**, which can provide the training that researchers really need, both in terms of research methodology and of transversal skills needed for entering the labour market;
 - **supporting the development of researchers' talent and skills** throughout their entire career;
 - **updating the systems of recognition and rewards in academic careers**, moving from outdated publication-based criteria towards more flexible, holistic, and qualitative approaches. Education, (societal) impact, and leadership should play a prominent role in academic career paths. Recognising a more diverse set of talents will result in more inclusive and excellent academic systems;
 - a dedicated action for **boosting the careers of Early Stage Researchers**, a group that needs specific support.
- Measures to **reinforce intersectoral mobility** are welcome, keeping in mind that the obstacle does not necessarily lie in the fact that researchers lack the skills to work in other sectors, but in the fact that **universities and governments need to take responsibility and must be more proactive in facilitating this**.
- **Researchers are under severe pressure** in academic environments. Their individual career usually depends on individual competitive performance, but the Communication does not acknowledge this challenge. The promotion of **individually targeted incentives is counterproductive to the sense of collaboration that a research environment needs** and that the European Commission seeks to promote.
- On further **developing research and technology infrastructures**, attention should be given to the issue of accessibility to large-scale European research infrastructures. Nowadays, many universities have access to small- and medium-sized research infrastructures, but not to large-scale ones. It is therefore imperative to **ascertain that large-scale research infrastructures are made accessible by the academic research community in Europe**.

In summary

In reaching the ERA Communication's strategic objectives, YERUN calls for (1) providing adequate funding for universities with a specific focus on adequate operating means, (2) achieving complementarity in the design and objectives of EU support schemes, (3) supporting excellence across Europe in a horizontal manner, focusing on all countries and regions and adopting an inclusive perspective, (4) accompanying the update of the Guiding Principles for Knowledge Valorisation with a proper consultation with stakeholders and thorough implementation mechanisms, and (5) further improving career opportunities for researchers by considering the pressure they face in academic environments and their employability challenges, as well as by dedicating special efforts to early career researchers by developing doctoral schools.

A coordinated action among the European Commission, Member States, and the research and innovation stakeholder community is fundamental. As representatives of young research universities, we reaffirm our commitment to continue taking part in this co-creation exercise and call on EU policy-makers to take into account the above-mentioned recommendations in implementing the new ERA.



- About YERUN -

The Young European Research University Network (YERUN) is a cluster of highly-ranked young universities in Europe that strengthens and facilitates cooperation in the areas of scientific research, academic education and services which benefit society. In this context, YERUN members consider that adequate support to human capital is essential to foster the next generations of (European) researchers and innovators. Strong support for excellent early-career researchers is therefore a priority for all YERUN members.

- YERUN Members -

University of Antwerp, Autonomous University of Barcelona, Autonomous University of Madrid, Bremen University, Brunel University London, University Carlos III Madrid, Dublin City University, University of Essex, University of Eastern Finland, University of Konstanz, Maastricht University, University Nova de Lisboa, University Paris Dauphine, University Pompeu Fabra, University Rome Tor Vergata, Syddansk University, and Ulm University.



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