



A STRONGER ERA WITH AND FOR UNIVERSITIES

The European Research Area (ERA) aims to establish a unified, borderless market for research, innovation, and technology within the European Union (EU). Through the ERA, countries and stakeholders collaborate to prioritise investments and enhance research policies and systems, fostering an environment that enables the free movement of researchers, knowledge, and innovation.

Going forward, the ERA is set to play a key role in shaping the future of research and innovation across Europe. It serves as a unique platform, fostering constructive dialogue among policy makers, governments and sectors to promote the collective wellbeing and prosperity of Europeans. In this space, our diversity becomes our strength, as the ERA aims to create the right conditions for our broad and varied research and innovation communities to thrive.

Achievements and progress of the ERA

Valuing collaborative governance

A key achievement of the renewed ERA has been the way we work together to advance the agreed objectives in a collaborative way. The 2022 reform⁽¹⁾ of the ERA governance structure, which foresaw an active involvement of stakeholders in the ERA Forum – an expert group of the European Commission that brings together EU Member States' representatives and stakeholders to advance the ERA – was warmly welcomed by the university sector. Since then, universities have been active and reliable partners, working alongside Member States to develop and implement the ERA Policy Agenda for 2022-2024. YERUN very actively participates in the ERA Forum, bearing the responsibility of bringing up the perspectives of young research universities with great care and contributing to the voice of the university sector.

⁽¹⁾ Council conclusions on the Future governance of the European Research Area (ERA). 26 November 2021. <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-14308-2021-INIT/en/pdf>.

Indeed, **one of the most significant changes in the renewed ERA over the past four years has been the increased stakeholder engagement and open collaboration with the European Commission and Member States.** While not without its challenges, this new approach has dramatically transformed the policymaking process; it has shifted from a reactive, complaint-driven mode to a proactive, co-creative one. With this change, key stakeholders such as university associations, were brought into the policy process.

A key achievement of the ERA has been bringing stakeholders together to identify challenges and find collective solutions. However, ensuring good governance, active listening, and a fair co-creation process remains essential. By joining forces with fellow European university associations, YERUN is proud to have played a crucial role in ensuring coordinated and effective representation of the university sector in ERA governance. Collaborating with these associations has been invaluable in promoting an inclusive and impactful ERA governance.

The ERA Forum has democratised the decision-making process by welcoming new voices to the table and providing opportunities for diverse perspectives to be heard. For YERUN, representing young research universities, this inclusive approach has been especially valuable. Additionally, this collaborative governance model has increased Member States' accountability to their constituencies and fostered a mutual dialogue. By involving stakeholders in ERA Forum meetings, the process has become more transparent, offering insight into how Member States shape decisions at both national and EU levels. This new channel of communication has facilitated exchanges between stakeholders and Member States that are still often missing at the national level.

The ERA Forum has also enabled stronger collaboration among stakeholders, particularly within the university sector. Universities have shown the capacity to effectively coordinate and raise their voices in the Forum. With many ambitious policy Actions on the agenda, university networks have productively organised their participation to ensure that all Actions meeting the threshold are being implemented with the university perspective in mind.

Remaining challenges

Improving coordination

Member States have different research and innovation systems, different conditions and priorities and funding gaps which do not allow us to collaborate as often, as deeply, and as efficiently as we could. The strength of Europe lays in our collaboration, not competition. But we need to coordinate better.

The recent report by Mario Draghi on the future of European competitiveness advocates for better coordination of public research and innovation investments across EU Member States. Greater coordination is essential to ensure that EU and national funding priorities align. At the EU level, the focus should be on maximising European added value, while national investments should aim at building local capacity. These two levels must work together seamlessly and complement one another, as no single funding source is sufficient on its own.

YERUN calls for stronger efforts to improve cooperation between national authorities and their universities or research-performing organisations to implement ERA Actions. While some Member States have made progress, constructive and regular engagement between national authorities and the sector is still lacking in many countries.

The 'threshold system' used to decide which Actions would proceed has caused confusion. While stakeholders, such as YERUN, have committed to multiple Actions at once, some Member States have shifted their positions over time. Certain Actions that initially failed to meet the threshold – requiring at least half of the Member States' support – were later initiated, creating uncertainty around planning and resource allocation. In the next ERA Policy Agenda, this process could be streamlined by ensuring stakeholders commit to a set of 'pre-agreed' Actions from the start.

The system of chairs, co-chairs, sponsors, and subgroups could also be simplified. The current varied implementation approaches for each Action have caused confusion among stakeholders, and the roles and responsibilities of co-chairs and sponsors were unclear. Having clarity in the working mechanisms in the next cycle would help streamline the process.

Among research and innovation stakeholders, universities play the most significant and active role in implementing ERA Actions. However, universities are only allocated one seat in the ERA Forum. **Given the critical role they play in advancing the ERA Policy Agenda, future discussions should consider increasing university representation to better reflect their contributions.** Going forward, it must be acknowledged that organisations included in the SHO registry do not share a common governance structure, so they should not be asked to present common or agreed positions. The ERA Forum should strive to design mechanisms by which the diversity of views is promoted. We have seen progress, but more is needed.

For all structural policies and Actions, success depends on key enablers: adequate funding, sound governance, shared responsibilities, and effective progress monitoring.

Focusing on key priorities

We need to return to basics and ensure greater commitment to achieving the core objectives of the ERA. The focus should remain on the ERA's four priority areas from the Pact for Research and Innovation, namely, prioritising investments and reforms; improving access to excellence; translating R&I results into the economy (and society); and deepening the ERA. ERA Actions should be organised under clear structural policies or pillars, allowing for concrete, time-bound initiatives within longer-term commitments.

The 2022-2024 Policy Agenda lacked consistency, covering a wide range of initiatives with varying levels of ambition, timelines, and implementation strategies. **For the next ERA Policy Agenda, YERUN supports restructuring the ERA Forum's work around fewer, more focused structural policies, such as careers, open science, and valorisation of knowledge.**

Each Action should be conceived as a time-bound, task-driven initiative with predefined success criteria, while structural issues should receive ongoing attention. It is also critical to clearly specify the responsibilities at different levels – institutional, regional, national, and European – for each Action's implementation.

It is unrealistic to expect all current Actions to be completed by the end of 2024. More time will be required for those Actions with more complex implementation, which will affect the opportunity

to introduce many new Actions in the next Policy Agenda. The next Agenda should build on the progress made so far, advancing current Actions to a more ambitious level rather than overloading the agenda with too many new ones.

Understanding what has been achieved so far will validate the ERA Forum's work and provide a solid foundation for future efforts. Future Actions should also account for the specific role Member States will play in their implementation, focusing on fewer initiatives but with a more realistic and targeted approach.

Successful implementation goes beyond isolated achievements. Some Actions are channelled through existing initiatives and structures (e.g., EOSC for Action 1, ESFRI for Action 8, CoARA for Action 3), but this should not be seen as a shortcut for fulfilling the broader objectives of these Actions, which often require a more comprehensive approach and commitment for implementation from Member States. Likewise, emerging priority areas such as the uptake of Artificial Intelligence in science need to be taken into account.

Several key priorities from the Pact have not been sufficiently addressed by current ERA Actions and deserve more attention:

- **Scientific leadership:** More support for bottom-up fundamental research is essential for the EU to become a global scientific leader. Despite this being a key priority, no ERA Action is actively supporting it yet. YERUN and the sector have been advocating for more fundamental research, especially in the context of the next Multiannual Financial Framework.
- **Synergies between research and education:** Despite widespread acknowledgement of the need for stronger connections between research and education, the ERA agenda has not adequately addressed this gap yet. The future policy cycle should promote action to address these synergies but also identify the remaining challenges and needed framework conditions to unleash the full potential of research and innovation environments, where universities play a central role.
- **Long-term R&I investments and policy reforms:** Member States have not committed enough to make this Action operational, which is regrettable. Support for R&I investment and reform is a crucial precondition for the success of all other Actions. In fact, this Action should have been a cross-cutting priority, underpinning all the others. The lack of commitment reflects the fact that many Member States have not yet fully understood the strategic importance of research for driving socio-economic benefits.

For the next ERA Policy Agenda, a new structure centred around ERA's core structural policies will ensure continuity in addressing long-term challenges while allowing for time-bound initiatives. It is also important to carefully consider the progress made under the 2022-2024 Agenda. When developing new Actions for 2025-2027, especially to address unmet priorities, we should build upon current achievements and recognise that some Actions will require more time to deliver and that sometimes, less is more.

YERUN aspirations for the future of the ERA

The current inclusive approach of involving stakeholders in the co-creation of the next ERA Policy Agenda is a highly positive development. It is essential to maintain this openness throughout the implementation of the actions and structural policies.

The ERA as a vehicle to reinforce European values and achieve the fifth freedom

The purpose of the ERA is to create the right conditions to strengthen Europe's diverse research and innovation community. Here, it is important to emphasise that research and innovation are interconnected; they do not occur in isolation or in a linear process. Progress happens when there are opportunities for them to intersect and reinforce one another.

Enrico Letta in his recent report 'Much More Than A Market' called for a fifth freedom and free movement of knowledge to enhance research, innovation and education in the Single Market. For the ERA to succeed, it must hold a prominent place at the European, national, and regional levels. This seems likely to be the case under the next European Commission. **However, to achieve the fifth freedom the ERA must ensure the underlying conditions for success across key areas in the EU, accompanied by a stronger commitment to implementation. While YERUN is aware of the major challenges, there is still a lack of enforcement, and bold actions are needed to address them effectively.**

As Draghi has recently highlighted, more effective and proactive citizen involvement, along with social dialogue, is crucial. **Enhancing stakeholder engagement will lead to more informed policymaking. In the future, greater attention should also be given to establishing structured dialogues with stakeholders at the national level.** While some countries have well-organised systems for this, many others do not.

Looking ahead, we must stay focused on the ERA's core objectives and make significant progress on its key pillars. Efforts should not be diluted by taking on too many Actions. Instead, we should concentrate on those that align with the ERA's four strategic objectives and where coordinated action will deliver the greatest impact. Topics that can be addressed through individual projects should not be included as ERA Actions.

To remain globally competitive, Europe must, as the European Commission President has stated, "put research and innovation at the heart of our economy"⁽²⁾. The ERA is a vital tool to achieve this. To unlock the full potential of research and innovation, the ERA must provide the right conditions across the EU and ensure greater commitment to implementation. This requires transforming the ERA into the fifth freedom of the EU single market, tackling fragmentation, and harmonising structural conditions. Beyond increased investments, this means creating more attractive research careers, improving access to investments, and offering better incentives across the Union.

Universities' role in the ERA

Universities are key actors of the ERA and their role in co-creating and implementing the next ERA Policy Agenda should be strengthened. This includes their preeminent role in co-shaping the direction and goals of the relaunched ERA.

The ERA is stronger with strengthened universities at the table

The ERA is stronger with universities actively involved. Universities are proactive partners, co-creating knowledge and driving innovation. However, there is still a misconception about their role. Traditionally, universities are seen primarily as institutions for teaching and research, with a

(2) Political Guidelines for the next European Commission 2024-2029. 18 July 2024. https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/e6cd4328-673c-4e7a-8683-f63ffb2cf648_en?filename=Political%20Guidelines%202024-2029_EN.pdf.

one-way flow of knowledge into society. In reality, these activities occur simultaneously, with universities at the heart of these connections. Yet, they are often constrained by regulations or a lack of opportunities that fail to view the ecosystem as a whole, treating each priority in isolation.

Universities should be recognised as bridge-builders and facilitators, bringing together all actors within the ecosystem for continuous co-creation, thereby democratising innovation. As innovation hubs, universities need greater support for fostering interaction and collaboration with external partners in real-world environments, where new solutions and inventions will emerge, driving sustainable and human-centric development.

To achieve this, it is crucial to provide universities with more flexibility in funding, allowing them to determine the best use of resources while maintaining institutional autonomy. This would be a key enabler for their role in innovation.

The Draghi report underscores universities' contributions to early-stage innovation, research, and talent development. However, it also notes that despite a strong university system, not enough institutions are reaching global excellence. **YERUN calls for a broader discussion on the role of universities, beyond their rankings.**

ERA Forum is a valuable platform to facilitate the dialogue on the needed steps to strengthen universities. This will in turn make the ERA stronger.

Building a stronger ERA together

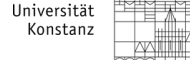
In conclusion, the new structure of the ERA Forum and the joint implementation of the ERA Policy Agenda have enhanced transparency, accountability, and collaboration within the R&I sector. Looking ahead, there is room to further streamline and simplify processes to encourage broader stakeholder participation and, ultimately, achieve better results.

YERUN strongly reaffirms its commitment to the ERA and is eager to continue fostering new opportunities for cooperation in R&I policies, working alongside peer university associations and other stakeholders, the European Commission, Member States, and associated countries.

- About YERUN -

YERUN - Young European Research Universities Network - founded in 2015 and based in Brussels, brings together excellence and value-driven young research universities. The network's objective is to strategically represent its members in the decision-making process at EU level, thus shaping their future and promoting their role in European societies. Further to its policy advocacy activity, the network also strengthens cooperation opportunities among its members in areas of mutual interest and raises their visibility via a dedicated communication strategy.

- YERUN Members -



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For questions about this document please contact Ms Silvia Gomez Recio: secretarygeneral@yerun.eu



www.yerun.eu



YERUN Office
Rue du Trône 62,
1050 Brussels