



## A Fifth Freedom for a Stronger European Single Market

YERUN – the Young European Research Universities Network – welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the [EU public consultation on the Single Market Strategy 2025](#). As a network of forward-looking research universities committed to excellence, inclusion and impact, **YERUN strongly advocates for the inclusion of the "fifth freedom" – the free movement of knowledge to enhance research, innovation and education in the Union– as a cornerstone of the updated strategy.** We align with the vision articulated in [Enrico Letta's report Much more than a market](#), recognising that the Single Market's future success hinges on harnessing Europe's knowledge and innovation potential, as enshrined in Title XIX of the TFEU, to drive inclusive and sustainable prosperity.

### The Fifth Freedom: Key to Strengthening Europe's Competitiveness

The original four freedoms – the free movement of goods, services, capital, and people – have been instrumental in shaping the European Union's collective strength. However, to remain competitive in an increasingly knowledge-driven global economy, **Europe must embrace a fifth freedom that promotes the seamless exchange of knowledge across borders and inserts research and innovation drivers at the centre of the Single Market. This entails [realising the full potential of the European Research Area \(ERA\)](#), as its foundation.**

To achieve the fifth freedom it is crucial to build on the foundations set by the ERA, align efforts and strengthen the process of the upcoming ERA Policy Agenda 2025-2027. For the ERA to succeed, it must be prioritised at the European, national, and regional levels – a goal which is set to gain traction under the current European Commission. However, the ERA must also address the key underlying conditions for success, accompanied by a stronger commitment to implementation. **Current challenges, including a lack of enforcement, demand bold actions to fully realise this ambition.**

To remain globally competitive, Europe must follow the European Commission President's call to [place research and innovation at the core of its economy](#). The ERA is pivotal to achieving this objective by providing the necessary structural and operational conditions across the EU. Transforming the ERA into the fifth freedom of the Single Market involves overcoming fragmentation and harmonising structural conditions. This effort requires not only **increased investments but also the creation of more attractive research careers, improved access to funding, and better incentives for researchers and institutions across the Union.**

The forthcoming ERA Act is expected to provide a much-needed legislative framework to support this transformation. However, the incomplete implementation of the original four freedoms serves as a reminder that achieving the fifth freedom will require a strategic, long-term approach. **National reforms within the ERA framework must be complemented by strong coordination and a sustained commitment to implementation planned in detail in the Single Market Strategy 2025, as one-off initiatives such as the ERA Act will not suffice.**

At a 2024 high-level Research Matters Campaign event, supported by YERUN and other R&I stakeholders, Letta emphasised the importance of strengthening Europe's research and innovation standing while upholding shared values on the global stage. Building on this vision, **YERUN highlights the broader significance of research and innovation, which goes [beyond competitiveness](#) to address societal and cultural challenges.** To establish a resilient European R&I system, there must be a concerted effort to attract and sustain research talent, enhance the alignment of R&I policies, and develop enabling frameworks across the EU. **Substantial R&I investments are essential, both at the EU and national levels. Member States must strive to exceed the 3% GDP expenditure target on R&I, which many have yet to achieve.**

## Empowering Universities as Knowledge Hubs

Research universities lie at the core of Europe's knowledge ecosystem. They drive scientific innovation, cultivate entrepreneurial talent, and enhance societal resilience. To fully harness their potential, the Single Market Strategy 2025 must strengthen universities to act as dynamic hubs of innovation and collaboration. Universities serve as vital bridge-builders in the research and innovation ecosystem, contributing far beyond their rankings. They facilitate public value creation, nurture talent, and democratise access to innovation. Recognising this, **universities should be granted a special consideration in the Strategy as key knowledge institutions. This entails granting universities and university alliances with [more flexible funding](#) lines, allowing them to determine the best use of resources while maintaining institutional autonomy.** This would be a key enabler for their role in innovation.

Moreover, to fully embed the fifth freedom in the EU Single Market, YERUN advocates for the following:

- **Establishing an integrated "European Knowledge Commons,"** proposed by Letta, by investing in digital infrastructure and policies that promote open access to research outputs and data while ensuring compliance with ethical standards. Existing efforts, such as Open Research Europe and the European Open Science Cloud, should be further developed, aligned with the commitments of the [Barcelona Declaration](#).
- **Operationalising a knowledge and innovation ecosystem** approach by facilitating partnerships between academia and the private sector to accelerate the translation of research into market-ready solutions. Key to this is creating incentives and allocating additional resources to support

universities in their societal mission of knowledge valorisation. This includes adopting responsible assessment practices, rewarding institutional staff for diverse contributions beyond education and research, in line with the principles outlined by the [Coalition for Advancing Research Assessment \(CoARA\)](#).

- **Increasing support for universities and especially for early-career researchers** by providing targeted funding and opportunities to foster the next generation of innovators and thought leaders. One proposal, championed by Draghi, is the creation of an [ERC for Institutions \(ERC-I\)](#), expected to bring excellence-based funding to academic institutions, enabling them to develop world-class research facilities and attract top talent. This initiative could be included in the Strategy, but only as long as it is driven by responsible indicators of academic excellence, moving beyond conventional university rankings; by a healthy turnover in institutions benefiting from the scheme. Similarly, the Expert Group led by Heitor recommends expanding the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA) programme with a [“Choose Europe” instrument](#) designed to support outstanding early-career researchers. The MSCA programme, as highlighted also by Letta, is a key mobility scheme for researchers and innovators that should be expanded to retain and attract the best talents.

**The fifth freedom is not merely an addition to the existing framework; it is a transformative principle that can unlock the full potential of Europe’s Single Market.** By embedding the free movement of knowledge into its 2025 strategy, the EU can create an environment where innovation flourishes, talent thrives, and societal challenges are addressed collaboratively. YERUN stands ready to support the EU in shaping this vision and ensuring that the Single Market remains a beacon of opportunity and prosperity for all Europeans.

## - 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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