




# AHEAD OF THE CURVE: HOW YOUNG UNIVERSITIES ARE DRIVING THE UNION OF SKILLS

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The new **Union of Skills**, set to launch in early March, has the potential to be a transformative initiative for the European Union, strengthening education, skills, and overall competitiveness. This initiative aligns with [Letta Report](#)'s proposal for a new European **Fifth Freedom**, focused on the free movement of knowledge and skills, and highlights universities as key drivers of Europe's economic strength.

Universities recognise that global competitiveness is at a pivotal moment, particularly for Europe. In an era of rapid technological advancements, shifting geopolitical and economic landscapes, and intensifying competition, higher education institutions serve as engines of progress. They are the primary spaces for developing top-tier talent, driving innovation and entrepreneurship, and ensuring Europe's ability to compete globally. **Research and innovation (R&I), is intrinsically linked to education**, and without sustained investment in highly skilled individuals, Europe risks falling behind in creating and exploiting future-proof industries that will shape the next generation of economic growth. Universities already have the infrastructure, expertise, and networks to maximise the impact of a Union of Skills, fostering interdisciplinary collaboration and equipping learners with the skills needed to tackle global challenges.

YERUN, with **24 young research universities across Europe**, exemplifies institutions that are prepared and agile in developing a Union of Skills. Young universities are uniquely positioned to contribute to the Union of Skills due to their adaptability and forward-thinking approach, which is crucial for addressing emerging challenges in education and workforce development.

## 1. High-Quality Skills for Competitiveness and Excellence

To maintain European competitiveness, skills must be **high-quality, comprehensive, and transversal**. These skills are needed by two primary target groups: young students who are preparing to enter the workforce and lifelong learners who are upskilling or reskilling to remain relevant in a rapidly changing job market. Universities provide the necessary expertise and infrastructure to support both groups effectively, creating an integrated system that fosters continuous learning and skill development.

Lifelong learning plays a crucial role in this ecosystem. Initiatives such as **micro-credentials**, which [YERUN has provided practical guidelines on developing](#), offer flexible learning opportunities, allowing learners at all career stages to benefit from university expertise. In leveraging the same infrastructure, universities can support the education of young students while offering pathways for lifelong learners to access new skills and knowledge.

**YERUN's young universities** benefit from the flexibility to adapt to emerging fields. Their strength lies in their **dynamic, interdisciplinary approach** to education and management. They forge strong connections with various sectors, co-develop curricula, create meaningful placements, and establish collaborations that provide students and lifelong learners with **real-world experience**, enhancing their employability.

Furthermore, young universities integrate emerging competencies from fundamental and applied research into academic programmes. They incorporate **sustainability principles** and align curricula with the [Sustainable Development Goals \(SDGs\)](#), ensuring graduates are equipped to tackle glo-

-bal challenges. Many such initiatives underscore young universities as frontrunners in shaping the future of higher education—through collaborations with the [VET sector](#), [a strong emphasis on interdisciplinarity](#), and the use of [sustainable pedagogies](#) on our campuses.

## 2. The Crucial Role of Social Sciences, Humanities and Arts in European Competitiveness

Discussions around competitiveness often emphasise STEM and emerging technologies. However, **Social Sciences, Humanities, and the Arts (SSHA)** play a crucial role in advancing science, the economy, and society. Moreover, the [Draghi Report](#) emphasises the importance of retaining Europe's social model as a key driver of competitiveness, reinforcing the role of SSHA in shaping policies that **balance economic growth with social sustainability**. The EU could develop an initiative that values essential contributions of SSHA disciplines in fostering innovation, economic resilience, and cultural development across various sectors (1). In the face of global and societal challenges, SSHA disciplines are more important than ever, providing critical insights into pressing issues such as climate change, digital transformation, and social cohesion.

It is imperative to understand the societal dimension of future innovations, from how human behaviour will be affected to the implications for democracy and the rule of law, whether in the context of clean technology, artificial intelligence, or security and defence. A holistic skills agenda must integrate SSHA in a transversal and interdisciplinary manner within STEM education.

YERUN has long championed the benefits of interdisciplinarity, demonstrating tangible outcomes through initiatives such as the [YERUN Research Mobility Awards](#) and [Doctoral Schools](#).

## 3. Addressing External Factors Influencing Skills Development

A robust skills agenda must consider external factors that affect education and workforce development. Issues such as **social mobility, affordable housing, travel costs, and the financial burden of upskilling** must be addressed alongside broader skills policies. Investment in these areas is essential to ensure equal access to education and training. Policies should minimise financial barriers through **scholarships, subsidies, and accessible student loans**, particularly for lifelong learners who need to upskill or reskill throughout their careers.

For the initiative to be effective, **mobility and qualification recognition across Europe** must be streamlined. While [Directive 2005/36/EC, as amended by Directive 2013/55/EC](#) provides a framework for mutual recognition of professional qualifications, challenges remain, especially for professions outside the ones that benefit from automatic recognition. Lengthy procedures often lead to wasted talent and resources, limiting Europe's full workforce potential.

To address this, efforts must align with the broader **Fifth Freedom** discussions and the renewed **Single Market strategy**. A well-designed recognition mechanism must maintain high standards while ensuring that talent mobility does not exacerbate **regional brain drain**. Universities, particularly younger institutions, play a role in decentralising access to education, fostering balanced regional development, and promoting competitiveness across Europe.

(1) Existing examples include the SHAPE ([Social Sciences, Humanities and the Arts for People and the Economy](#)) initiative in the United Kingdom.

In parallel, the **internationalisation of education** is crucial in equipping students with the global competencies needed to navigate increasingly interconnected economies and societies. As Europe faces complex challenges, from demographic shifts to digital transformation, Member States should support universities in fostering international collaboration and mobility, ensuring that education systems remain open, outward-looking, and responsive to global developments

## 4. Ensuring Skills Development Benefits Learners for Years to Come

The **Union of Skills** must be **learner-centred**, ensuring that learners benefit rather than becoming experimental subjects of hastily implemented policies. The skills cultivated must align with both **economic and individual aspirations**, ensuring meaningful career prospects.

Education programmes should be **inclusive, accessible, and adaptable** to different learning styles and life situations. Universities must be allowed to **experiment with diverse learning models** to determine the best approaches for different sectors and learners. Additionally, mechanisms should be in place to **monitor and assess** the effectiveness of skills initiatives, ensuring they are **future-proof rather than reactive to short-term labour market trends**.

To achieve this, clear **benchmarks and expectations** must be set regarding skills development, aligning with the needs of **educational institutions, lifelong learners, and future generations**.

## 5. A Thoughtful and Sustainable Approach

The Union of Skills has the potential to position Europe as a **global leader in knowledge and innovation**. However, achieving this requires a well-defined strategy. **Should Europe pursue a radical overhaul, or can incremental adjustments create a sustainable skills ecosystem?**

One effective approach would be to **build upon existing initiatives** with established infrastructures. Programmes like **Erasmus+** and **Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions** have proven successful and should receive **increased and stable funding**. Extending collaboration to other sectors would further leverage universities' expertise. Additionally, enhanced synergies between education and research must be a priority, ensuring that new scientific discoveries shape curricula and skill-building efforts. Additionally, we must align skills within their regional ecosystem. The skills of learners must not only benefit the learners' environs now but also look forward to potential skill gaps in the future. Educated individuals can drive beneficial change and push regional competitiveness.

A European Union of Skills is increasingly necessary to align with the Commission's competitiveness agenda. However, education remains a supporting competence of the EU, meaning policy enforcement is limited. Therefore, the European Commission must work **collaboratively** with all stakeholders—**member states, regions, universities, and industry partners**. Engagement with **networks like YERUN** will be essential in ensuring the initiative is both **sustainable and impactful**.

To **strengthen Europe's competitiveness**, a **collective, coordinated** and sustained effort is required, leveraging the strengths of **Member States, institutions, and regional ecosystems**. How-

-ever, the EU's limited competence in education presents challenges, as it remains primarily a national responsibility. Treaty-level changes are unlikely in the short term, so progress must come through strengthened collaboration between Member States, the EU, and universities.

Action at this level should **align national and institutional strategies** with European goals, ensuring universities have the **autonomy, resources, investments and policy support** needed to act as hubs for talent development, innovation, and societal progress. For the Union of Skills to be a sustainable success, consistent ample investment will be needed across the European Union, on a regional, member state and European level.

## Key recommendations

- Europe's competitiveness requires high-quality Skills, those that enable individuals to be innovative and creative to challenge the status quo.
- The Union of Skills needs to incorporate the crucial Role that Social Sciences, Humanities and Arts (SSHA) play alongside STEM and VET
- Focusing on skills only will not solve the problem. There are persistent barriers in mobility and recognition of skills and qualifications across Europe.
- For a sustainable Union of Skills, learners, and not just economic benefits, need to be at the centre of the initiatives
- A sustainable, coordinated and resourced approach to Skills Policy. Reshuffling ongoing initiatives and putting them together is not the right solution. Coordination, flexibility and investments are needed to build the Europe's Union of Skills.

## - 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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