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**COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN
PARLIAMENT, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL
COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS**

on a European strategy for universities

{SWD(2022) 6 final}

1 Universities – a distinctive feature of our European way of life

Today, our society needs more than ever the contribution of its universities[1]. Europe, in a quickly changing world, is facing major challenges - climate change and biodiversity loss, the digital transformation and aging population - at a time when it is hit by the biggest global health crisis in a century and its economic fall-out. Europe's position in the world and the well-being and prosperity of future generations will depend on our response. The higher education sector has an essential role to play in Europe's post-pandemic recovery and in shaping sustainable and resilient societies and economies. **Excellent and inclusive universities** are a condition and foundation for open, democratic, fair and sustainable societies as well as sustained growth, entrepreneurship and employment.

Europe can build on a diverse and flourishing higher education sector, deeply enrooted in European culture. Europe is home to close to 5 000 higher education institutions[2], 17.5 million tertiary education students, 1.35 million people teaching in tertiary education[3] and 1.17 million researchers[4]. Be it research universities, institutes of technology, schools of arts or higher vocational education and training institutions – the different types of higher education institutions are all hallmarks of our **European way of life**. *This diversity is a strength*, as it allows for choice and for creativity and synergy through mobility and cooperation. Europe now celebrates 35 years of life-changing experiences for more than 10 million young learners through its emblematic Erasmus+ programme.

Universities have a unique position at the crossroads of education, research, innovation, serving society and economy: they play a critical role in achieving the European Education Area (EEA) and the European Research Area (ERA), in synergy with the European Higher Education Area. Through strong partnerships in the EU and across the globe and building on the cumulative asset of education systems and research networks, they are key actors to promote the European model in line with EU's interests and values: rule of law, human rights and international norms and standards.

Europe needs thriving universities to contribute implementing the **European Union political agenda,** as they cut across many different key initiatives taken recently for recovery and resilience. The **European Union and Member States have a shared interest in supporting the higher education sector** by joining their forces around a joint vision for the higher education sector, building on the richness of its diversity.

In doing so, they need to take into account the **evolving context the EU is facing**, and that impacts the higher education sector directly. If not acted upon appropriately, this could drag on

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[1] The term "university" is used as a reference to the broader sector, representing the entire area of tertiary education, thus including all types of higher education institutions, including research universities, university colleges, universities of applied sciences, higher vocational education and training institutions, and higher arts institutions.

[2] These are counted as higher education institutions having received the Erasmus+ Charter for Higher Education (ECHE), a prerequisite for higher education institutions to participate in the Erasmus+ programme.

[3] For EU, Eurostat, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Tertiary_education_statistics

[4] For EU, Eurostat, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/tsc00003/default/table?lang=en

universities' performance. Universities have embarked on a process of rethinking and renewing themselves. The EU and Member States should support them in this endeavour.

Universities can better solve big societal challenges by engaging more effectively in transnational cooperation. 92% of universities identified the elimination of legal and administrative obstacles to international strategic institutional partnerships as a key issue[5]. In a Eurobarometer survey, 93% respondents answered that it would be useful to create EU degrees delivered by networks of European universities, offering students the chance to study in different EU countries, with a flexible choice of courses or modules[6].

Funding of universities is often insufficient to fulfil their growing societal mission. A public funding observatory report[7] has revealed that in more than half of the higher education systems surveyed, investment in higher education either decline despite growing numbers of students, or does not increase at the same pace. The Covid-19 pandemic has led to additional investment needs (e.g. in digital tools and infrastructure) and loss of revenues.

As skills needs are rapidly evolving, the higher education sector has to adapt. The green and digital transitions require future-proof education, research and innovation, in close cooperation with the related industries and stakeholders and the significant disparities in digital skills across the EU must be overcome. Students and staff across the EU need to be equipped with the green and digital skills for the future and the innovation and technological potential of universities needs to be put at work to tackle related societal challenges. The European targets are that, by 2030, at least 45% of 25-34 year-olds obtain tertiary level attainment[8] and at least 60% of adults participate in learning (over the previous 12 months) by 2030[9]. The Digital Decade[10] sets ambitious targets, aiming at 80% of people with at least basic digital skills and 20 million ICT specialists employed by 2030.

Diversity, inclusiveness and gender equality in the higher education sector have become more important than ever. Students, academics, administrative staff and researchers from disadvantaged backgrounds are still underrepresented in higher education[11]. A persistent gender gap remains in some fields of study and research and in decision-making positions at universities. Gender balance clearly decreases with seniority among heads of higher education institutions where women hold slightly below 24% of these positions in EU27[12].

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[5] Survey EUA, International strategic institutional partnerships and the European Universities Initiative, April (2020), p 26

[6] Eurobarometer (2018): https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2186

[7] EUA Public Funding Observatory Report 2019/20

[8] The Council Resolution on a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training towards the European Education Area and beyond (2021-2030), Official Journal C 66, 26.2.2021, p. 1–21

[9] As set under the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan

[10] COM(2021) 118 final

[11] Hauschildt, Gwosć, Schirmer, & Wartenbergh-Cras (2021). Social and economic conditions of student life in Europe: Synopsis of Indicators.EUROSTUDENT VII 2018-2021

[12] She Figures 2021, Women in Science database, DG Research and Innovation. https://op.europa.eu/s/tflN

Fundamental academic and democratic values are under pressure. Universities have voiced deep concern over threats to academic freedom and university autonomy[13]. Numbers of scholars and researchers at risk in European neighbourhood are on the rise. Foreign interference in higher education institutions is also a threat.

Universities have to remain competitive on a worldwide scene. Europe's relative weight at global scale when it comes to research-intensive universities is shrinking. There is unused potential in bringing together Member States' efforts on the global scene. Europe could still do better in stimulating mobility and attracting and retaining talented students, academics and researchers to maximise Europe's global influence when it comes to values, education, research, industry and societal impact.

This European strategy for universities is part of a higher education package, together with a proposal for a Council Recommendation on building bridges for effective European higher education cooperation. The two initiatives together aim to unlock the full potential of the higher education sector as the promoter of skills and knowledge and the engine for innovation and solving societal challenges. The strategy builds upon the achievements of more than 20 years of the Bologna Process to propose a vision for a European higher education cooperation that is transformative for the benefit of the EU and beyond. The Commission proposal for a Council Recommendation is a first step in facilitating deep transnational cooperation for universities to be able to thrive and to strengthen a sense of European belonging.

2   Objectives of the European strategy for universities

The European strategy for universities aims at supporting and enabling universities to adapt to changing conditions, to thrive and to contribute to Europe's resilience and recovery. It is a call to Member States and higher education institutions across Europe to join forces. It seeks to take transnational cooperation to a new level of intensity and scope and to develop a genuinely European dimension in the higher education sector, built on shared values. The strategy recognises excellence and inclusion as a distinctive feature of European higher education, exemplary for our European way of life. This makes the higher education sector in Europe different from other parts of the world.

The strategy also builds on the first lessons learned from the European Universities initiative[14]. This initiative represents a vivid example of deep institutional transnational cooperation based on joint and shared long-term visions of universities. The 41 European Universities alliances[15] are catalysts for the launch of new instruments and legal frameworks and can inspire the wider higher education community across Europe.

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[13]   Academic freedom and institutional autonomy: commitments must be followed by action, joint statement by ALLEA, EUA and Science Europe, April 2019
[14]   European Universities Initiative | Education and Training (europa.eu)
[15]   European Universities factsheets | Education and Training (europa.eu)

By mid-2024, the Commission proposes to focus on achieving the four joint key objectives:

- **strengthen the European dimension in higher education and research:**
  Implement a set of flagship initiatives that will be for transnational cooperation what Erasmus+ has been for student mobility so far and Horizon Europe for excellent research: the visible expression of a distinctly European approach. With the growing responsibilities of universities for a resilient Europe, they need appropriate financial support.

- **support universities as lighthouses of our European way of life:**
  Higher education and research in Europe support our European way of life through their trifold focus on 1) quality and relevance for future-proof skills, 2) diversity and inclusion 3) democratic practices, fundamental rights and academic values and freedom of scientific research. Flexible and attractive academic careers, valuing teaching, research, entrepreneurship, management and leadership activities need to be promoted.

- **empower universities as actors of change in the twin green and digital transitions:**
  Support the full engagement of universities in unfolding green and digital transitions. The EU will only meet its ambitions on equipping more young people and lifelong learners with digital skills and skills for the green transition, or developing green solutions through technological and social innovation, if the higher education sector pulls its weight.

- **reinforce universities as drivers of the EU's global role and leadership:**
  Through deeper international cooperation within Europe and beyond, support universities in becoming more outward looking and competitive on the global scene, and in contributing to the strengthening of higher education systems in partner countries, in line with European values. This will help in turn boosting Europe's attractiveness not only as a study destination, but also as an attractive global partner for cooperation in education, research and innovation.

To succeed, the European strategy for universities requires alignment of policy priorities and investments at EU, national, regional and institutional levels. Implementation of this strategy will require closer cooperation with and between Member States, universities and other stakeholders. Together, we can leverage the strong and unique basis of Europe's higher education sector and bring its missions – education, research, innovation at the service of society - closer together.

3   A new framework for enhancing European cooperation

3.1   Four flagships to boost the European dimension in higher education and research

Both Communications on Achieving the European Education Area by 2025[16] and on a new European Research Area for Research and Innovation[17] emphasise that we need to facilitate and **reinforce transnational cooperation between universities** to strengthen their capacities to equip young people, lifelong learners and researchers with the right competences and skills. It will also mainstream a culture of excellence in education and science and value creation amongst

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[16]   COM(2020)625
[17]   COM(2020)628

higher education institutions, improving attractiveness and global competitiveness. Europe can support these efforts through a gradual approach, with **a set of four flagship initiatives** that will – taken together – leverage the strength of universities across Europe and further strengthen both their inclusion and excellence in all their activities.

The Erasmus+ **European Universities initiative**, in combination with Horizon Europe, Digital Europe and other EU and national instruments, will support ambitious transnational alliances of higher education institutions to develop and share a common long-term structural, sustainable and systemic cooperation on education, research and innovation, creating European inter-university campuses where students, staff and researchers from all parts of Europe can enjoy seamless mobility and create new knowledge together, across countries and disciplines.

A **legal statute** for alliances of higher education institutions – for European Universities and other types of alliances - would allow them to mutualise their strengths together, make common strategic decisions, act together with a legal personality, and facilitate pooling together resources, activities and data. Such statute would facilitate deeper, long-term and flexible transnational cooperation, allowing the sharing of capacities, exchange of staff and the implementation of joint programmes, with the aim to award at the level of the alliance joint degrees, including a joint European degree.

A **joint European degree,** to be delivered at national level, would attest learning outcomes achieved as part of transnational cooperation among several institutions, offered for example within European Universities alliances, and based on a common set of criteria. A European degree should be easy to issue, store, share, verify and authenticate, and recognised across the EU. As a first step, the Commission will work towards developing European criteria for the award of a European Degree label. Such a label would be issued as a complementary certificate to the qualification of students graduating from joint programmes delivered in the context of transnational cooperation between several higher education institutions.

The generalised use of the **European Student Card initiative** for all mobile students across universities in Europe will facilitate their access to transnational mobility at all levels. It will make the management of mobility easier, more efficient and greener. Ensuring that each European student can be uniquely identified across borders and across digital tools, will facilitate the roll out of European Student Cards across Europe and enable the complete digitalisation of the management of Erasmus+ student mobilities from application to issuing of study credentials[18].

These four flagships will work in synergy and will contribute to **a framework for European cooperation in the higher education sector**. They will contribute to shaping a true European

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[18]   This action will draw lessons from the digital identity framework of the European Commission and be interoperable with other European IT tools, including the eIDAS (electronic IDentification, Authentication and trust Services) Regulation which is an EU regulation on electronic identification and trust services for electronic transactions in the European Single Market; and the work on the Digital Wallets which rely on the European Blokchain Services Infrastructure (EBSI) using W3C Verifiable Credentials for exchanging educational credentials.

identity, bringing transnational cooperation to a higher level and fostering a strong sense of European belonging.

In addition, with universities enjoying autonomy and the national legislation in the hands of Member States, it is a permanent challenge to ensure that curricula and qualifications are fully transparent, and that differences do not get in the way of free movement of students, academics and researchers. Ensuring quality assurance is the foundation for mutual trust that enables in-depth cooperation and seamless mobility. This is why it is proposed to further develop a **European Quality Assurance and Recognition System,** where the quality of qualifications is assured, the qualifications are digitised and recognised automatically across Europe, doing away with the bureaucracy that hinders mobility, access to further learning and training or entering the labour market. In synergy with the ERA Policy Agenda, a **European Excellence Initiative** will raise excellence in science and in knowledge valorisation of Europe's universities and will improve global competitiveness of European Universities in key areas such as the green and digital transition.

The Commission, in close cooperation with the stakeholders and the Member States, will:
- Expand to **60 European Universities with more than 500 universities by mid-2024**, with an Erasmus+ indicative budget totalling EUR 1.1 billion for 2021-2027.
- Work towards a **legal statute for alliances of universities by mid-2024**: pilot as of 2022 under Erasmus+ the implementation of existing European instruments[19].
- Examine options and necessary steps towards a **joint European degree by mid-2024:** pilot as of 2022 under Erasmus+ the first steps towards a joint European degree, in particular the development of European criteria for the award of a European Degree label.
- **Scale 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.
- Review the Recommendation on further European cooperation in Quality Assurance in higher education[20] in 2023 to further develop a **European Quality Assurance and Recognition System**.
- Report in 2022 on **the implementation of the Council Recommendation on promoting automatic mutual recognition** of higher education and upper secondary education and training qualifications and the outcomes of learning periods abroad, and support Member States.
- Propose a **Council Recommendation on 'Building bridges for effective European higher education cooperation'** to facilitate deeper transnational cooperation.

3.2 Adequate financial support to higher education and research

Achieving inclusion and excellence requires appropriate funding for universities at local, regional, national and European levels. Currently, Member States spend, on average, 0,8% of their GDP on tertiary education, ranging from 0,3% to 1,7%[21]. Average government expenditure for research and development in higher education institution is 0,48% of the GDP in Europe[22].

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[19]   One existing instrument is the European Groupings of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC)
[20]   Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 15 February 2006 on further European cooperation in quality assurance in higher education, Official Journal L 64, 4.3.2006, p. 60–62
[21]   General government expenditure according to the Classification of the Functions of Government - COFOG
[22]   https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=R_%26_D_expenditure#Gross_domestic_expenditure_on_R.26D

The EU's higher education sector shows signs of significant underfunding, especially in the light of the increase of numbers of students and growing responsibilities of universities.

European funding is important to universities to complement national funding as a source of income, but also as a platform for European and international academic cooperation. With the new multiannual financial framework, the EU-level is going to invest a significant amount in the support of universities, estimated at EUR 80 billion[23] over the programming period 2021-2027. The higher education sector will thus benefit from an unprecedented level of EU funding from various sources, including from Erasmus+, Horizon Europe, Digital Europe, the Recovery and Resilience Facility, the funds under shared management[24] or InvestEU. Each of these funding sources is a financial tool in its own right with its specific purpose and mission.

While EU funds and programmes are significant, they must not replace, but operate in addition to sufficient national public funding and other public and private investments. It is key that Member States and actors of the higher education sector make effective use of the EU tools and explore synergies with national, regional and local funding to mobilise EU and national efforts towards the common vision as set out in this European strategy for universities.

The Commission, in close cooperation with the stakeholders and the Member States, will:

- Facilitate the access to EU and national funding for quality projects that could not be funded under Erasmus+: first, a **certificate** from the Commission will be delivered to be tested for the 2022 European Universities Call for Proposals; second, the **Seal of Excellence tool[25]** could be implemented under Erasmus+, as is currently the case under Horizon Europe.
- As part of the mid-term review of the MFF programmes, **develop an investment pathway that takes into account regional, national and European funding**.

In addition to the above, the Commission calls on Member States:
- To maximise the impact of EU interventions, by seeking further **synergies with national financing**, notably in the context of European Universities.
- To develop **adequate funding mechanisms** for universities.
- To support higher education reforms via the **Technical Support Instrument**.
 - To ensure **flexibility in funding programmes** to allow for **interdisciplinarity**.

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4 Lighthouses of our European way of life

4.1 Strengthen quality and relevance for future-proof skills

There is a need to tackle in a systemic and comprehensive way **academic careers,** responding to the call of the Council to promote flexible and attractive career structures and improve working conditions. Career assessment should take into account the variety of activities of academics such as teaching, research, entrepreneurship, management or leadership. A Council Recommendation on a Pact for Research and Innovation in Europe aims to improve the attractiveness of research careers and ensure better access to excellent science.

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[23] The final figure will depend on the outcome of the on-going programming of funds.
[24] The European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and the European Social Fund (ESF)
[25] This is a quality label awarded to project proposals evaluated above quality threshold to help them find alternative funding through the European Regional Development Fund and the European Social Fund+.

Universities have a key role to play in preventing **skills mismatches** and bottlenecks that risk hindering Europe's recovery, and in enabling the development of learners as creative and critical thinkers, problem solvers and active and responsible citizens equipped for lifelong learning. The Commission presented in 2021 a proposal for a **Council Recommendation on a European approach to micro-credentials** for lifelong learning and employability. Its swift follow-up by the Council will help to mobilise higher education in support of lifelong learning and contribute to professional reskilling and upskilling to meet new and emerging needs in society and labour market.

Excellent education, research and innovation environments are an enabler for developing high-level skills, creating breakthrough knowledge and translating it into practical applications. Cooperation among universities and with the **industrial ecosystems** is mutually beneficial in this respect, with the higher education sector supporting skills development for industry and the business sector, in addition to personal development purposes. Learners should have more opportunities to benefit from traineeships, be exposed to start-ups, and be engaged as actors of change in their community to positively impact the society around them. Entrepreneurial education and training that enhance business knowledge and skills are essential, in particular for SMEs. More synergies should be promoted between the European Universities alliances and the Centres of Vocational Excellence in that respect.

To achieve excellent and relevant higher education, support is also needed to **stimulate pedagogical innovation**, focused on the learners, with a variety of learning spaces and flexible, interdisciplinary paths. The creation of '**living labs**'[26] should be promoted as a good example of how students can be trained to work on challenges in a holistic way, across disciplines, and how to support students' critical thinking, problem-solving, creative and entrepreneurial skills.

The Commission, in close cooperation with the stakeholders and the Member States, will:

- Propose by 2023 a **European framework for attractive and sustainable careers in higher education,** in synergy with the research career framework developed under the ERA.
- Support the future-proof **skills development** and entrepreneurship competences of graduates and **co-design of curricula between industry - including SMEs - and higher education institutions in strategically important industrial sectors** identified in the updated industrial strategy[27], implemented by the Erasmus+ Alliances for Sectoral Cooperation on Skills and contributing to the transition pathways of eco-systems[28] .
- **Extend the EIT label[29] to lifelong learning activities** such as mentoring, re-skilling and up-skilling modules and programmes, and open the EIT label beyond academic education.
- Support the **uptake of the joint EU/OECD-INFE[30] financial competence framework** to support adults' financial wellbeing throughout their lives.

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[26] Living Labs in universities enable students, staff and researchers to cooperate with other key stakeholders to solve societal challenges and encourages application of knowledge to the real-world context, enhances skills of those involved, increases connections between people, and provides more opportunities to connect with society.

[27] COM(2021) 350 final, Updating the 2020 New Industrial Strategy

[28] Transition pathways will be co-created with stakeholders, and could offer a better bottom-up understanding of the required action to accompany the twin transitions for the most relevant ecosystems leading to an actionable plan.

[29] The EIT label is awarded to educational programmes on innovation, entrepreneurship, creativity and leadership

- Boost **Erasmus+ traineeships abroad,** reaching more than 100 000 trainees every year, through student peer reviews and traineeships in start-ups and entrepreneurial organisations.
- Mainstream new **innovative approaches to learning and teaching, including 'living labs',** at Bachelor, Master and Doctorate levels, through the Erasmus+ and Horizon Europe programmes.
- Develop a **transition toolbox for universities and Member States: Eurograduate tracking** surveys, **HEInnovate 2.0[31]** and **Acceleration Services** for universities under Horizon Europe.
- As part of the **ERA Hubs**, reinforce universities' role in local innovation ecosystems, such as strengthening and sharing of technology transfer capacities, through spin-offs and through promoting joint investment in synergy with InvestEU.
- **Strengthen the role of universities in implementing ERA4You** by promoting intersectoral mobility, in particular between academia and businesses.
- Provide European support as from 2023 for **Innovators at school**, for school partnerships to involve leading personalities from start-ups to act as ambassadors and mentors to inspire young people, and invite them to develop new ideas and solutions.
- Provide European support as from 2023 - including a toolkit for universities - for the development of **incubators** within higher education institutions, in close cooperation with the entrepreneurial sector, to help student entrepreneurs to develop their ideas into businesses.
- Organise an annual **European Talent Fair** bringing together students, early career researchers, scholars, start-ups, industry and investors promoting talent, business and job opportunities across the EU, starting with the first edition under the European Science in the City in Leiden 2022.

In addition to the above, the Commission calls on Member States:
- To **facilitate and promote interdisciplinary approaches**, including through institutional accreditation, academic assessment, reward and professional development.
- To promote **parity of esteem between different academic career paths** and provide more **flexibility for academic careers**, also beyond academia.

4.2 Foster diversity, inclusiveness and gender equality

As set out in the first principle under the European Pillar of Social Rights, 'everyone has the right to quality and inclusive education, training and life-long learning'. Europe has highly accessible higher education compared to the rest of the world. However, disadvantaged or discriminated groups (ethnic minorities, people with migration background, or with disability, people from poor families, children of low qualified parents) are still underrepresented among students, academic staff and researchers. Despite increasing access to tertiary education, higher education systems remain highly stratified. First-generation students and students with an immigrant or minority background have lower chances to achieve a tertiary education in the EU.

There are persistent gender gaps in higher education. While at Bachelor's and Master's levels, women outnumber men as students and graduates, and while there is almost gender balance at Doctoral level, there are large gender differences across fields of study – in the STEM fields, women still represent slightly less than a third of students at bachelor and master level, and 37% of doctoral candidates. Despite some progress in recent years, the proportion of women holding full professorship or equivalent positions remains at a low 26% in the EU.

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[30]   OECD International Network on Financial Education
[31]   This is a self-assessment tool of universities' innovation and entrepreneurial capacity.

More institutional changes are needed for universities to become places of truly equal opportunities.

The Commission, in close cooperation with the stakeholders and the Member States, will:

- Develop a **European framework for diversity and inclusion, including on gender gaps,** identifying challenges and solutions for universities, and the needed support of public authorities.
- Address the **underrepresentation of women in STEM fields** through a roadmap that includes a manifesto from STE(A)M-oriented universities on gender-inclusive STE(A)M[32] education.
- **Support for researchers at risk** with guiding principles for universities to facilitate their inclusion.

In addition to the above, the Commission calls on Member States:

- To encourage universities to implement institutional change through concrete measures for diversity and inclusion, including **voluntary**, **quantified targets for inclusion** and inclusive **gender equality plans**, building on the Rome Communiqué[33].
- To develop national support schemes and support **access to higher education of refugees and individuals seeking asylum**, including the establishment and scaling of complementary pathways for refugee students and the related support, in line with the Commission Recommendation on legal pathways to protection in the EU[34].

4.3 Promote and protect European democratic values

Universities need to be places of freedom: for speech, thought, learning, research and academic freedom at large. Academic freedom cannot be isolated from institutional autonomy, nor from the participation of students and staff in higher education governance.

Ensuring academic freedom in higher education institutions is at the core of all higher education policies developed at EU level, as well as in the Bologna Process. It is a basic prerequisite for the creation of the European Education Area and the European Research Area. Fundamental academic values cannot be taken for granted. In recent years, we see them threatened in different formats and in different places, even in the EU. Autonomy of higher education institutions is uneven in Europe[35]. The Union and its Member States are called on to protect actively, nurture and defend these values through their policies and funding opportunities, as well as protect research-performing organisations against foreign interference.

Universities are key to promote active citizenship, tolerance, equality and diversity, openness and critical thinking for more social cohesion and social trust, and thus protect European democracies. Universities have an active role to play in preparing graduates to be well-informed European citizens. By teaching and awareness raising actions, they support anchoring European values in society, and by upholding scientific rigour they help to strengthen trust in science.

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[32] Science, technology, engineering, (the arts) and mathematics (STEAM) is a multidisciplinary set of approaches to education removing traditional barriers between subjects and disciplines to connect STEM and ICT education with the arts, humanities, and social sciences.
[33] Rome Ministerial Communiqué, http://ehea.info/Upload/Rome_Ministerial_Communique.pdf
[34] Commission Recommendation (EU) 2020/1364 of 23 September 2020 on legal pathways to protection in the EU: promoting resettlement, humanitarian admission and other complementary pathways, Official Journal L 317, 1.10.2020, p. 13–22
[35] The European Universities Association's Autonomy Scorecard (2017)

The Commission, in close cooperation with the stakeholders and the Member States, will:

- Roll-out and monitor the new **Erasmus Charter for Higher Education** and the new **Erasmus Student Charter[36]**, integrating academic freedom and integrity.
- Create new opportunities to **foster academic debates and exchange of best practices on values and democracy** as part of the Erasmus+ **Jean Monnet Higher Education activities**, including in third countries.
- Propose in 2024 **guiding principles on protecting fundamental academic values,** based on the Rome Communique[37], in synergy with the action developed under ERA, which aims at developing an action plan for protecting academic freedom and the freedom of scientific research in Europe, based on the Bonn Declaration
- Provide support for **implementing the guidelines on foreign interference** in research and innovation.

In addition to the above, the Commission calls on Member States:
- To support the **diversity within the European higher education** sector
- To strengthen and respect **university autonomy** in its various dimensions.
- To promote and protect **academic freedom and integrity**.

5 Actors of change in the twin green and digital transitions

5.1 Develop skills, competences and technological innovation for the green transition

Universities are key actors for **the green transition** and for a more sustainable world. They have an important role in conducting research to find solutions, in cooperation with industry and society to environmental and climate challenges in view of achieving climate neutrality, reversing biodiversity loss and stopping pollution, and in developing climate and environmental literacy for all students across all levels and disciplines, as well as for the public at large through community engagement. Universities can also be a role model for environmental sustainability through their infrastructure and operations. Ultimately, results of research and innovation activities can constitute a solid ground for environmental-related policies, innovation and measures.

The Commission has recently presented proposals for **Council Recommendations on learning for environmental sustainability and micro-credentials for lifelong learning and employability**. The Council's swift follow-up will help to mobilise Member States in supporting their universities and students to become agents of change for the green transition, including in a lifelong learning perspective. **Horizon Europe partnerships and missions[38]** offer great potential for synergies, for example, in sectors such as zero-emission transport and sustainably sourced batteries, requiring new skills.

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[36] Which are respectively a prerequisite to receive any Erasmus+ funding and present the rights and responsibilities of Erasmus+ students while on mobility

[37] http://www.ehea.info/page-ministerial-conference-rome-2020

[38] EU are a new way to bring concrete solutions to some of our greatest challenges. EU Missions are a coordinated effort by the Commission to pool the necessary resources in terms of funding, policies and regulations, etc.

The Commission, in close cooperation with the stakeholders and the Member States, will:

- Support Member States' efforts through peer learning and sharing best practices in promoting **whole-institutional approaches** to **sustainability, climate and environmental literacy**. Foster innovative teaching and learning approaches. Support universities through the Erasmus+ Programme to **mainstream environmental sustainability across their infrastructure and operations**.

- Support the development by universities in cooperation with socio-economic actors of short learning courses on **skills for the green transition leading to micro-credentials[39]**

- Support **Higher Education Climate Frontrunners**, a platform for transnational partnerships between students, academics, universities, employers and communities on climate challenges, building on the Education for Climate Coalition and the European Climate Pact Ambassadors.

- Encourage '**green villages'** as a way to open up university campuses to communities, to bring science closer to citizens, with the support of Horizon Europe, including its missions.

- Promote and monitor the **new Green and Blue Erasmus+[40]** to boost environment and climate change-related action. Monitor the implementation of the new **Erasmus Charter for Higher Education** and the **Green Charter for the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Action programme**.

- Provide support to the **European Battery Alliance (EBA) Academy** run by the European Institute of Innovation and Technology, for training, up- and reskilling the workforce in the battery industry value chain.

- Supporting the **implementation of strategic research and innovation action plans** that deliver on the green energy transformation and the greening of key industrial ecosystems.

In addition to the above, the Commission calls on Member States:

- To support universities in their **whole-institutional approaches** to sustainability, including on **green skills**, as well as the **key role of universities** for **innovation and new green technologies;** and universities to lead in green transition.

5.2 Develop skills and competences and promote innovation for the digital transition

The digital transition gives universities a fundamental role in equipping students and researchers with the digital skills and competences needed in the new reality and in the promotion of innovation and new technologies.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the higher education sector showed its ability to adapt to the new situation. It became evident that digital solutions cannot and should not fully replace physical activities. The future should be based on **hybrid solutions representing a good balance between physical presence and digital tools**. Universities can also foster innovative

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[39] Inspired by the Competence Framework for learning for environmental sustainability and the upcoming Commission's taxonomy of skills for the green transition, to strengthen the up-skilling and re-skilling of the European workforce.

[40] Environmental and climate goals are an overarching priority of the Erasmus programme. The **'Green Erasmus'** aims to promote the incorporation of green practices in all projects and support awareness-raising. The blue dimension is an important part of Green Erasmus. All planned sustainability measures will be relevant as well for **the blue dimension of Erasmus+**, with the objective of preserving healthy oceans, seas, coastal and inland waters.

education technology development through spin-off or scale-ups and leverage the potential of the growing European Education Technology (EdTech) industry.

The Commission has set up a **structured dialogue with Member States on digital education and skills** to agree jointly on the key enabling factors to make digital education and training effective and inclusive. Universities have a key role to play in fostering a labour force equipped to take on the challenges of the digital transition in the future. Specialised education offer in digital areas, such as AI, cybersecurity or cloud computing, as well as microelectronics, are crucial in this respect[41]. Skill shortages in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) are one of the main obstacles. As digital technologies penetrate all sectors of the economy, it is also necessary that all students, for example those studying medicine, business administration and agriculture learn to use them at an advanced level in their professions.

In the next decade we need to make **'connected universities'** a reality. For that, sufficient digital capacity and infrastructure of universities is key. The more widespread use of digital means will have to rely on new and trusted technologies and platforms, which will require interoperability, have a solid European basis, and should serve education and research needs in an integrated manner. At the same time, common, open standards are needed, allowing universities to take better control of their data to make cooperation effective.

The Commission, in close cooperation with the stakeholders and the Member States, will

- Provide support to **transnational cooperation to develop the digital skills and competences** of students of all ages, staff and researchers, in line with the Digital Education Action Plan.
- Through the Digital Europe Programme, provide support to **specialised education and training programmes** in cutting-edge digital technologies and for **multi-disciplinary courses** in **artificial intelligence, cybersecurity, microelectronics and high performance computing**.
- As a follow up to a feasibility study conducted in the context of the Digital Education Action Plan, support the launch and rollout of a targeted **European platform to promote cooperation between higher education institutions,** compatible with the European Open Science Cloud (EOSC) and interoperable with other European standards.
- As part of the Erasmus+ Jean Monnet activities, support dedicated measures to **recognise at EU level the efforts of universities driving the digital transformation** across the EU
- Lead universities in **co-developing guidelines and principles** for allowing **mutual access to services** and enabling **seamless knowledge and data exchange**, reflecting the need for interoperability and openness.

In addition to the above, the Commission calls on Member States:

- To support the **development of digital skills** of students of all ages, staff and researchers, the **digital capacity of universities**, as well as the **key role of universities** for **innovation and new digital technologies,** and universities to lead in digital transition.

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[41] E.g. gains from investment on common EU projects, such as the European Cloud Initiative or the upcoming Chips Act, can only materialise if there are highly qualified people able to design and develop these technologies.

6 Drivers of Europe's global role and leadership

Europe needs more than ever to reach out to the rest of the world. Universities are instrumental in building Europe's connections with the world and in promoting European values globally[42]. They play a vital role in generating the evidence that underpins Europe's foreign and security policies, international agreements, and multilateral action. As key players in science diplomacy, they help building bridges.

Europe has become a pacesetter in higher education cooperation. For many regions, countries and universities worldwide, the European experience has inspired new strategies towards internationalisation or regional cooperation. Deepening cooperation among European institutions therefore goes hand in hand with consolidating their global dimension. In parallel, supporting the strengthening of higher education in partner countries is essential.

In line with the Global Gateway strategy, universities in Europe are essential to assist partner countries to transform their education systems and facilitate mobility of students, staff, teachers, and trainees, in a spirit of mutual benefit and reciprocity. They are also the drivers behind strengthening cooperation on research and innovation.

The diversity and international standing of the EU education systems and Europe' status as the biggest provider of cooperation on higher education represents a substantial cumulative asset that could be leveraged. EU experience with cross-border recognition, quality assurance and accreditation issues is informing regional cooperation and integration in wider geographical areas.

By exchanging talents from all over the world and building strong bridges with partner countries across the globe, and by promoting academic and European values, universities are part of Europe's soft power. Europe needs to strengthen and build on this reputation, and level up these strengths across Member States. This will in turn make it more attractive not only as a study destination but also as a homogenous cooperation partner for education, research and innovation.

The Commission offers to:

- work jointly with Member States to promote Europe's higher education offer and international cooperation in higher education in a **Team Europe approach**. This means: developing the 'Study in Europe' portal to foster international exchanges; strengthening peer-learning among universities and agencies on internationalisation; strengthening partnerships with priority regions, such as Western Balkans, the Neighbourhood and Africa, based on reciprocity, and better engaging and relying on alumni networks.

The Commission, in close cooperation with the stakeholders and the Member States, will:

- Foster mobility between Europe and other regions of the world: call on Member States to organise in particular the relevant procedures in view of the timely issuance of permits/visas to third-country students so they can start the academic year in the EU on time, respecting the Students and Researchers Directive[43].

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[42] As outlined in the Global Approach to Research and Innovation (COM(2021)252 final)
[43] Directive (EU) 2016/801 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 11 May 2016 on the conditions of entry and residence of third-country nationals for the purposes of research, studies, training, voluntary service, pupil exchange schemes or educational projects and au pairing, Official Journal L 132 of 21.5.2016, p. 21-57

- **Support consortia of worldwide leading universities to develop and implement Master programmes,** through Erasmus Mundus Joint Master calls addressing global challenges.
- Support transparent and fair **recognition of third country qualifications**, including those of refugees, through the network of academic recognition centres[44] and the EU transparency tools (European Qualifications Framework, European Digital Credentials for Learning).

7 Making it happen: monitoring and governance

Progress in implementing this strategy will be reported on through the European Education Area strategic framework and the European Research Area governance. The Commission will **take stock of the state of play in its Progress Report on the European Education Area (EEA) and through the European Research Area monitoring system**. This will enable the Commission, the Member States and the stakeholders to engage in a strategic dialogue on progress accomplished and where to focus our policies and support.

In 2023, the Commission will set-up a **European Higher Education Sector Observatory** as part of this process in order to provide evidence on the progress made**.** This Observatory will **combine the best of the current EU data tools and capacities[45] in one single place**, while further enhancing their use and relevance for policy makers, universities, students and researchers. Streamlining and upgrading existing European data sources will enable institutions and governments to strengthen their evidence basis on key topics such as inclusion, learning outcomes, progress on digital, green and entrepreneurial skills, technology transfer, employability, students and labour market needs, strengthening research careers, open science, the institutions' role in innovation ecosystems, and transnational cooperation in the higher education sector. The Observatory will make it possible to compare, analyse and showcase the higher education sector's performance across various fields. By building on the synergies among the existing data tools, it will ensure focused and purpose-driven monitoring, eliminating potential overlaps and decreasing data collection burden on higher education institutions.

One of the Observatory's deliverables will be a **European Higher Education Sector Scoreboard** to yearly assess the progress made across the EU towards the key priorities of this strategy: inclusion, values, quality and relevance, mobility, green and digital skills, employability, transnational cooperation, technology transfer and knowledge valorisation.

This monitoring will also cover the adequacy of investment in higher education and research both at the EU, national and institutional levels. For this purpose, the Commission will use the results of the work of the Expert Group on Quality Investment in Education and Training.

This Communication is an invitation for **closer cooperation between countries and actors of the higher education sector within the European Education Area (EEA), the European Research Area (ERA) and the European Higher Education Area (EHEA, Bologna process).** Synergies are needed in areas such as transnational cooperation and the institutional transformation of universities, support for fundamental academic values and scientific freedom,

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[44] Joint network of the European Network of Information Centres in the European Region and the National Academic Recognition Information Centres in the European Union (ENIC-NARIC)

[45] For example, ETER, U-Multirank, DEQAR, Eurostudent, Eurograduate, Bologna implementation reports data and Mobility Scoreboard, Eurostat, Education and training statistics and R&D statistics and JRC KT Metrics Platform

developing academic careers, innovative and interdisciplinary learning, teaching and research, as well as the interconnectedness between these, knowledge circulation, international cooperation with partners beyond the EU and the contribution to the United Nation's SDG's.

The Commission, in close cooperation with the stakeholders and the Member States, will:
- Set-up a data-focused **European Higher Education Sector Observatory** in 2023, with a **European Higher Education Sector Scoreboard** as one of its deliverables.
- Promote **synergies between the European Education Area, the European Research Area and the European Higher Education Area in a fit-for-purpose and flexible manner**.

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8 Conclusion: the way forward

This strategy sets out a European vision for the future of universities and how the Union can support them across Europe**. This Communication is presented at the beginning of the 2022 European Year of Youth.** To underpin Europe's recovery and resilience and lay the foundation for its sustainable growth, Europe has to invest in its young generation. This phase in life is marked by education and training. *We owe young people the chance to acquire excellent and relevant skills and competences.* Offering each young European a real chance to upskill and reskill, helps lay the foundation for a stronger, more prosperous and resilient Europe.

With this Communication on a European strategy for universities, the Commission invites Member States and their universities to join forces for the benefit of higher education and of the European Union as a whole. It is an invitation for joint reflection and debate and collaborative work on how we can together develop the European dimension in higher education, research and innovation in a way that harnesses the full potential of universities.

This strategy can only be implemented together. The Commission invites Universities to take forward the work within their institutions and Member States to support their universities through appropriate policy and funding support; and invites Member States, universities, students, academic staff, researchers and their partners within broader innovation ecosystems to take ownership of the strategy and share pledges to inspire others.

The Commission is committed to **mobilise all the instruments** at its disposal – be it governance, funding, cooperation, or legislation – to implement this strategy.

Coordination of efforts between the EU, Member States, regions, civil society and the higher education sector is key to make this strategy a reality. **The Commission invites the [European] Council, Member States and universities to engage in a joint discussion on this policy agenda** and work jointly towards future-proof universities, for the benefit of Europe's young generation and to nurture lifelong learning for the benefit of people of all ages.