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Launch of the Nordic visions for the European Knowledge Area

62 leaders from the Nordic Universities call for a reflection on what implications of the use of the term “European values” and emphasises the need for a shift of discourse from Academic freedom to values; which are global. This and more are included in the Key messages from the Nordic University Days 2022.

BRUSSELS - Monday to Tuesday 62 Rectors and Vice-Rectors from Universities in Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden came together for a High-level Conference to share their visions for the European Knowledge Area. Visions are structured around six key messages for the EU institutions and the Member States in the future development of research, innovation and higher education policies and programmes. During the two-day conference the university leaders met with and engaged in discussions with Margrethe Vestager Executive, Vice-President of the European Commission, Christel Schaldemose, Member of the European Parliament, Group of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats, Signe Rastso, Acting Director-General, European Commission, DG Research & Innovation, Maria Leptin, President of the European Research Council, Maria Cristina Russo Director, European Commission DG Research & Innovation, Global Approach & International Partnerships and Vanessa Debiais-Sainton, Head of Unit, European Commission, DG Education, Youth, Sport & Culture. The Nordic Universities presented their visions to the European stakeholders.

“The Nordic University Days 2022 was a terrific opportunity for university leaders from the Nordics to meet and discuss. In this years’ Key Messages from the Nordic University Days, we share our views and Nordic visions for the European Knowledge Area, something which is very important for Nordic Universities relating both to research and education funding and the changing university landscape in Europe. Several leaders from the EU institutions joined us and engaged in our discussions. This has been very beneficial and something we will build on in the Nordic context.”

Says Jon Atli Benediktsson, Chair of the Nordic Rectors Association, host of the Nordic University Days 2022

The six key messages, in brief;

1. Academic freedom and values; a priority for Nordic universities
2. Science-based policy making
3. Joint implementation of the European Research Area and European Education Area
4. Research and education based on excellence
5. Universities in a global landscape
6. The future of EU research and innovation programmes: excellence and openness

The full extensive list can be found in the appendix and on the following link: www.larosatensyd.se/en/key-messages-for-the-nordic-university-days-2022/

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Key messages for the Nordic University Days 2022

1. Academic freedom and values; a priority for Nordic universities

Academic freedom and institutional autonomy are fundamental for Nordic universities to develop knowledge and science which is needed to solve global challenges. Freedom of teaching and learning, freedom in carrying out research without commercial or political interference, freedom to disseminate and publish one's research findings, freedom from institutional censorship, including the right to express one's opinion publicly about the institution or the education system in which one works. Lastly, freedom to participate in professional and representative academic bodies, including trade unions should be accepted as a university core value.

Many Nordic universities are signatories of Magna Charta Universitatum⁵, supporting principles of academic freedom and institutional autonomy. However, academic freedom is not a given in a time where scientific findings are being discredited and universities' independence is being challenged - also in Europe.

Academic freedom is an essential element of a democratic and free Europe and therefore a fundamental value of the EU and a principle of international cooperation. Institutional autonomy is a key component of academic freedom. Academic institutions should have the freedom to manage their core activities of research and teaching without fear of societal, political or religious interference that would impact scientific research or teaching.

Both the European Research Area (ERA) and the European Education Area (EEA) need to fortify and support in particular the efforts of academic organisations concerning academic freedom which is an indispensable prerequisite for social, political, cultural and economic progress and resilience and yet still today in acute danger in many countries.

Nevertheless, moving the discourse from Academic freedom to academic fundamental values allows the debate to become more inclusive. It allows for greater global partnerships funded on these values in contrast to the concept of 'European values' which remains undefined. Universities are global by nature, and so are their values.

2. Science-based policy making

As universities, we are aware that the knowledge that we produce serves as a key input for sustainable high-quality policymaking and regulation across policy areas, i.e., climate change, health crises as well as developing research priorities. For example, it requires a strong interdisciplinary scientific evidence base, across natural, technical, medical and social sciences and humanities to address the complexity of challenges that are part of the UN Sustainable Development Goals' roadmap towards 2030. Nordic universities are at the EU's disposal to contribute to help improve policies collectively and we are open to entering into dialogue with both the EU and the Member States on how to improve the structures of engagement of science-based policy.

The most frequently reported barriers in science-based policy making to relate to problems with disseminating high-quality information effectively namely because of lack of time, support, resources and incentives for scientists to engage in dissemination activities. Studies suggest that scientific evidence is often not presented at the correct time and scientists are unable to anticipate a demand for information to solve a specific problem quickly. Further, society sometimes lacks the research skills to understand scientific evidence. Scientific evidence and research should be an important component of policymaking and therefore be addressed through the ERA actions such as action 7 knowledge valorisation and action 14 citizen science.

It is an increasing problem that researchers who contribute with scientific evidence to policy-making processes and engage in public debates risk being victims of harassment and threats, as seen during the COVID-19 pandemic. This is a tendency, which may undermine academic freedom if researchers refrain from contributing to science-based policy due to the potential personal costs of doing so. This can also harm the attractiveness of choosing a research career.

In addition, the time horizons of basic research need to be better understood by policymakers. The ERA should place more emphasis on the so-called "curiosity and blue skies" research, as their long-term funding and development are critical for society and its citizens, both in Europe and in the rest of the world.

The representatives from the EU institutions invited us to continue dialogue to form evidence-based policy. It is in our hands to develop our research communication to foster a better debate. Despite research results never being 100% we need to communicate why this is to counter the development of research resistance.

3. Joint implementation of the European Research Area and European Education Area

Higher education and research policy are primarily national competencies and in accordance with the subsidiarity principles, joint EU initiatives should bring added value to address common challenges. Actions and reforms proposed by the European Commission have a better chance of succeeding if the Commission's plans are aligned with the needs of the Member States and the respective Higher Education system. Without an alignment, there is a risk that the reforms will not materialise due to a lack of political or financial support. Therefore, it is crucial to have a proactive national debate on the strategic objectives of EU research and education policies and their alignment with national objectives and universities' long-term strategic objectives.

Preparations for actions should be based on the views and concerns expressed by universities, and jointly seek solutions at both national and EU levels if harmonisation and compatibility between higher education systems within Europe should be achieved. The EU has a role to play in encouraging new European education and research initiatives, but it is important that universities are included in the process of developing these and that they respond to an actual need and have an added value.

Universities are the main actors in implementing the ERA policy agenda and the European Strategy for Universities and therefore their perspectives and experiences should play a more prominent role in the decision-making process. Higher Education stakeholders should have a stronger say in designing and implementing the new ERA e.g., through the ERA Transition Forum and the ERA policy agenda. The European Higher Education stakeholder community will need to be involved in the development and implementation of the initiatives that will shape the universities of the future.

We look forward to the engagement we will have with our national implementing bodies of the ERA actions taking the driver's seat for some to form a European Research Area in which Universities can thrive.

4. Research and education based on excellence

Excellence must continue to be the primary principle guiding investments in research, education and innovation to enhance the sustainable growth and resilience of our societies. Quality and global excellence must be the criteria for which funding should be allocated. Excellent science is a must if we are to find solutions that can realise the green and digital transition in Europe and globally, and the challenges of the future.

Strengthening societal resilience based on greener, digital and sustainable solutions requires joint actions and investments in science and innovation, as well as participatory and empowered citizens. Blue-sky research, breakthrough technologies, social innovations and applications are required for the global transition to a greener and more digital society and it is needed to develop robust evidence that supports or rejects the added value and viability of solutions, approaches etc.

Universities enhance the green transition and wider societal impact through education. Universities empower learners of all ages with the knowledge, skills, values and attitudes to address the interconnected global challenges we are facing. The new ERA and the European Strategy for Universities have in large part been conceived to facilitate the contribution of European R&I to the twin transition.

5. Universities in a global landscape

To boost competitiveness and generate solutions to global societal challenges such as pandemics and climate change and deliver the twin transition, international R&I cooperation with partners outside Europe is essential. “Open to the world” should therefore remain the leading principle of Horizon Europe and the EU’s approach to international collaboration.

Foreign interference in research and innovation is identified as a growing threat in an increasingly internationalised field. EU-level guidelines on foreign interference are important to raise awareness. The guidelines should first and foremost help universities develop comprehensive and preventive approaches for tackling all forms of interference and facilitate responsible collaboration.

The COVID-19 pandemic has made visible the critical role of international collaboration on the frontiers of science. The pandemic is also a robust example of how removing open science policy obstacles impacts the free flow of research data and ideas, and thus accelerates the pace of research, critical to combating the disease.

The EU should promote science collaboration globally and enter into strategic differentiated R&I partnerships with third countries based on common values and principles that promote the importance of academic freedom and institutional autonomy, research integrity & ethics, open science and gender equality.

It is not only a matter of foreign interference; it is a matter of political interference which can be domestic as well as foreign.

6. The future of EU research and innovation programmes: excellence and openness

The EU’s research and innovation programmes have long been the most international and open to the world. Openness is a necessity and should remain the core of Horizon Europe in the last three remaining years and the future. Global challenges can only be solved through global collaboration.

Excellence must continue to be the primary principle across Horizon Europe and in future EU research and innovation programmes. Quality and global excellence must be the criteria on which research funding should be allocated, from theoretical to problem-driven research and across all technology readiness levels.

Nordic universities are committed to preserving and protecting the freedom of research and to maintaining research environments that are open and that promote the free exchange of research results.