



NORDIC UNIVERSITY DAYS

23-24 September

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NORDIC UNIVERSITY DAYS 2024 – KEY MESSAGES

The success of the EU hinges significantly on its capacity to position itself as a global front runner in research, innovation, and education. To achieve this position we need a strong, excellence based European framework programme for research and innovation, emphasize academic freedom, and support international cooperation and science-based policy-making. The EU policies in research, innovation and education serve as instrumental avenues to attain these objectives. Together with the EU, Universities play a significant role in carrying out this mission.

1. An excellence-driven European framework programme for research and innovation: Towards FP10

The current structure of Horizon Europe has proven to be an efficient framework for European research and innovation. Building on this success, excellence must continue to be the leading principle guiding investments in research, education, and innovation to enhance the sustainable growth and resilience of our societies.

Moreover, the new geopolitical situation and the global challenges like the green and digital transition call for new approaches to international R&I collaboration underpinned by an ambitious budget. A predictable and ambitious budget dedicated to research and innovation should be ensured, potentially even ring-fenced, to avoid unnecessary frustration among potential applicants, wasted planning efforts and to avert a gradual erosion of the budget due to funds being prioritised for other initiatives. Establishing the budget for FP10 requires a proper balance between predictability and flexibility to safeguard research and innovation. Additionally, the FP10 calls for simplification and should be cut down from unnecessary special rules and measures.

Innovative blue-sky and frontier research, breakthrough technologies, social innovations and applications are necessary for the global transition to a greener and more digital society. It is needed to develop robust evidence that supports or rejects the added value and viability of solutions, approaches etc. Therefore, it is essential to maintain a balance between bottom-up and top-down funding opportunities within the framework programmes, along with a corresponding coherence in the Technology Readiness Levels (TRL), to further ensure that the EU R&I funding landscape fosters strategic cooperation among the best research teams in Europe.

Finally, there is an increasing demand for a comprehensive and enhanced integration of an interdisciplinary approach in FP10. Recognising universities as pivotal agents of change, it becomes evident that the integration of social sciences, arts, and humanities (SSAH) must be enhanced within the framework programme. Only by acknowledging and incorporating SSAH disciplines can universities effectively tackle the intricate and multifaceted challenges ahead.

2. Academic freedom and institutional autonomy; a priority

Academic freedom⁷ and institutional autonomy are fundamental for universities to develop knowledge and science needed to solve rapidly evolving global challenges. Freedom of scientific research, 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, or the education system in which one works, should be valued. 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 Universitatum, supporting principles of academic freedom and institutional autonomy. However, as geopolitical tensions intensify, the assurance of academic freedom and institutional autonomy becomes less certain, particularly in an era where scientific discoveries are being undermined, and the independence of universities is being challenged more often. In response to these challenges, it is necessary to not take academic freedom and institutional autonomy for granted, but to engage actively to ensure that those remain strong. Academic freedom, especially freedom of scientific research, is an essential element of a democratic and free Europe and therefore a fundamental value of the EU and a principle for 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. Hand in hand with academic freedom, is academic responsibility. The Nordic universities take responsibility to shape societal transformation through research and education, while staying true to their values and mission. This responsibility lies within the organisation as well as when engaging with other stakeholders.

Both the European Research Area (ERA) and the European Education Area (EEA) need to continue to fortify and support 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.

Universities are global by nature, and so are their values. Moving the discourse from academic freedom to academic fundamental values allows the debate to become more inclusive.

3. Science for Policy

In a recent Council conclusion, “Strengthening the role and impact of R&I in the policymaking process in the Union”, the implications of citizens' and civil society organisations' participation in the design of policies are highlighted. This is a crucial point in policymaking, including researchers and universities as well. Strengthening the contribution of research and innovation to policymaking benefits society as a whole. Universities and their researchers are key actors in this structure. Among other things, scientific analyses can support the understanding of a policy problem. Science can assess different policy options and assist in designing solutions. Universities and researchers also play a crucial role in providing empirical evidence and uncovering fake news through participation in public debates.

However, there are challenges in integrating evidence effectively into policymaking. Science and policy can be perceived as different worlds where their participants do not speak the same language. Skills and knowledge need to be enhanced on both sides. Incentives for researchers to contribute to policy should also be improved. It is a skill to contribute with knowledge and evidence to policymaking. For policymakers, checking with research should become a standard action to ensure that new legislation will not hinder education and R&I activities. Scientific evidence and research should be an important component of policymaking.

Universities do not only have the capacity to support policy and policymakers with evidence but have a responsibility to do so. Policymakers on the other hand must be trained to better obtain and integrate evidence in policymaking. In a world where we are witnessing the increase of 'alternative facts', AI-generated (fake)news and biased algorithms, a common goal should be to promote evidence-informed policymaking and work together to create a healthy science for the policy ecosystem.

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

Preparations for actions under the European Research Area (ERA) and European Education Area (EEA) 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 are to be achieved. The EU has a pivotal role in encouraging new European education and research initiatives, but it is also important that universities are included in the process of developing these, so that the initiatives respond to an actual need and add 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 ERA objectives. The European Higher Education stakeholder community must be involved in the development and implementation of the initiatives that will shape the universities of the future.

Moreover, the European Research Area (ERA) and the ERA Policy Agenda for 2025-2027 could benefit from a streamlined structure. It is advisable to keep ERA actions restricted and targeted to enable meaningful work with individual actions and avoid confusion with parallel structures within Horizon Europe.

By 2025 the European Education Area (EEA) should be established. By then, the flagship initiative in Higher Education, The European Universities alliances should count to around 60 cross-border cooperations and legal entities. Allowing the initiative to be truly successful requires the possibility of continued European funding and for more Higher Education Institutions to take part. Furthermore, the European Commission must work in synergy with the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) allowing for a harmonised implementation of the European Education Area (EEA) and the European Research Area (ERA). The European Universities alliances are one example where the harmonisation between the areas is beneficial for part-taking Higher Education Institutions. European Universities alliances create new opportunities for our academic communities whilst challenging the lack of implementation of Bologna Tools calling on the European Commission to find solutions to the barriers of depend cross-border collaboration.

5. Universities in a new geopolitical and global landscape

Foreign interference and security in research and innovation is identified as a growing challenge in an ever more internationalised field. EU-level guidelines on foreign interference and research security are becoming increasingly important to raise awareness and to handle a constantly evolving situation. Furthermore, the role of research in policy priorities of the EU such as investments and trade can also be seen in the Economic Security Package presented at the end of January this year. Except for proposing Council Recommendations on research security, it is made clear that research is also a relevant topic in outbound investments (investments outside of the EU), as well as in dual-use (military and defence application of research results). There are suggestions to further monitor outbound research investments, as well as a need to discuss the scope of dual-use. In many cases this implies unknown territory for universities, but where participation and input from academia and from science are of essence.

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 of Europe is essential. “As open as possible, as restricted as necessary” should therefore remain a leading principle of EU’s framework programme for research and innovation, and the EU’s approach to international collaboration.

The EU should first and foremost assist universities in developing comprehensive and preventive approaches to tackle all forms of interference, threats to research, and to facilitate responsible collaboration. The EU should promote science collaboration globally and enter into strategic differentiated R&I partnerships based on common—principles that promote the importance of academic freedom and institutional autonomy, research integrity and ethics, open science, and gender equality.