

State of the Union: Ambitions need to be backed by boosting research and education

Jean-Claude Juncker aims for Europe's industry to be world leader in innovation, decarbonisation and digitisation. That will require more European investment in research and the assurance that Europeans are well equipped for changing labour markets through education. The EU institutions as well as Europe's universities must act on this challenge.

In his yearly speech on the State of the Union on 13 September, European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker called for a stronger, more united and more democratic Europe against the background of Europe's achievements throughout the past year particularly the economic recovery and falling unemployment in many European countries.

The European University Association welcomes this general pledge for a strong and united Europe. It is, however, necessary to look beyond the world of European institutions and recognise the Europe of civil society, with the university sector as an outstanding example. European cooperation in higher education and research is part of Europe's success story and shows how collaboration can work through the exchange of students, researchers and ideas with the sector setting its own standards and practices.

"Juncker wants the EU to be world leader in innovation. That needs ambitious investments in research and education."

Juncker puts much emphasis on a relaunch of European industry and engaging in free global trade. He also mentioned working to counter climate change and managing legal and illegal immigration. Higher education and research were not once mentioned in relation to these priorities, but universities already play an important role in this regard, and face important challenges. A relaunch of Europe's industry will accelerate changes in labour markets, and require universities to increase efforts to prepare students for these changes. Innovation will remain central to maintaining a strong, competitive economy; it requires continued investment in research and continued engagement of the university sector in regional and national development. Free trade with partners such as Japan will likewise require that European industry be in the top league of global competitiveness. For the university sector, it means being an active part of innovation, supporting and fostering innovation ecosystems that are globally competitive.

What should the EU do?

The Commission will not be able to realise its agenda, and Europe as a whole will not sustain its growth, without investment in research, innovation and education. The EU framework programmes for research and innovation and the contribution to development of its higher education institutions bring unparalleled added value and fund projects that would otherwise not be funded. Sustainable funding in this area must be a high priority. The European Research Area needs to be revitalised in order to provide a basic framework for Europe's long-term competitiveness.

The EU must engage in a continent-wide discussion about how to meet the challenge of changing labour markets.

“It is not possible to envisage a free trading Europe of strong industries without thinking about how Europeans are trained to harness globalisation.”

The EU must also safeguard the possibilities of open innovation by promoting open access and flexible solutions for copyright.

What should universities do?

Universities must respond to the challenges Europe is facing. With more than a third of young people going through higher education and an increasing need for lifelong learning, universities are at the centre of providing the right skills for a competitive as well as for a democratic Europe. This requires a continuous dialogue about how learning and teaching are conducted at universities.

Universities are already an important part of European innovation, but more can be done to work actively with industry, policy makers, NGOs and citizens to fully reach the potential of Europe’s knowledge base.

With 720,000 refugees resettled or granted asylum in 2017 alone, universities have a task to integrate the new Europeans through education. The work begun in many places needs to be continued and strengthened if necessary.

EUA is supporting and facilitating European dialogue and cooperation on these and many other issues, reaching beyond the university community to a range of other stakeholders; we hope that the Juncker Commission will remain committed in its actions, including the last year before the European elections, and recognise the role that learning and teaching, research and innovation play for their success.

List of related EUA actions: [1st European Learning and Teaching Forum](#), [EFFECT Project](#), [UNI-SET project](#), [EU funding for universities campaign](#), [Refugee welcome map](#), [EUA updated statement](#) on copyright in the digital single market.

