

Brussels, 18 September 2019

Open letter to Ursula von der Leyen and Mariya Gabriel

Dear EU Commission President-elect, Dr von der Leyen,
Dear Commissioner-designate for Innovation and Youth, Ms Gabriel,

On behalf of Europe's universities, we congratulate you on your respective election and nomination and invite you to join forces to the benefit of Europe. The [European University Association](#) (EUA) represents more than 800 universities in 48 countries and 33 national university associations. EUA welcomes the [proposal for the new College of Commissioners and their portfolios](#) as it points to a fresh and ambitious approach for the next five years. We particularly welcome that the digital transformation and the climate crisis will be dealt with at vice-president level and that the new industrial strategy will be based on strengthening innovation. Furthermore, combining research, education and innovation in one portfolio is a great opportunity to strengthen the knowledge triangle and realise synergies between related EU policies and programmes, which we have long called for.

Europe needs a strong knowledge base to meet the challenges facing the Union and the ambitions set out in your [political guidelines for the next five years](#). Research, education and innovation are crucial enablers for many of the policy priorities - from addressing climate change to leading the ecological transition through new technologies and strengthening European technological sovereignty, fostering sustainable development and making people and societies fit for the digital age. All these goals need ambitious investments and policies for research, education and innovation at European and national levels.

Universities have a key role to play in all of this by advancing knowledge, empowering people through skills and critical thinking, through their work with partners in society, policymaking and the economy. We foster social inclusion, regional development and social and technological innovation. We also promote values such as openness, tolerance and international collaboration, which are all central to the European project.

Europe and its multilateral framework of collaboration in research, education and innovation are of utmost importance to universities and Europe's universities have a clear responsibility as societal actors working for and in Europe. We invite you to work together with us to advance European higher education, research and innovation. Please find below a number of key questions that we strongly believe should be considered when developing future policies; we would be most delighted to discuss this with you throughout your mandate.

European University Association

1. Supporting curiosity driven research

The EU is looking to strengthen its industrial base and technological sovereignty through investments in innovation. However, we know that real, disruptive innovation comes from creating new knowledge, rather than applying things that we already know. This will require sufficient funding and good framework conditions for curiosity-driven research.

How will you make sure that Europe supports curiosity-driven and potentially disruptive research?

2. Protecting academic freedom

In the recent past, academic freedom has come under pressure in parts of Europe, to the point that a university has been forced out of an EU member state. This is a serious breach of European values as stated in the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights. It is fundamental to our knowledge societies that scholars have freedom of thought and inquiry to advance knowledge, as well as the freedom to communicate the results of their work and educate the next generation of critical thinkers. It is also essential that citizens have access to knowledge and can participate in knowledge creation.

What would you do to protect academic freedom in Europe?

3. Establishing a European Education Area

The European Union aims to establish a European Education Area by 2025. Making Europe's education systems work better together with more mobility for learners and staff and closer cooperation between education institutions has proven to raise the quality of education. The European Universities Initiative, for example, would allow for higher education institutions to grow together at the European level for the benefit of students and staff alike.

- ***Which concrete steps would you propose to establish a European Education Area?***
- ***How would you encourage member states to participate given that education is a national competence?***
- ***How would you foresee the articulation with existing frameworks such as the European Higher Education Area and the Bologna Process?***

4. Strengthening the European Research Area

In order to realise the full potential of Europe's knowledge base, we need a strong European Research Area (ERA). This includes stepping up common investments and making sure that knowledge can circulate freely across the continent. Strengthening the ERA would also mean working towards reducing the innovation gap in Europe. For this to happen, member states will need to continue structural reforms of their research systems and further support capacity building of research performing organisations – including universities. The Commission has a crucial role of facilitating this.

What will you do to strengthen the European Research Area?

5. Fostering international openness

International collaboration, exchange and openness to the world are crucial for European universities and the competitiveness and attractiveness of European higher education and research. However, at the political level multilateral frameworks are being questioned and international cooperation is getting more difficult in many areas outside research and education.

How will you make sure that universities can continue to collaborate with key partners worldwide through EU programmes such as Horizon Europe and Erasmus+?