

# Universities and virtual worlds

## THE EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY ASSOCIATION'S INPUT TO THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION'S VIRTUAL WORLDS INITIATIVE

The European University Association (EUA) welcomes the initiative of the European Commission to develop comprehensive and inclusive policies for the development of virtual and augmented reality. EUA also applauds the aim to further innovation and avoid dominance of a few large companies.

Education and research institutions, including universities and their communities, are important users, as well as creators, of these technologies. Universities are also greenhouses for digital innovation, key players in innovation ecosystems and providers of the skills required to develop and use innovative virtual learning and research spaces.

Virtual and augmented reality are increasingly used in research, education, innovation and culture. This is the case in fields such as engineering, architecture or medicine, where these technologies are used for simulation and modelling. Generally, they are also used for virtual mobility and collaboration. Such practices became more widespread during the Covid-19 pandemic, allowing for a more inclusive approach to education. This could well be scaled up in the coming years.

It is vital that these activities are underpinned by physical and digital infrastructure that enables innovation and safeguards academic values, as well as open standards that facilitate sharing, cooperation and inclusion.

### **The need for investment**

To create such an open and interoperable environment, public investment will be important. Universities must have the capacity to develop and maintain infrastructure and to access publicly funded infrastructure, as well as the financial means to access commercial solutions. Investments must also be made in the capacity of universities to create technologies within their innovation ecosystems.

In their various roles, universities will adopt technologies across many domains, which will add to the amount of investment needed. It is therefore welcome that the European Commission aims to further private investment. However, ambitious public investment will remain a necessity if universities are to contribute to the development and use of these technologies.

It is unlikely that the existing European programmes will be sufficient for the necessary investment, beyond the financing of pilot projects or similar. For that reason, it is very welcome that the initiative includes the coordination of national funding. Such coordination highlights the need for a European governance model that includes a wide range of stakeholders.

## **Governance for open standards**

Regarding the role of governance, the Commission roadmap mentions a multitude of issues. These are all important, but the development of standards that allow access, interoperability and privacy in an open ecosystem remains key. Ambition in these central areas would be preferable to having too wide a remit.

In order to achieve this, the proposed governance structure must include a diverse set of stakeholders that represent the whole higher education and research ecosystem. In addition, the governance structure would benefit from common foresight including all relevant Commission services and member states to monitor the development of virtual worlds and identify trends, needs and opportunities.

In conclusion, ambitious investments and inclusive governance aimed at open virtual worlds will be essential elements of seizing the opportunities and managing the risks associated with virtual and augmented reality, both in the near and far future.