



# **Response to the EC Public Consultation on Smart Specialisation: a fresh approach to European growth and jobs through regional innovation strategies**

**European University Association**

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## **European University Association**

With 850 members across 47 countries, the European University Association (EUA) is the largest and most comprehensive organisation representing universities in Europe. 17 million students are enrolled at EUA member universities. As the voice of Europe's universities EUA supports and takes forward the interests of individual institutions and the higher education sector as a whole.

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## Introduction

This document sets out the response of the European University Association (EUA) to the EC public consultation on smart specialisation. EUA has prepared this response in consultation with its Expert Group on Research and Innovation Strategies for Smart Specialisation (RIS3) and its Research Policy Working Group (RPWG). These committees serve as advisory bodies to the EUA Council on matters related to regional innovation and European research policy matters, respectively.

EUA's responses to this consultation are primarily based on the outcomes of two RIS3 workshops organised by EUA and its national rectors' conferences, in [2015](#) (Madrid, Spain) and [2016](#) (Warsaw, Poland), as well as on the [EUA membership consultation on the mid-term review of Horizon 2020](#).

Due to EUA's wide and diverse membership base, some questions were not deemed appropriate to be answered directly by EUA. Consequently, EUA's response to the consultation focuses on general areas covered by the consultation. EUA's response is thus not submitted via the online survey, rather in electronic paper form.

EUA's input relates primarily to two thematic areas, corresponding to three questions, included in the consultation:

- A. The role of smart specialisation strategies in the development of innovation ecosystems** (Q4: Did smart specialisation strategies foster the emergence or improvement of innovation ecosystems?)
- B. Additional needs for European universities in order to leverage smart specialisation strategies in further developing innovation ecosystems** (Q8: What other/additional types of research, innovation and competitiveness support in the framework of smart specialisation strategies would your organisation need?; Q10: Please give further suggestions or comments regarding the development and implementation of smart specialisation strategies, including in the context of the wider EU policies on research, innovation, competitiveness, digitisation, education, etc., e.g. on how to reinforce political commitment, disseminate good practices and facilitate strategic interregional collaboration?)

In summary, EUA's response addresses the importance of political support, transparency and convergence of innovation policies and the need for more synergies between EU instruments and programmes. It also underlines that human talent acts as a fundamental driver of innovation, and proposes to provide greater flexibility of cohesion fund use in order to further improve the responsiveness of regions to new emergent areas of research and innovation (R&I). The response furthermore recommends the introduction of a concise set of reporting rules and it emphasises the complementarity of innovation, excellence and research.

## A. The role of smart specialisation strategies in the development of innovation ecosystems

The experience of European universities in the design and implementation of RIS3 strategies indicates that this has had an overall positive effect on the development of innovation ecosystems across different regions in Europe.<sup>1</sup> The development of RIS3 strategies has also provided a good

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<sup>1</sup> This information has been gathered through two RIS3 workshops co-organised by EUA and its national rectors' conferences. This information is available at: <http://bit.ly/2nVfQNE> and <http://bit.ly/2mYghG3>

opportunity for regional and local authorities, and universities to jointly work on developing innovation policies. However, the level of collaboration between these different stakeholders has been heterogeneous across Europe. Some regions have developed systematic collaboration between different stakeholders in developing their innovation policy. Others, however, have not fully embraced the opportunity of enhancing the impact of their innovation policies through this inclusive process.

Another very positive development with smart specialisation concerns the implementation of the *ex-ante* conditionality imposed on regions. This could be further emphasised in a future programme, in order to support the optimisation of regional innovation strategies.

At the same time, there is also experience to suggest that some regions find it difficult to adapt their policies and strategies to new emergent areas of research and innovation, particularly when they were not foreseen in the original RIS3 plan. Therefore, it would be important to further work on improving regions' responsiveness, so they can more swiftly adapt to changes in their ecosystems.

It is also worth noting that there is widespread recognition by political actors at European, national and regional levels of the key role of higher education institutions in the definition, implementation and impact enhancement of smart specialisation strategies. There is evidence that the most highly innovative regions have universities as critical components in their innovation ecosystems. However, more can be done to better leverage the benefits that research universities bring to regional development across Europe. There are already many good examples of universities being central to effective smart specialisation in both established and more recent accession countries. Specific showcase initiatives should be set up with a view to sharing good practice in research and innovation activities.

Examples of successful case studies on RIS3 initiatives with an active role from universities have been presented in two workshops in 2015 and 2016, co-organised by EUA and by its National Rectors' Conferences. The case studies presented in the workshop organised in [2015](#) (Madrid, Spain) and [2016](#) (Warsaw, Poland) are available on EUA's website.

## B. Additional needs for European universities in order to leverage smart specialisation strategies in further developing innovation ecosystems

The following aspects have been identified by EUA as being particularly relevant for the further development of smart specialisation:

### Importance of political support, transparency and convergence of innovation policies

- Effective smart specialisation is an ongoing and evolving process: **political support** is needed to promote strong, continuous and enduring cooperation among all relevant stakeholders in regional innovation. Platforms for dialogue bringing together universities, public authorities at the local, regional or national level should be put in place, along with focused oversight groups that include meaningful university representation.
- **Open, inclusive systems** are crucial to enable innovation. Enduring political engagement and clear processes need to be ensured at the local level.

- **Decision-making processes** in the area of smart specialisation and regional innovation should be evidence-based and transparent. In line with this, the information available on **RIS3 spending** could also be made **more transparent** (for example, indicating the level of funds spent on universities and research infrastructure).
- It will be important for future policy development to **monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of current approaches**. Regions should use an appropriate range of assessment approaches and multi-dimensional measures that are able to capture diverse effects in the local innovation ecosystem.
- There is a need for **better compatibility and interaction between local, regional and national level policies**, particularly related to the R&I area. In some cases, these different levels represent barriers to innovation. For better synergy, incentive mechanisms (e.g., monetary incentive systems between national and EU funds) could be developed to motivate national governments to invest appropriately in R&I at the regional level. Some regions are retracting from national/regional investment on R&I and putting the full responsibility of such activities on European programmes only.
- There is a need to **raise public awareness** on the added value of European programmes, in order to ensure continued public support. Co-creation by all relevant stakeholders, including civil society, could be explored as an instrument to increase public support.

#### More synergies between different EU instruments and programmes and more simplification

- Diverse funding mechanisms are available that can be combined to contribute to regional competitiveness and innovation. However, the **synergetic use** of funds can only be achieved with higher levels of strategic and practical alignment of different funding instruments. **Further harmonisation and simplification** of regulations would be highly beneficial.
- A **concise set of reporting rules** for different EU funding instruments and for national governments would also be highly desirable. For example, no regional authority should be able to impose additional reporting complexity, since this is simply an increased bureaucratic burden.
- Synergy needs to be addressed systematically – the cooperative use of different funds remains aleatory given the multilevel governance structures. **Re-shaping and providing greater flexibility of cohesion fund use** in Europe could be a pilot for such efforts. Additional flexibility could also bolster interregional cooperation.

#### The importance of human talent

- Universities provide a unique and essential link between education, research and innovation. Investing in even stronger links between education and research will support the development of **human talent which is the fundamental driver of innovation**. Physical infrastructures are necessary to build capacity for innovation in the short term, but are not sufficient. Investment in human talent is essential to spark, take forward and catalyse long-term innovation. There is a need to increase focus on human talent, which is indispensable for change to occur. The importance of the human factor should be enhanced in European programmes.
- The **Teaming and Twinning, and the ERA Chairs programmes** should be expanded in the future, preferably with funding from the European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF),

taking great care to lower bureaucratic impediments and clarify their purpose. Such programmes are especially important to promote the development of regions that are lagging behind.

#### Education, research and innovation: an inter-dependent system

- **Innovation results from research excellence** and is not an independent dimension. Excellent scientists can also be innovators and there is no contradiction in excelling in innovation and research. There is thus the need to increase awareness of policy makers and other political stakeholders on the complementarity of innovation, excellence and research. There is also the need to focus on *qualified excellence*, i.e., being excellent in the framework of the local environment.
- Many top universities are establishing more and more significant incentives and recognition mechanisms to support collaboration activities with external stakeholders. There is recognition that co-creation of knowledge through **active engagement with external stakeholders should be valued on a par with traditional research activities**. Teaching that is informed by external engagement ensures relevance and freshness, and gives added value.
- An appropriate **balance of fundamental and applied research** is crucial to ensure sustained innovation capabilities. In addition, social and cultural innovation aspects need to be put increasingly in focus.