

POLICY INPUT

Building an impactful European Research Area

EUA input to the European Commission's public consultation on the ERA Act

January 2026

In 2026, the European Commission will put forward its proposal for the European Research Area (ERA) Act. Building on the renewed momentum brought by the Letta and Draghi reports, the ERA Act seeks to establish research and innovation as the 'fifth freedom' within the EU's single market. The ERA Act is a major opportunity to allow the free circulation of research, scientific knowledge and technology and further support the objectives of the European Research Area.

The following considerations and recommendations offer a perspective from universities on each of the areas of intervention envisaged by the European Commission. As such, they aim to support the preparation of the ERA Act, in addition to the European University Association's (EUA) feedback to the [Commission's public consultation on the ERA Act](#).

Many of the issues addressed by the consultation are important to tackle. However, for each specific area, the Act should focus on key objectives that cannot be achieved at national level, in accordance with the subsidiarity principle. In addition, striking the right balance between reducing fragmentation and maintaining adequate levels of flexibility and autonomy for institutions is crucial to avoid rigid, one-size-fits-all obligations that could limit institutions' ability to operate effectively across diverse national, legal and institutional contexts. The Act should guarantee a prior assessment of any new legislation, to ensure it is 'fit for research' and does not hinder education and R&I activities, in line with the '[university check](#)' advocated for by EUA.

Moreover, while binding measures may be effective to progress on parts of the ERA, the Commission should carefully consider the risk of possible unintended consequences and assess the danger of overly restrictive measures, particularly where they could translate into excessive burdens at institutional or researcher level. Proposals should not create an additional burden for institutions, such as increased compliance checks. Moreover, any lack of compliance with the binding principles of the ERA Act on the part of the member states should not put R&I actors at a disadvantage. The Act should seek complementarity with related EU initiatives such as the Innovation Act and closer alignment and coordination with the European Education Area and European Higher Education Area.

In response to the areas for intervention and the specific measures identified by the European Commission in its public consultation, EUA sets out its analysis and recommendations below.

R&I INVESTMENTS

EUA strongly agrees with the European Commission that "the EU's innovation gap with other major economies is largely caused by [underinvestment in R&D](#)". The current level of investment within the EU does not allow the R&I sector to properly address important challenges and adequately respond to increasingly knowledge-dependent economies' demands. For the EU to truly become a global leader and safeguard autonomy in strategic sectors, it is necessary to enhance Europe's position at the forefront of global R&I, notably by increasing national and EU R&I investments and reducing disparities within the EU.

Importantly, in addition to setting R&I intensity targets, it is necessary to further encourage and support reforms of national R&I systems, which should be considered on an equal footing with investment targets. Without a strong R&I framework, increased investment may not lead to sufficient impact.

Moreover, the burden of underinvestment by member states should not be shifted onto research-performing organisations such as universities. If the 3% target becomes legally binding, it will be crucial to introduce appropriate safeguards to ensure that institutions are not penalised for government decisions beyond their control. Some measures proposed in the European Commission's proposal for the EU's tenth R&I framework programme (FP10) move in the opposite direction. For instance, it suggests conditionality under widening measures, which would restrict access to funding if countries do not increase their R&I spending annually. This needs careful consideration, particularly with regard to its potential unintended effects on research-performing organisations.

ALIGNMENT OF R&I POLICIES AND PRIORITIES ACROSS MEMBER STATES

EUA strongly agrees with the Commission's conclusion that "the lack of mechanisms to coordinate and prioritise research and innovation policies at EU level reduces the effectiveness of R&I investments". The possible ways forward presented in the public consultation can contribute to better alignment of EU-level and national research and development priorities, although their effectiveness depends on proportional and efficient implementation. Instruments for joint priority-setting and an expanded role for ERA governance structures can support coherence across policies and investments, provided they remain streamlined, avoid introducing additional administrative complexity, and address how non-EU countries could contribute to and possibly benefit from this alignment. In particular, this alignment process should take into consideration the EU Semester mechanisms, as well as ensure that the expanded competencies of the ERA governance bodies do not overlap with existing decision and advisory bodies which are meant to define strategic investments priorities, e.g. the existing and future governance structures guiding the direction of Horizon Europe.

With regard to the European Partnerships under Horizon Europe, the concentration of a critical mass of funding within these initiatives is particularly appropriate, as it enhances strategic focus and maximises impact. This approach is most effective when accompanied by greater transparency and harmonisation in how Partnerships are designed and managed. Flexibility to adapt, reorient or conclude Partnerships is useful, but such adjustments should be guided by clear criteria to ensure predictability and continuity for stakeholders.

A broader challenge concerns the fragmentation of the current Partnership landscape. Reducing overlap between topics, following up on sunset clauses and improving coordination across initiatives would help streamline the system. Strengthened and early stakeholder consultation when developing new initiatives would further enhance transparency, relevance and alignment with EU strategic priorities.

FREEDOM OF SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH

Under the ERA Act, the European Commission is considering establishing an EU-level legal framework and specific measures to protect the freedom of scientific research. Academic freedom and the freedom of scientific research are the lifeblood of meaningful scientific endeavour. They are a precondition for universities to fulfil their considerable responsibilities toward society, which include advancing science and education and driving societal progress.

Secure legal and regulatory frameworks to protect the freedom of scientific research play an important role: to ensure maximum effectiveness and accommodate the diversity of national (and other, including regional or international) frameworks, any regulatory and/or legislative initiative at the EU level to protect and support academic freedom and the freedom of scientific research should be carefully developed, taking into consideration preexisting frameworks and assessing the risk of unintended consequences in their implementation. Therefore, a minimum standards approach, rather than a legally binding, harmonised framework at EU level may be more effective.

Crucially, universities also have a responsibility to promote academic freedom by fostering a conducive environment that supports free learning, teaching, research and communication activities. As part of its broader work on academic freedom, EUA thus encourages its members to implement frameworks and develop institutional guidelines to promote and protect academic freedom. Hence, the European Commission's suggestion to foster a culture of scientific freedom and integrity across the EU by complementing legal measures with awareness-raising, education and programmes is particularly welcome. EUA is ready to contribute and support the Commission in the design and implementation of such initiatives, building on the Association's [practical guidance](#) on ways to protect and promote academic freedom aimed at university leadership and other university communities.

GENDER EQUALITY

Gender equality should remain strongly embedded in European research and innovation. The measures proposed in the public consultation can support more effective promotion of gender equality and equal opportunities in R&I, provided they are implemented in a proportionate and context-sensitive manner. In this respect, setting minimum spending levels for gender equality policies can play a positive and meaningful role in reinforcing political commitment, supporting long-term institutional change, and ensuring a stable level of investment. At the same time, such measures need to be designed carefully as prescriptive obligations risk being counterproductive. Awareness-raising, capacity-building and incentives tend to generate more sustainable engagement, while mandatory spending may create compliance behaviour that limits lasting outcomes.

Incorporating gender and broader social factors such as ethnicity, disability or age into R&I programmes is appropriate, especially in view of the need for a more holistic approach to equality, diversity, inclusion and belonging. Nevertheless, reporting and evaluation requirements should be proportionate, as excessive administrative demands could undermine the intended benefits.

Overall, improving gender equality in R&I would benefit from stronger monitoring across the entire project lifecycle, while ensuring administrative processes remain manageable, especially for research performing organisations, including universities. A shift towards more inclusive and diverse participation, beyond gender alone, would further enhance the relevance and societal impact of European research and innovation.

RESEARCH CAREERS AND MOBILITY

Working towards more attractive and sustainable research careers is a must. Removing barriers to researchers' mobility and strengthening research careers is the way to go, as long as provisions in the ERA Act are evidence-based and provide concrete improvement for research careers and mobility. The ERA Act should take advantage of possible synergies with the European Higher Education Area and the European

Education Area – and not duplicate efforts in the same area of action, when applicable. These synergies are also key to making the fifth freedom a reality, enabling the free movement of knowledge, research, innovation and education.

The challenge of R&I underfunding at the national level has a major effect on research careers, and on researchers' working conditions. The widespread use of fixed-term contracts, usually linked to the duration and funding of specific projects, is recognised as one of the factors contributing to precarity in research careers. Nevertheless, without additional resources, a significant increase in the number of open-ended contracts for researchers remains difficult to achieve.

Establishing a common vocabulary and mutually recognised [R1-R4 profiles](#), including scientific responsibilities and assessment criteria, could pave the way for an EU-level contract template for researchers and support its broader implementation by universities and research employers. While the rationale behind the proposal to introduce an EU-level contract template for researchers is understood, its implementation poses several challenges. First, researchers' duties and status vary across member states and sectors. Second, existing national laws in some EU member states already regulate researchers' employment, in some cases establishing contract templates adapted to the national context and labour market specificities.

The Act could foresee minimum standards covering practical aspects of researchers' contracts such as paid leave (holidays, sick leave, parental leave) and social benefits (health insurance, pension schemes) to ensure similar living and working conditions for researchers across member states. This would enhance researchers' mobility by reducing uncertainty about living and working conditions in other countries. However, these standards should carefully consider the diversity of situations across member states. In addition, administrative complexities for travel of researchers should be removed (no requirement for the A1 standard form for social security rights in case of business trips, attendance of research conferences, etc).

FREE CIRCULATION OF SCIENTIFIC KNOWLEDGE

The European Commission's ambition to strengthen the promotion and adoption of open science policies and actions in the EU is most welcome. Indeed, as a general principle, any measure that ensures the free circulation of scientific knowledge, by harmonising practices and facilitating research activities and scholarly communication of academic actors, is a positive step.

Looking ahead, any legislative action must be carefully designed to avoid unintended consequences. It is essential that new requirements do not impose excessive burdens on researchers nor be perceived as punitive for researchers (e.g. fears about legal infringement if your data is not interoperable). A supportive, enabling legislative environment is crucial to foster positive change.

Across Europe, the current landscape shows substantial variation in how legal possibilities and market-based mechanisms for sharing, accessing and reusing copyright-protected material for scientific purposes are implemented. While some countries offer adequate legal means, others make insufficient use of the possibilities available at the national level. These differences can significantly influence how stakeholders perceive this issue, making it difficult to provide a homogeneous overview.

A similar pattern of uneven progress appears in research assessment practices. Although certain disciplinary communities have advanced towards more balanced and comprehensive evaluation systems, many others continue to rely heavily on publication-related metrics in prestigious journals, without fully recognising

the intrinsic quality, broader impact and diverse contributions of researchers. This inconsistency highlights the need for continued support to research assessment reform efforts, including those of the Coalition for Advancing Research Assessment (CoARA), aimed at recognising diverse contributions and promoting the importance of qualitative evaluation supported by the responsible use of quantitative indicators, where appropriate.

KNOWLEDGE VALORISATION

Many of the possible ways forward suggested by the European Commission include incentives for member states in priority-setting, the development of policies to upscale knowledge valorisation and cross-sector mobility schemes.

Knowledge valorisation activities are [firmly embedded in the institutional goals of most universities](#), allowing them to drive innovation ecosystems through both marketable solutions and social innovations. Nevertheless, while various academic career assessment systems recognise innovation achievements, the cultural shift away from publications is slow and there is no straightforward indicator for knowledge valorisation beyond patenting or licensing, for instance non-commercial breakthroughs which improve public services to the benefit of citizens and the private sector. Moreover, dual career appointments are possible only in some countries, while in others there are legal or cultural barriers such as strict civil service statutes and negative cultural perceptions of working outside the university. Hence, academics' focus remains primarily on research rather than innovation, as they lack the training and support to fully valorise their work.

For innovation to be a fully recognised activity beyond technology transfer offices (TTOs) and intellectual property management, its visibility must be enhanced through orchestrated actions among governments and R&I stakeholders. This would ensure that researchers who want to perform valorisation can stay in academia so that their skillset as innovators can benefit both their host institutions and the wider ecosystem.

AI IN RESEARCH

It is highly welcome that the public consultation addresses artificial intelligence (AI) in research. The growing use of artificial intelligence in research offers significant potential for scientific discovery but also raises important questions about core values such as integrity, accountability and transparency.

Striking a balance between binding and non-binding rules can promote the trustworthy and responsible adoption of AI in science while preserving the flexibility required for institutions and scientists to keep pace with AI development. The ERA Act should support the responsible adoption of AI by enshrining core principles of AI use in scientific research. These principles should be both sustainable and adaptable to emerging AI technologies.

Universities, research organisations and researchers would benefit from support and dedicated tools to ensure the responsible uptake of AI. EU-level guidelines that reflect the specificities of AI and its potential impacts may therefore be an interesting approach. These guidelines could draw on the work of the ERA Forum to establish [living guidelines on the use of generative AI in research](#).

Regarding the misuse of AI in scientific research, it is important to consider that universities and research organisations already have whistleblowing systems in place. Any new mechanism for reporting misuse of AI in scientific research should therefore ensure complementarity and avoid overlap with existing tools.

INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION AND RESEARCH SECURITY

Universities [recognise the challenges](#) to security, ethics and integrity that are inherent in their wide-ranging global partnerships and projects. Good institutional practices for due diligence and risk appraisal enable universities to engage responsibly in broad international cooperation.

Nevertheless, identifying and tackling security risks is a shared responsibility and can only be done in close dialogue between authorities, universities and individual academics. It must be coupled with capacity building and awareness raising, in a spirit of co-production which respects academic freedom and institutional autonomy.

While there is no one-size-fits-all approach to research security in view of different national strategic interests, it is nevertheless essential to be mindful of varying resource levels in the R&I sector and the need for safeguards and security checks to be proportionate. The consolidation of existing risk management frameworks can be better synchronised at European level and demonstrate a firm commitment to bolstering trust in science for a continued pursuit of internationalisation.

EUA is committed to contribute to further dialogue with policy makers and provide input to the European Commission to ensure that the ERA Act becomes an impactful initiative that fully delivers on the objectives of the European Research Area.

EUA DOCUMENTS FOR FURTHER READING

[EUA \(2025\). How universities can protect and promote academic freedom](#)

[EUA \(2024\). A renewed social contract for Europe and its universities](#)

[EUA \(2024\). Enhancing research security in Europe](#)

[EUA \(2024\). Paving the way for impactful European R&I](#)

[EUA \(2022\) Universities as key drivers of sustainable innovation ecosystems](#)