New momentum for the European Research Area

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Acknowledging past achievements and concerned about current threats, the signatory major European university associations and science organisations call upon the EU to overcome complacency, to take responsibility, and to provide new momentum, dynamism and equity to the European Research Area (ERA) composed of the EU Member States and Associated Countries. With a view on the 60th anniversary of the Treaty of Rome, we the undersigned herewith contribute to the debate on the future of Europe: we firmly believe that more and better Europe is needed and that the ERA must be realised fully in order to safeguard the boundary conditions enabling us to contribute to solving the grand societal challenges and to achieving the sustainable development goals. Together, we need to realise a stronger brand, set more ambitious priorities for the ERA and the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and open them up beyond Europe, and, finally, invest more into knowledge.

Past achievements

The establishment of the EU Framework Programmes for Research & Innovation (FP) and the European Research Council (ERC), and the inclusion of the ERA and related 5th Freedom (free circulation of knowledge) in the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) concern the most important and tangible achievements of European integration in research and innovation. After a long and hesitant start, some progress to implement the ERA has been made. However, the lack of ERA has been estimated to cost €3 billion annually and the complacency regarding the ERA is worrying, as a lot of work remains to be done in order to fulfil the TFEU obligation. The successes of European integration in education and innovation have been more limited due to a lack of shared competences.

Current threats

Lack of sense of urgency and of national and EU investments, post-factual politics, populism, authoritarianism, protectionism and nationalism threaten the free circulation of knowledge and its bearers (i.e. students, teachers, researchers and inventors), the international orientation and cooperation of our institutions and in some cases academic freedom and institutional autonomy. War, terrorism, climate change and related migration are topping these crises. Alarmingly, these threats to the fundamental core values of science also occur within countries that earlier paved the way towards knowledge societies. Intolerance of divergent opinions and political interference with academia jeopardise the ability of science to act in the public interest and to take our full societal responsibility.

Future opportunity

Universities and research performing and funding organisations in the ERA deliver knowledge (i.e. education, research and innovation) and, as such, still constitute the strongest science system in the world. Knowledge is indispensable for long-term sustainable economic and societal benefit to European citizens and the rest of the world. We cannot afford submitting cooperation in education, research and innovation to short-term political interest in other policy areas and cutting corresponding budgets. Rather, we must build upon past achievements, put knowledge back at the heart of EU policy making and, finally, invest more into cooperation and competition in these fields at all levels as essential drivers for the future of Europe. There is an immediate call for action upon the EU to safeguard the respect for the rule of law and human rights, freedom from political interference, tolerance of divergent opinions, democratic citizenship, evidence-based policy making, free circulation of knowledge and its bearers, academic freedom and institutional autonomy.

The EU, in our view, must better integrate knowledge. It can do so by enacting the following initiatives by European and national policy makers and science organisations in the years to come:

1. Stronger Brand

By enacting a renewed focus on knowledge, the EU can create a stronger brand - a visual and future-oriented brand. `Science made in Europe` has been a roaring success. It is this domain that is most closely associated with future economic and societal success, attraction of talent and exciting jobs. Looking at the United States - as an example - over half of its economic growth since World War II has been attributed to research and innovation. However, the US is now encountering political and cultural threats to research, whilst the ERA produces more researchers and research output. Europe now must capitalise on its scientific achievements to attract global talent, collaborations and investment into the ERA and EHEA, and to develop a stronger brand for science in Europe.

2. More integration

Europe needs to increase its efforts to combat fragmentation and make sure differences in national polices and legislation do not represent obstacles to research collaboration in any form. We firmly believe that addressing the remaining challenges to the ERA and fully realising it, is the best way forward to gain an estimated amount of €16 billion annually and to serve European citizens. Essentially, the EU policies and funding programmes for knowledge should complement institutional, regional and national efforts safeguarding supranational added value and creating international momentum for knowledge societies.

3. More ambitious priorities

The EU should avoid complacency, lead the dialogue with partners and citizens, identify shortcomings, gaps and opportunities, inspire all partners to set more ambitious goals and priorities and continuously monitor the progress achieved. Evident emerging topics concern - amongst others - safeguarding fundamental core values, assuring the leading position of the European knowledge worldwide, strengthening science integrity, increasing excellence in education and research, boosting science-based disruptive innovation and increasing the scientific, social, economic and societal impact of European science.

4. More openness

The EU must aspire to expanding openness of education, research and innovation better involving business, industry, public services and civil society in science and challenging vested interests, together with reaching out globally. Open science and open innovation are essential tools to realise the ERA fully. The EU should adopt the broadest possible definition of the ERA and EHEA and reconsider and adjust the ethical, legal and financial conditions of its funding instruments. We should offer true partnership and direct access to the EU programmes to like-minded partners worldwide.

5. More funding

Funding for science should be increased and improved in delivery, both at European and national levels. Governments in the ERA and EHEA should stop cutting budgets for knowledge and finally meet the 3% target (of the GDP spent on research and development). Importantly, the EU should finally move towards collecting own means and allocate more funding to its knowledge programmes.

We the undersigned have engaged in an ERA partnership and as the main stakeholders in research and innovation in Europe are in full support of the ERA goals, which we have adopted as part of our strategies and activities. We offer our continuous dialogue and cooperation with you and other relevant partners on shaping this ambitious future for Europe and truly realising the ERA.

Conference of European Schools for Advanced Engineering Education and Research (CESAER)
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