

## **Last chance to invest in European higher education and research**

European Science seems to be doing well, in October 2020. While its rapid reaction in the Corona crisis showed its fundamental importance for the functioning and survival of our societies, the Nobel Prizes awarded to several European scientists confirmed its past performance and international reputation. Thus, can European scholars sit back and relax? The opposite is the case: the scientific community in Europe is facing a whole decade of misguided European austerity in science and higher education that will endanger the future of research and innovation, which will have a long-lasting impact on the continent.

In the negotiations between the European Parliament, Council and EU Commission on the next multiannual financial framework of the European Union, the future of European research and higher education is at stake. What may sound technical at first will have concrete, long-term and perhaps painful consequences for our societies. We are not talking about the next few months or next year. The decisions bound to be taken will bind us for the very long period up to 2028 and – indirectly – the period after that.

Research strives to create solutions for some of the biggest challenges our societies are facing today such as climate change. We need research to develop new ideas, tools and concepts for questions related to digitalisation and artificial intelligence, to name just a few. Eighty percent of EU exports rely on technology-based industries. As knowledge creation leaders, our jobs and therefore our prosperity depend on technological development with a strong foundation in fundamental and applied science as well as competences for the digital age such as complex problem solving, critical thinking and creativity.

Europe's universities are world class and well prepared for the tasks. However, to play in this league investments are necessary, also in view of geopolitical developments. The US is at the lead and since 2017 China has taken the second place from the EU when it invested €370 billion compared to EU's €320 billion. We need to defend our position as innovation leaders in order to avoid future technological dependencies. Technological developments will shape society and we need to ensure through science and research that our fundamental democratic rights and humanistic values such as freedom, transparency, privacy and open cooperation are guaranteed and further strengthened in this process.

Therefore, we strongly disagree with our governments' decision to cut funding for European cooperation in education, research and innovation. If the cuts related to the EU's recovery fund NextGenerationEU are added, European programmes for student mobility and university cooperation, research and innovation will lose a total of €16.9 billion.

The current strength of our European science and innovation ecosystem is founded on two pillars: an excellent national science base combined with intensive European cooperation. This results in the optimal combination of competition and cooperation and makes new knowledge available to our societies. Therefore, cutbacks in the European budget cannot be offset by national investment. For example: with the newly founded European University Alliances, the European Commission and EU Member States want to increase cooperation between European universities to a new level. However, the funding of these ambitious new networks would be endangered due to the intended cuts in the Erasmus+ programme.

In a world which has become more complex, international and fast-moving we need young people who can thrive in an environment based on a capability for critical thinking and appreciation for European and international cooperation. The Erasmus+ programme offers a valuable preparation to these challenges as it gives young people the opportunity to broaden their horizon, acquire intercultural skills and boosting their personal development. And yet, even with the previously intended funds only 5% of all current students could be mobile on the European level over the next seven years. With the currently planned cuts, this figure will be even lower.

The study “The Grand Challenge – The design and societal impact of Horizon 2020” carried out by the European Commission's scientific service found that every Euro invested in European research generates an economic surplus growth of 13 euros. Would you turn down an investment like that and then claim to have "saved" the money? This is exactly what is happening right now with our governments wanting to cut €16.9 billion for European education and research. Following the study's rationale, our societies are likely to lose up to €200 billion in economic value as a result. This will lead to more technological dependency as well as an increasing difficulty to address current societal challenges, turning the tide of climate change and achieving sustainable development goals. Europe must continue to build on the quality and strength of our basic research that has been a key resource for the wealth and culture of our continent.

The decisive negotiations on the EU's Multiannual Financial Framework are currently underway and it is not too late to change course. We therefore urge our governments to recognise the value of education, research and innovation in the EU financial framework and, together with the European Parliament, to set the right course for a successful future by reversing the planned cuts.

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