



Applied higher education and research for competitiveness and cohesion

EURASHE Contribution to the Consultation on
the EU Multiannual Financial Framework
2028-2034

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EURASHE



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Key Messages

- The next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) will be a crucial tool in securing Europe's future competitiveness, cohesion, and resilience. As Europe faces transformative social, environmental, technological, and geopolitical challenges, investing in education, skills development, innovation, and regional resilience has never been more urgent.
- The next MFF must significantly reinforce investment in education, research and innovation to ensure that Europe shapes and adapts to technological change.
- Applying knowledge across the economy through a highly skilled workforce is vital for Europe's productivity and competitiveness.
- Quality education and training are essential not only for addressing skills gaps and needs, but also for strengthening democratic resilience, combating disinformation, and supporting Europe's strategic autonomy.
- European funding for education and research should be demand led, which means asking enterprise and society what they need from our universities.
- Demand is not the same everywhere and therefore the MFF should have a significant place-based element – meaning that investments lead to knowledge and skills that are relevant to the varying priorities of Europe's different cities and regions.
- The EU has an approach for placed based innovation that is evidence-based and draws on 15 years of experience: Smart Specialisation. The approach should be further strengthened as the basis for implementing the Fifth Freedom of the Single Market.
- Regional development and European value chains require high levels of knowledge transfer between actors and places, as well as connectivity between different regional innovation ecosystems. This points to the need for more centrally managed projects for capacity building and linking knowledge actors in their regions. It cannot be done only through the Cohesion Policy.

- Investments in applied higher education support local economies, regional resilience, social inclusion, and Europe's twin transitions. None of our cities and regions can be forgotten, or the integrity of the EU itself will be at risk. The next MFF must reflect these strategic priorities with coherent, increased, and targeted and cross-cutting funding, as well as better integration and simplification across EU funding instruments (e.g., Erasmus+, Horizon Europe, Cohesion Funds) to reduce administrative burdens and enhance impact, including fostering synergies between the European Education Area (EEA) and the European Research Area (ERA).

The Applied Sciences: A Strategic Investment for Europe

Universities of Applied Sciences (UAS)¹ are uniquely positioned to bridge education and the labour market by delivering practice-oriented education that equip graduates with the competences and skills required by dynamic, evolving economies ("Work Ready Graduates"). As such they are central to achieving the objectives of the Union of Skills. Through their close cooperation with industry, SMEs, and public sector actors, UAS actively contribute to reducing skills mismatches, supporting upskilling and reskilling efforts necessary for Europe's green and digital transitions. They play a critical role in strengthening regional innovation ecosystems and fostering smart specialisation strategies, ensuring that innovation and growth opportunities extend beyond major urban centres to reach less developed and transitioning regions.

Moreover, UAS enhance social inclusion and territorial cohesion by offering flexible learning pathways to a diverse range of learners, thus supporting social mobility and broadening participation in higher education. Their engagement with SMEs and local industries ensures that education and research activities are directly aligned with labour market needs, thereby

The next MFF must explicitly recognise that investing in applied higher education and research is a strategic investment in Europe's economic competitiveness as well as its social and territorial cohesion. To maximise this impact, centrally managed programmes such as the successors to Erasmus+ and Horizon Europe should be used in synergy with the Cohesion Policy to support UAS

¹ Similar institutions are also called Technological Universities and Polytechnic Universities, while comprehensive universities may have departments for the applied sciences.

led initiatives such as regional development projects, work-based learning schemes and the uptake of new technologies.

Erasmus: A driver for international cooperation and European values

As the Erasmus+ Coalition underlines, “Erasmus+ is more than a mobility scheme, it is a catalyst for European cooperation”.² As part of the Coalition, EURASHE supports the call for a fivefold increase in the Erasmus+ budget, in line with Mario Draghi’s report and calls from the European Parliament. To ensure the Erasmus+ Programme meets Europe’s strategic goals for skills, cohesion, innovation, and democratic resilience, a **fivefold increase** in the budget is both necessary and urgent.

The Erasmus+ Programme plays an essential role in promoting active citizenship and democratic participation, demonstrating its transformative impact on societal resilience, at a time when our democracies are under pressure.³

Moreover, many initiatives under the **Union of Skills** rely on Erasmus+ funding. It is essential to secure and expand current funding to achieve its objectives.

In recent years, we have seen the Erasmus Programme fund strategic flagships, such as European University Alliances, Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoVEs), and piloting of a European Degree. Adding priorities without a proportional budget increases risks, undermining the programme’s core objectives. New initiatives, such as transnational university-business partnerships or Joint VET diploma, it require dedicated and increased budgets to ensure their successful implementation without compromising existing priorities.

Sustainable investment pathways for European University alliances must be established, with inclusive access to funding instruments for all alliances, including those with the Seal of Excellence. Applied universities are pioneering joint study programs that combine academic rigor with practical, industry-relevant training. The European Degree can further boost mobility, skills circulation, and talent attraction. Erasmus+ must prioritize funding for these initiatives to bridge skills gaps.

² Erasmus+ Coalition statement

³ Ibid

Additional funding is needed to ensure inclusive, accessible, and fair higher education, particularly to cover the high costs of mobility for non-traditional learners. EURASHE also calls for simplification of programme management and administration, especially in mobility and cooperation actions, and for enhanced digital opportunities and inclusivity.⁴

Research and Innovation: Including Applied Research in Europe's Future

As a signatory to the Research Matters campaign, EURASHE supports the widespread call to double the next Framework Programme budget to €200 billion. Having a large FP10 budget is in the interest of all European countries, both politically and economically.

Research and innovation must remain central to Europe's competitiveness strategy. This means supporting the entire chain of innovation, from basic to applied research, and from startups to scale ups. Generating knowledge must be matched by its application across all sectors of the economy. Crucially, a one size fits all approach should be avoided, with funding sensitive to the different types of research and places where it is conducted.

It is essential that applied research — research focused on solving real-world challenges and driving innovation at the regional level — is fully integrated into the future European research framework. Universities of Applied Sciences, with their strong links to local economies and industries, are ideally positioned to deliver applied research outcomes that support both societal development and industrial competitiveness.

In the next Framework Programme (FP10), it will be vital to strengthen collaborative research across countries, sectors and types of institutions. This is where we find true European added value. Furthermore, a much greater effort should be placed to build innovation ecosystems and connect them across borders. The type of capacity building and integration of the Knowledge Triangle supported by Pillar 3 of Horizon Europe (Innovation Ecosystems and the EIT) should be substantially reinforced and integrated with the I3 instrument (Interregional Innovation Investments) funded by the European Regional Development Fund.

Moreover, simplifying administrative procedures and creating synergies with other funding programmes and initiatives is critical to enabling smaller institutions, including Universities of

⁴ Ibid

Applied Sciences, to participate more effectively in European research programmes. Removing barriers to entry will foster a broader, more inclusive research community and ensure that the transformative potential of applied research is fully realised across all regions of Europe. Recognising and supporting applied research as a fundamental lever for addressing Europe's societal, technological, and economic challenges must be a core objective of the future MFF and research funding landscape.

EURASHE, therefore, calls for maintaining the current balance between basic and applied research. This is crucial to be on equal footing with other geopolitical actors, such as the United States or China, that spend higher amounts proportionally on applied research.⁵

Strong Stakeholders for a Strong Europe

The successful delivery of Erasmus+, research programmes, and regional development initiatives is deeply dependent on the existence of a vibrant ecosystem of civil society organisations and sector-specific stakeholders. Organisations such as EURASHE play a critical role by acting as a bridge between European policy initiatives and their local and regional implementation. They ensure that diverse types of institutions, particularly those embedded in cities and regions such as Universities of Applied Sciences, have a voice in shaping and delivering European strategies.

Stakeholder organisations also provide essential functions in capacity-building, quality assurance, and policy development, strengthening the education and innovation ecosystems across Europe. Their expertise and networks facilitate the translation of European objectives into actionable outcomes at national and regional levels, ensuring that policies are informed by on-the-ground realities and sectoral needs.

To sustain and enhance this vital role, the next MFF should reinforce and expand Operating Grants for stakeholder organisations, recognising them as indispensable partners in achieving Europe's strategic goals. Furthermore, structured stakeholder consultation mechanisms must be embedded systematically across all EU programmes, from Erasmus+ to Horizon Europe and beyond. Empowering stakeholder organisations through stable and predictable support will ensure that Europe's education, skills, research, and regional development strategies remain grounded in

⁵ [European Parliament report on research and innovation | EURASHE](#)



expertise, diversity, and practical experience, delivering tangible benefits for European citizens and communities.

Conclusion

Europe's future competitiveness, cohesion, and democratic resilience hinge on strategic investments made today. The next MFF must:

- Strongly invest in Erasmus+ with structural enhancements and a substantial increase, allowing it to cover both politically and societally relevant initiatives.
- Recognize the central role of applied sciences education in delivering skills, supporting labour markets, and driving regional growth.
- Reinforce support for applied research and innovation ecosystems.
- Sustain and empower stakeholder organizations to ensure sector-driven implementation.
- Supporting applied education and regional innovation is supporting Europe's economy, resilience, and future generations.

About EURASHE

EURASHE is the European Association for the Applied Sciences in Higher Education, the leading voice for applied sciences and professional higher education in Europe. With over 70 members based in Europe and beyond, EURASHE advocates for the interests of more than 500 applied higher education institutions. Founded in 1990, EURASHE has a mission to promote the value of applied higher education at both national and European levels. It is committed to fostering international cooperation and enhancing the global engagement of its member institutions. Through these efforts, EURASHE contributes to the advancement of higher education and research, and in particular its role in meeting societal and economic challenges. For more information, visit www.eurashe.eu