



UnILiON NEWS RELEASE

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Universities are navigating a fast-changing landscape, Horizon Europe missions must be open - and a strong relationship between education, research and innovation is essential to the future of Europe.

These were key messages as UnILiON's "Universities Fast Forward: Value in Diversity" event this week brought together EU policymakers and education leaders to debate the current and future role of universities, the international competitiveness of European higher education and funding under Horizon Europe.

"Comprehensive universities are in an ideal position to take the lead, because they are able to analyse the scientific world with a helicopter view across all disciplines," said Ignace Lemahieu, Vice Rector for Research at Ghent University in Belgium. "They can contribute to the dream that one day, a single set of rules will apply for Marie Curie, EIT, ERASMUS+ and the structural funds."

"Interdisciplinarity, together with entrepreneurial skills, are essential for solving future challenges. Technology alone is not enough," said Anne Borg, Vice President for Education, Norwegian University of Science and Technology. "We must acknowledge the link between education, research and innovation in seeking new solutions, and train students accordingly. And internationalisation and student exchange develop a global mindset that is crucial to solving global challenges."

Universities of Applied Sciences, meanwhile, can collaborate with SMEs to act as strong drivers for regional innovation, with research teams able to quickly respond to market and societal needs, said Ralph Blum, Vice President for Research at Nuremberg Tech. "The results are immediate product innovation, a fast-track to implementation, and well-educated graduates due to practice-oriented curricula."

University wishes: Structural funds, and room for smaller projects

"Existing funding is good," said Mr. Lemahieu. "But we hope that in the future, even more attention will be paid for structural funds to invest in innovation and research." He also called for improving mobility for researchers at all levels and students, and more support for doctoral training in the Marie Skłodowska-Curie actions.

Horizon Europe should open funding to smaller projects with fewer participants and focus more strongly on collaborative projects, said Mr. Blum. "Europe needs stronger involvement of applied research in innovation. Let us foster smart partnerships that connect research, education and innovation. Let us initiate interdisciplinary research projects, establish joint study and doctorate programs, and finally increase the number of European projects."

"I expect that in a few years, universities will look quite different", said Ms. Borg. "The labour market will change so rapidly that we will have to be prepared for people coming back after their first degrees, for

additional training. This will be a much larger part of our mandate.” She added that specialisations based in industry challenges would be essential - and that achieving this would be easier through 5-year comprehensive programs, rather than 3+2 models.

The Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) includes a proposed doubling of ERASMUS funding, but the proposals also create “a lot of space for member states and education institutions to access the structural funds,” said Stefaan Hermans, Director of the Policy Strategy and Evaluation at the European Commission’s Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture (DG EAC), adding that there are ongoing discussions with the European Investment Bank to structure this under InvestEU.

A Discussion of Missions

Participants were eager to know more about the missions structure under Horizon Europe, particularly their openness and reach - and how they align with the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals.

The Commission and member states this week discussed five missions and nine institutionalised partnerships, said Wolfgang Bartscher, Deputy Director-General of the European Commission’s Directorate-General for Research and Innovation (DG RTD)

“Missions are, in particular, in the second pillar which deals with sustainable development and industrial competitiveness, which is €52 billion according to the proposal from the European Commission,” noted Mr. Bartscher. “We consider that in certain areas, we need more focused and mission-driven research to address economic and societal challenges,” he added, but “missions will not constitute the lion’s part in terms of expenditure under the second pillar.”

“In general, we welcome the mission-driven approach,” said Mr. Lemahieu. “We think that this could be a step forward, but we hope that the top-down approach will not be too far stretched.”

“I think it’s important that the goals are not too narrow, and perhaps that they relate to something that could be specific to Europe,” said Ms. Borg. “If it could be valuable to add that to the UN development goals, then a European context would be a way of thinking about it.

“One of our key messages is that despite the world becoming a closer place than in the past, Horizon Europe still has the mission to remain open,” responded Mr. Bartscher, reassuring universities that missions would not be a “closed shop,” with mission boards to ensure participation of university representatives, stakeholders and end-users. “The missions will most likely rely on calls and cooperative research, on a bottom up approach,” he added.

Horizon Europe negotiations: Cautious optimism

EU officials voiced cautious optimism that the Horizon Europe negotiations could be concluded before the European elections in May 2019.

“What I hear from colleagues is that the overall negotiations are advancing well,” said Mr. Bartscher. “We know that there are countries who want to pay less, and nobody wants to pay more. Still, the European Parliament is evidently also of the opinion that Europe can only deliver on new priorities and new challenges with more money.”

“Our goal is to publish the calls in October 2020, to avoid any gap between the periods. We’re doing everything in order to get there,” added Mr Hermans.

A first annual event for UnLiON

The “Universities Fast Forward: Value in Diversity”, moderated by Science|Business managing director Maryline Fiaschi, was the first event in a new, yearly series organised by UnLiON, an informal network of over 40 liaison offices representing more than 120 excellent universities based in Europe, Japan and Russia.

“We want to be an effective information multiplier, a European network where people create, exchange, and have new ideas for reinforcing our collaboration at European level,” said UnLiON Secretary Massimo Busuoli. “And we would like to represent a single entry point to world of excellent universities, an easy door to complex organisations which normally are difficult to target.”

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