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Arqus Position Paper on a European Strategy for Universities

The Arqus European University Alliance, which brings together the universities of Bergen, Granada, Graz, Leipzig, Lyon, Padua, and Vilnius, welcomes the initiative for a European Strategy for Universities including the four missions of higher education institutions – education, research, innovation, and service to society.

Higher education and the societal context in which we are an integral part are increasingly complex. The way in which we work, communicate, and participate in society is rapidly changing. We are increasingly interlinked and share global challenges that are beyond disciplines, countries, or regions. A European Strategy has the potential for setting a direction for higher education in Europe, responding to these developments. The areas we as a sector need to address are comprehensive. We believe that a European Strategy should focus on elements with the greatest potential for European added value.

Prioritizing focus areas will strengthen the impact of a European strategy.

European universities consider students' involvement and participation on all levels to be vital. A strategy for universities in Europe must include student participation and the representation and promotion of all students' educational, social, economic, and cultural interests.

Executive summary - Key input to the strategy for universities in Europe

Our key input to a European Strategy for higher education is as follows:

- The strategy must emphasize the importance of academic freedom and institutional autonomy as drivers for excellence, creativity, and innovation in European higher education. Furthermore, the strategy should encourage diversity in higher education.

- The EU should develop bottom-up instruments, as opposed to a top-down governance approach steering universities in a specific direction.

- The strategy must acknowledge the primary contribution of universities is research and education, which forms the foundation of our service to society.

- The strategy should support Sustainable Development. Complex and wicked challenges require innovative and interdisciplinary approaches to education and research. Social sciences and humanities have important contributions for inclusion and socially sustainable development, and closer links between these disciplines and STEM should be promoted.

- The strategy should assume a human development approach to education, avoiding a market- based approach.

- The strategy should encourage synergies between research, innovation and education, promoting students' participation in research and innovation activities, as well as research- based approaches to teaching and learning.

- The strategy should promote digital teaching and learning, and the development of digital skills and competences.

Fundamental aspects of a European Strategy:

The strategy must underscore institutional autonomy and academic freedom

In addition to being fundamental academic values, academic freedom and institutional autonomy are the foundation for our competitiveness, resilience, and responsiveness to societal developments at global, European, and local levels. The strategy must emphasize the importance of academic freedom and institutional autonomy as drivers of excellence, creativity, and innovation in European higher education.

Furthermore, the strategy should encourage diversity in higher education, allowing for different strengths and priorities among universities and European University alliances. We strongly encourage a visionary and open approach to universities in Europe, emphasizing where we want to go, rather than how to get there. The EU should develop instruments that enables universities' transformative agenda based on a bottom-up initiatives, as opposed to a top-down governance approach steering universities in a specific direction.

High quality research drives our development both in education and innovation, underpinning our role in society. The European strategy should encourage diverse responses to changing needs linked to societal developments, inclusion, and the digital and green transitions. The strategy must acknowledge the primary contribution of universities is research and education, which forms the foundation of our service to society.

The strategy should assume a human development approach to education

Preparing students and learners for life-long learning is an important purpose of higher education. For this reason, it is also important to be attentive to students' and learners' life skills, such self- understanding of learning and the importance of reflection. Of

course, students should be well prepared for employment, but personal development and active participation in a democratic society should be a key dimension in a European strategy. Higher education has an emancipatory function - with critical thinking as a central tool for students' and learners' empowerment.

A market-based approach to education must be avoided, and the provision of education should not be governed by the immediate needs of economic stakeholders. The provision of high-quality research- based education that enables graduates to adapt to rapidly changing societies is a key strength of the European educational system which should be reaffirmed in the Strategy.

The strategy should support Sustainable Development

The UN Sustainable Development Goals are fundamental aspects of the role of universities in research, education, and service to society. Other priorities support sustainable development as they are transversal. Instead of focusing on compartmentalized SDGs, it is important to focus on SDGs in concert to address relations between different dimensions of sustainability as well as tradeoffs and synergies between different SDGs. Enabling interdisciplinary approaches requires addressing, on the one hand, organizational structures within and across universities and, on the other, legislative rigidities which constrain universities' performance.

Sustainability competences, and in particular green and digital skills, are key both for the world of work lives, and in a broader societal context. Complex and wicked challenges require innovative and interdisciplinary approaches to education and research. Social sciences and humanities have important contributions for inclusion and socially sustainable development, and closer links between these disciplines and STEM should be promoted.

The strategy should promote excellence, diversity, and inclusion

Promoting quality and excellence is key for sustainable development. We support a broad approach to excellence which also means inclusion as a possibility to excel. Inclusion is much wider than geographic outreach. Excellence depends on promoting all talents irrespective of background, as well as benefitting from a variety of perspectives and experiences. It means enabling all members of society to contribute to the development of society, with their own knowledge, skills, talents, and competences. Inclusion means being open to heterogeneity and diversity. Also, it means diversity of opinion, being open to disagreement, to exploration and being respectful of good and rational argumentation. In today's increasingly complex and diverse society, it is not 'simply' a moral imperative, it is the only way forward.

For Arqus, inclusion should be framed at the very heart of the mission of universities in Europe. Commitment at the governance level is crucial, insofar as this translates into action, adequately allocated resources, and coherent policies across the institution. The European strategy should promote the development of a culture of inclusion, in an open way that allows universities to promote inclusion based on needs and contexts at the national, regional, and local level.

The strategy should encourage synergies between research, innovation and education

The Arqus alliance of seven longstanding comprehensive research universities supports the ambition to strengthen links between the European Education Area (EEA), the European Research Area (ERA) and the European Higher Education Area. Research of high quality is at the core of our universities, and research drives the development of

our educational offer, innovation, and our societal role. Research-based education and the involvement of students, at all levels, in research and innovation activities are essential for educating critically engaged citizens, and in order to strengthen our response to grand societal challenges.

A particular emphasis of the strategy should be to promote students' participation in research and innovation activities. This is a priority for the Arqus Alliance, and we believe it provides learners with relevant skills and competences for the 21st century, in addition to supporting the future career development of excellent researchers, entrepreneurs, employees and engaged citizens. Equally important, research on quality teaching and learning, and its implementation in overall educational offer should be a priority at European level.

The strategy should promote digital teaching and learning, and the development of digital skills and competences

Contemporary research supports using digital practices for teaching and learning. The pandemic has accelerated the introduction of digital teaching and learning, still there is potential, beyond the pandemic emergency, to further strengthen digital teaching and learning practices as an effective approach to quality in education, complementary to face-to-face interaction.

Experimentation, follow-up research and staff training in new digital teaching methodologies that promote active participation in educational activities is a key priority that should be promoted in the Strategy. This also includes ensuring the accessibility of digital tools and providing a more inclusive study and work environment. Furthermore, it provides an opportunity for a deep culture change, de- privatizing teaching and building learning communities.

Still, digitalisation is broader than using digital tools in teaching and learning. Our society and the labour market are transforming, and new processes, services, and products are continuously being developed. To an increasing extent employees and leaders will need to understand and make decisions based on data and knowledge produced by digital technologies and methods. Students and learners need to understand the technology and methods that digital tools are based on, as well as potential errors, bias and their social, political and legal implications. The European Strategy for Universities should therefore reflect forward-looking digital skills, including artificial intelligence. Digitalisation enables tremendous progress, however, ethical dilemmas also arise around issues such as surveillance, data protection, privacy and security, alienation, discrimination and bias, as well as challenges linked to true and false information. The Strategy needs to address all these aspects, going beyond technology- related disciplines.

The strategy should support the development of common quality standards in support of lifelong learning

Lifelong learning means opening our educational offers beyond traditional student groups, in a flexible and accessible manner. Rapid and fundamental changes affecting the public sector, enterprises, and overall societal developments, have led to an increasing demand for continuous education and lifelong learning. Often, specific needs differ between regions and are therefore very much local to each university. However, quality assurance, standards and guidelines are needed. We would welcome a Strategy that supports the development of common European quality standards that are adapted to the increasing demand for high quality, flexible and accessible lifelong learning, including micro- credentials.

The strategy should underscore the global dimension of higher education and support global cooperation in higher education

Higher Education Institutions need to prepare their graduates for a globalized employment market and multi-ethnic, multicultural, and multilingual living contexts. To fulfil that promise, universities in Europe need to reach out to their partners worldwide to mutually benefit from respective strengths.

Universities need to ensure that curricula are truly global in content, in perspective, and in approach. The strategy should reinforce European values and educate critical and engaged citizens who will be responsible for the future of the planet. Grand societal challenges are global in nature and necessitate a global understanding and approach, involving global actors.

EU programmes, including Erasmus+ and Horizon Europe, need to be open to participation of global partners, reflecting the central role of mobility for learning and promoting cooperation with global partners. Facilitating cooperation with neighbouring and developed regions is key, but global cooperation also including the Global South, is of high importance; through long-term multilateral cooperation, on the basis of mutual trust, respect and priorities, European universities are key actors for development cooperation and capacity building. We would welcome more attention to Latin America, a region with considerable potential which is currently not prioritized in European research and innovation cooperation.

Final remarks

The Arqus Alliance welcomes a Strategy for universities in Europe. We will continue to share our experiences both as individual institutions and as an alliance and remain ready to contribute to the further development of the Strategy, and its future implementation.