

## **The New European Innovation Agenda must strengthen the capacities of universities in driving social, cultural and economic innovation**

**On 5 July 2022, the European Commission published a communication on a New European Innovation Agenda. The agenda articulates a number of priorities. The proposed actions will nevertheless need to target all types of innovation and leverage the roles of all ecosystem actors, including universities, to improve Europe’s strategic autonomy, and foster its capacities to address present and future societal challenges.**

In April 2022, the European Commission highlighted the need for an “overarching innovation agenda that articulates all aspects in a way that allows for efficient implementation and maximum impact on strategic objectives”<sup>1</sup>. However, the New European Innovation Agenda published on 5 July 2022<sup>2</sup> puts emphasis on deep tech instead of embracing all types of innovation (including social innovation). Also, by focusing on scale-ups and investors, it neglects the crucial role of some actors, including universities, in the emergence, development and sustained competitiveness of innovation ecosystems. This is particularly important for lower-performing EU member states and regions. Building a strong science base has proven to be a key element for successful regions, and their ability to develop a strong innovation ecosystem. Structural funds, especially the European Regional Development Fund, have played an important role in supporting EU-13 economies but have recently also adopted a narrow focus on innovation activities, granting funding for universities only where they serve the needs of the industry.

The Guild acknowledges the relevance and importance of the five pillars of the European Innovation Agenda. However, for the success of the New European Innovation Agenda it is of crucial importance that it does not disconnect innovation from research (including fundamental research) and that it helps universities to unleash their multi-faceted potential to support and strengthen innovation ecosystems.

Universities play multiple roles in innovation ecosystems: they are powerhouses of talent, knowledge and innovation, and act as facilitators in innovation ecosystems. Their core mission is to nurture talents by providing the cutting-edge skills and capacities that innovation requires. The New European Innovation Agenda puts emphasis on training future entrepreneurs and providing students with the skills that industries in local and regional ecosystems immediately need. While we recognise the importance of entrepreneurship education at universities, we emphasise that innovation requires a wider range of skills, not only entrepreneurial skills and technology/digital competences, and that these

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Have your say on the development of the New European Innovation Agenda’ published on 22 April 2022: [https://ec.europa.eu/info/news/have-your-say-development-new-european-innovation-agenda-2022-apr-22\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/news/have-your-say-development-new-european-innovation-agenda-2022-apr-22_en)

<sup>2</sup> European Commission (2022). A New European Innovation Agenda. Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, COM(2022) 332 final.

skills should be future-proof. This requires focusing also on study programmes which aim to foster “a mindset-creativity-problem-solving attitude”<sup>3</sup>.

The Guild supports the emphasis of the New European Innovation Agenda also on innovation ecosystems. The European Commission observes that universities may need support to further engage in their local and regional innovation ecosystems. It nevertheless puts forward actions in which the roles of universities are not clear and which appear to overlook the critical importance of their Technology Transfer Offices (TTOs) in strengthening research-industry collaboration. Therefore, The Guild recommends follow-up actions that will aim explicitly to strengthen universities in their core missions on which innovation ecosystems depend. For instance, the New European Innovation Agenda must ensure that the appropriate framework conditions are in place to maximise the exploitation of research outcomes. The Guild urges also the European Commission to help strengthen knowledge valorisation and support capacity building of universities’ TTOs<sup>4</sup> to ensure that they play their role at the interface between academic and non-academic actors in ecosystems.

Universities are not mere suppliers of knowledge and talents. They also provide services to other actors in their ecosystems to support their innovation efforts. The New European Innovation Agenda highlights the need to develop testing labs and regulatory sandboxes. Universities can provide these safe environments to further develop new technologies and ensure that they comply with the regulatory framework in place and pose no threat to individuals, their fundamental rights and our society’s values.

Presenting the New European Innovation Agenda on 5 July 2022, Commissioner Gabriel said that one of the main assets of Europe is its scientific excellence. We welcome this recognition of research as the bedrock of innovation. It is now important to ensure universities are more clearly supported in the 25 actions put forward. The role of universities should not be limited to providing entrepreneurship education and deep-tech skills. The new agenda must involve universities to ensure that innovations across all areas of culture, society and the economy have the knowledge base they require to emerge, grow and develop.

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<sup>3</sup> Angouri, J. (2021). Reimagining Research-led Education in a Digital Age (The Guild Insight Paper No. 3). The Guild of European Research-Intensive Universities and Bern Open Publishing. DOI: [10.48350/156297](https://doi.org/10.48350/156297).

<sup>4</sup> The Guild (202). Proposals of The Guild for the EU Guiding Principles for Knowledge Valorisation. [https://www.the-guild.eu/publications/statements/the-guild-statement\\_guiding-principles-knowledge-valorisation\\_221021.pdf](https://www.the-guild.eu/publications/statements/the-guild-statement_guiding-principles-knowledge-valorisation_221021.pdf)