The Guild's response to the European strategy for universities

On 18 January the European Commission presented the [European strategy for universities](#) as a way to articulate a transformative vision for the higher education sector. The Guild welcomes the strategy as a framework which recognizes the rich potential and contribution of Europe's universities to our society through research, education and innovation. We wish to thank Commissioner Gabriel and Vice-President Schinas for their constructive consultations with the sector and acknowledging many of the views expressed by [The Guild's presidents](#).

Although there is much to welcome – the articulation of funding needs for universities, respect for academic freedom and university autonomy, diversity and inclusion targets, or the importance of global excellence – there is a genuine question whether the strategy is visionary enough. And how well it captures the research and innovation dimension which is discussed in the framework of the European Research Area.

The institutional transformation is presented on the basis of two premises: 1) universities can better solve big societal challenges through effective **transnational collaboration**, and 2) the principle of **inclusive excellence** across all four missions of universities makes the EU's approach distinct compared to other parts of the world.

A distinctly **European approach to higher education and research** is showcased through four concrete initiatives – the expansion from 41 to 60 European Universities, piloting the joint European degree, testing a possible legal statute for alliances of universities, and advancing the European Student Card initiative. As one of the first steps, and inspired by the European Universities alliances, the Commission's Proposal for a [Council Recommendation on building bridges for effective European higher education cooperation](#) offers a new momentum for Member States to take action through legislation, policy and funding. However, the strategy lacks concrete actions to boost bottom-up research excellence. It contains only a brief mention of the upcoming European Excellence initiative which should "raise excellence in science and in knowledge valorisation of Europe's universities and improve global competitiveness of European Universities."

The objective to support universities as **lighthouses of our European way of life** includes a number of guidelines and frameworks to promote attractive careers in higher education, pedagogical innovation, gender equality or academic values. In this regard, there is surely a role for universities to first examine critically what we might understand as "the" European way of life.

The strategy invites universities to lead the paradigm shift towards the **green and digital transition**. Here, we would strongly urge the EU to support contributions from all subject domains, including the social science and humanities. Also, universities' commitment to these transversal challenges comes from within and goes beyond short-term policy cycles. Therefore, we need trust-based funding and quality assurance systems that encourage risk-taking.

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The strategy should focus on strengthening universities at a **global level**, notably their capacity for world-leading research and education. For this, we need a much richer discussion about how the EU can help universities improve their capacities for research across Europe. This should go beyond the European Universities and start with a particular vision for excellent science collaboration within Europe, beyond the boundaries of the EU. The strategy emphasizes the importance of developing equitable partnerships in other regions of the world and recognizes the key role of universities in strengthening cooperation on research and innovation. In light of the importance of a global vision, it is particularly regrettable that it does not introduce any new initiatives to support Europe's global leadership.

Any strategy is defined by its aspirations, as well as its concrete implementation. We look forward to engaging with the Member States and the European Commission to ensure that the strategy and the Commission's proposal for enhanced collaboration can strengthen Europe's universities meaningfully and sustainably.

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