European Education Area – European Research Area

Lead authors: Pim de Boer, Richard Harvey, Hussein Kassim, Kees Kouwenaar

Info@aurora-network.global;
kees.kouwenaar@aurora-network.global
(+31 6 5111 9635)

Summary

1.   Introduction:

In this document, the Aurora Universities Network presents its views on the development of the European Education Area, in connection with the development of the European Research Area.

Our guiding concern is what is good for Europe beyond the European Union (EU), focusing on challenges and perspectives and supporting the development of a European vision and the role of education and research. We outline the contribution that the European Education Area (EEA) and European Research Area (ERA) can make to the six priorities of the European Commission – the Green Deal, an economy that works for people, fitness for the digital age, the European way of life, a strong Europe in the world, and a democratic Europe[1].

The COVID-19 pandemic has already led to major disruption in education and R&I. While the effects are likely to be felt for many years to come, there is still considerable uncertainty about the form that the new normal will take.

We take three perspectives:

- Our view on the EEA and the ERA.
- Our view on the contribution that Higher Education & Research institutions and systems can make to this EEA and ERA.
- Our view on the role and contribution of Aurora as a group of societally-engaged and research-intensive Universities.

This paper has been endorsed by the General Council of Aurora and by its committees of vice rectors education and vice rectors research.

1.1   European priorities:

Skilling and training, education at all levels, and research and innovation, are essential to the six priorities that will guide European Union (EU) action until 2024[1]. Education is key to sustainable development, a climate-neutral and green Europe, a fair transition, protecting cultural heritage, tackling disease and political polarisation. It is essential to working with digital solutions and other technological and product advancements. It is necessary to foster security, a resilient society, reduce inequalities, and challenge misleading or false information. Previous and current global situations dealing with e.g. zoonoses demand resilience to situations like the COVID-19 pandemic and tackling global challenges. This requires collaboration between the education, research and innovation areas. Education should be inclusive, take account of diversity and culture, and put people at the centre. The development of knowledge, skills, competences and critical thinking from basic skills to high-level qualifications at all levels of education and training will increase the number of good-quality jobs[2,3].

1.2   EEA and ERA

Education includes primary school, vocational education, higher education, skills & training, lifelong learning[2]. We believe that the EEA should be underpinned by lifelong learning[4]. As well as a source of individual enrichment and growth, education is a key driver for job creation, converging economic growth, improved social cohesion and sensing the European identity[2,4]. In the view of the European Commission, education should involve study and learning abroad, multilingualism, access to high-quality education, and awareness of European cultural

heritage. The EEA should enable citizens to benefit from the best education, training and skilling, and to find good-quality employment across Europe. Its ambition is to develop key competences for lifelong learning, to adopt digital skills and common values, and to benefit from an inclusive education. It recommends actions on early childhood education and care, mutual recognition of diplomas and learning periods abroad, as well as improved teaching and learning of languages. Appropriate funding would be provided by programmes such as Erasmus+, ESF+, Digital Europe and Horizon Europe, and supported by initiatives such as European Universities and the European student card, which would not only strengthen the EEA, but reinforce synergies with research and innovation.

In the research domain, the ERA, which is open to the world based on the internal EU market, makes possible the free circulation of researchers, scientific knowledge and technology. Its aim is to create more effective national research systems, transnational cooperation and competition, to establish research infrastructures, and to bring about an open labour market for researchers. Gender equality and mainstreaming in research, international cooperation, knowledge transfer and use (open innovation), and open access to data and results (open science) will bring the EEA and ERA closer together[5,6].

However, national barriers remain both in the ERA and EEA, as well as to the integration of EEA and ERA, that prevent an open European exchange in education. Differences in priority assigned to education and research are also an issue. These questions are at the centre of on-going discussion on widening access, the level of expenditure committed to education and research and innovation (R&I), closing the salary gap between researchers in the EU, full acceptance of citizen science and engaging citizens in R&I, and the openness of ERA and EEA to the world[7].

1.3   The role of the SDGs as a lead thread

The United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have rapidly become the lens through which the role of higher education institutes' research, teaching and operational activity in tackling societal challenges is viewed. In general, the SDGs are largely an 'agreed' framework in the context of social impact and a sustainable future.

In the past two years the SDGs established a prominence in educational discourse as viewed via e.g. The Times Higher Education's 'Impact' Ranking. Meanwhile the SDG Accord with Aurora as an Endorsing Partner Network, reports annually to the United Nations on the aggregated sustainability impact of the sector. The simplicity of the SDG framework belies the complexity of the inter-connected societal challenges it covers.

Aurora's ambition is to be a global exemplar in embedding sustainability at the heart of its collective and individual missions, with the SDGs as a central pillar of the network's societal impact focus. In the higher education sector the main area of disagreement seems to be the best way of gauging impact against SDGs. This should not outweigh climate change over all societal challenges. A long-term education or research strategy can have the SDGs mapped against it. SDGs have utility across the educational spectrum and can be used at any level, from primary and pre-school to post-graduate. They can be used as the basis for engaging younger people with concepts such as social justice and environmental protection, but are adaptable enough to permit the world's research-intensive institutions to use them in articulating their advanced research, inter-disciplinary collaborations, and their networked approaches to addressing those same societal challenges. The COVID-19 pandemic must not distract us from the SDGs as an interconnected framework of societal challenges and goals.

Rather, it is an opportunity to make changes that were hitherto seen as too difficult or even impossible.

2.   The EEA and ERA

A number of issues relevant to EEA and ERA and their interconnection are highlighted below, each leading to a *concluding Aurora position*.

2.1   role of knowledge for society and innovation:

Both education and research contribute to Europe's external competitiveness and internal prosperity.

Both education and research require a European dimension to complement national, regional and local action, nature, values, standards, and quality

Education and research are mutually reinforcing: research and innovation are driven by education, training, skilling, research, innovation, and societal relevance, while education, training and skilling are key to research, and innovation

Higher education and research (HER) institutions form a small part of the EEA and ERA, but link both EEA, ERA and all participants.

EEA and ERA need to develop and strengthen European identity, values, standards of education and research to complement existing identities, values and standards.

Robust knowledge acquired through sound scholarly methods is key to individual and social well-being and prosperity. But knowledge cannot exist without doubt or scepticism -- the stimulus to discover new knowledge.

The creation and application of knowledge requires depends on education at all levels and of types, as well as research and innovation. And the (societal) need for novel solutions requires education, skilling and training for further development and use to achieve societal impact. Hence, the EEA and the ERA are mutually dependent.

University education should impart all students with a basic understanding of different approaches to research (knowledge creation) in different scholarly traditions (disciplinary or otherwise) and form an opinion on their relative value.

EEA and ERA need to defend and promote knowledge that is methodologically robust with a culture that promotes doubt and willingness to challenge assumed truths.

The dimensions of knowledge can be viewed as a triangle:

- Creation of new knowledge: research
- Development of people who create and apply knowledge: education
- Application of knowledge to create social value: service to society.

But the knowledge triangle is not value-neutral. Whether funded by state or market, it contributes to the public and common good. As the COVID-19 crisis has taught us, this feature is fundamental. The natural sciences, technology, engineering, mathematics (STEM) and (bio)medical sciences need to work together with social sciences and humanities (SSH) to support the public good.

EEA and ERA need to foster all dimensions of knowledge.

The knowledge triangle must address the major challenges facing European societies today and tomorrow: the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The SDGs are a system of interconnected challenges. As an example, SDG 13 on climate action and SDG 6 on clean water calls for a different mindset and behaviour towards green, climate-neutral and non-polluting products and activities based on education, training and skilling from children to the elderly. Democratic principles, societal acceptance of diversity, and inclusiveness are necessary for the delivery of SDG 10 on reduced inequalities and SDG4 on quality of education. The role of social sciences and humanities is essential. Interdisciplinary, transdisciplinary and intersectoral collaboration is needed if research and education are to be social responsive, shift behaviour and mindset, develop advanced technologies and achieving the sustainable development goals.

EEA and ERA need to direct creation of knowledge, formation of knowledge bearers and enhancement of knowledge application towards the SDGs as a system of interconnected challenges.

Europe is rich in the diversity of its peoples, regions and localities, and in its HEI&R institutions. A key challenge is to celebrate difference, while fostering creative interactions between different actors.

The EEA and ERA need to create a knowledge system in which subject-related knowledge and skills are accompanied by academic, personal and linguistic competences that enable citizens to develop knowledge and skills.

EEA and ERA need to embrace, celebrate and complement national, regional and local values.

Strengthening the EEA and ERA must be joint projects of European and national public authorities and institutions in meeting the needs of citizens.

If the EEA-ERA project is perceived as a top-down project of "Europe" – as distinct from stakeholders at national level – it will fuel opposition and will strengthen populist tendencies rather than engage and counter them. And if as an "European" and therefore external endeavour, it does not succeed, it will be added to the list of "European failures".

EEA and ERA need to be developed at national and institutional levels – and supported by champions at all these levels.

3. Role of higher education and research in EEA and ERA

Here, we consider the Commission's vision for the EEA and articulate where the Aurora network has a different aim or emphasis.[2,4]

3.1 What should the contribution of HER institutions be to the EEA?

-   Study/learning abroad as the norm:
    Rather: opportunities to study/learn abroad are available to all students and learners.
    Better: a meaningful international experience as a component of all study and

learning paths. Europe needs to have a young adult population that understands and embraces the value of international and intercultural differences or it shall fail. The COVID-19 pandemic reinforces the need to focus on meaningful international experience over physical international mobility.

- Qualifications recognised across the EU:
  Rather: acceptance of (subject-specific, general academic, personal) competences for the purpose of work, study and civil life regardless of the place where or the mode through which these competences were acquired

We fully embrace the aims relating to the following:

- Plurilingualism, or the use of more than one language to express oneself
- Access and success for all, which accords with the Aurora Vision & Mission
- European Identity and Diversity, which is *why we argue for a refined articulation of the Study/learning Abroad and Recognition dimensions of the EEA vision.*
- Life-long learning (LLL), though this does not imply that all *primary schools, secondary schools and need to be active in LLL. LLL is more a mindset than a formal process of "taking courses and getting certificates". Some people may follow lots of LLL courses and learn no more than the superficial new knowledge and technical skills; others may hardly ever take an LLL course and continue deep learning every day. Hence, we need to find a balance between learning by heart and learning by doing. To help people to becoming 'always learning human beings' is the core challenge of LLL.*
- European Education Policy cooperation, which *needs to include societal stakeholders as well as public authorities at EU and national levels, HEIs, and students, and to foster collaboration between platforms at all levels and providers of all types of education.*
- European Universities and European Student Card should become priorities, marking key steps towards the realisation of wider *elements of the EEA vision.*

3.2   What should the contribution of HER institutions be to the ERA?

Education has a key role to play in the future of ERA, especially the higher education sector. The approach should foster cooperation between education, research & innovation policies and instruments (notably EHEA, Erasmus+, European Universities, Horizon Europe and EIT as building blocks). Research-intensive universities have a unique role to play within higher education because of the inseparable connection they have established between teaching and research.

ERA should position R&I as important enabler of sustainable solutions for societal and global challenges and needs, improving well-being of all, improve circulation of researchers, knowledge and technologies, and reduce the brain drain. ERA should also support fundamental "blue sky" research.

The new ERA should focus on: i) seizing opportunities in addition to overcoming barriers; ii) addressing transformative changes; iii) broader societal engagement and increased social responsiveness; iv) optimising the attractiveness of research careers across European countries; and v) research-based knowledge-driven sustainable growth leadership rather than global competitiveness[6]. These actions call for the development of a dynamic knowledge circle based on the principles of Open Science, the co-design of R&I, ensuring the diversity of Europe's R&I systems, and establishing a novel R&I driven sustainable growth and development model. They require breaking down barriers for research careers, facilitating mobility across European countries and making recognition, reward and social security systems interchangeable.

The European Universities initiative funded under the Erasmus+ programme enables students to obtain a degree by combining studies in several EU countries, and focuses on a joint strategy for education with links to R&I and society. In addition, they form knowledge-creating teams that address societal challenges in a multidisciplinary way in collaboration with other sectors including citizens. The European Commission encourages the R&I dimension in these networks and sees these European Universities working in synergy with education. The aim is to increase the quality, international competitiveness and attractiveness of European higher education. To realise these goals, the Council of the European Union wants to have a limited number of higher education networks by 2024.

The current two pilots for European Universities will cover about 290 higher education institutes out of some 3,000 higher education institutions in 37 countries of Europe[8]. However, the whole European higher education sector should benefit from the enhanced quality and visibility initiated by the European Universities programme.

4. How can Aurora universities contribute to the EEA and ERA

Research intensive universities cherish institutional autonomy and academics cherish academic freedom. In Aurora, we believe that these values do not confer a privilege of freedom from external influence or pressure. Rather, they are to be understood in the sense that universities and academic research, education and innovation are subject to a multitude of external influences and pressures and that a balance is required between these external influences and internal drivers.

Views on what is to be taught, researched and innovated in universities comes from national and regional governments, European institutions, the corporate sector, civil society, citizen organisations, and the media. We believe that is a good thing.

Universities and academics must accept that they will be held accountable for the choices they make, for the ways in which they are influenced by these external pressures, as well as by their own convictions and drivers.

Universities and academics must reject the claims of any external force to precedence or a monopoly of influence, or an expectation of blind obedience from the academic world.

Aurora universities agree with other research-intensive universities that sufficient budgetary resources should be provided to support excellent science and education, but also believe that funding is necessary to enable them to address societal and global challenges, and to involve as well EU countries with less well elaborated R&I and education systems (widening).

Aurora universities will contribute to the EEA and ERA by matching academic excellence with societal relevance in education, research and outreach to society, which is core to their vision. In particular, we will define learning outcomes for general academic and personal skills, as well as a philosophy of learning, which enables our students to address major societal challenges as social entrepreneurs and innovators.
Hence, we aim to contribute to a harmonious and prosperous Europe through their focus on inclusion and diversity, making their student and staff population a true reflection of the talent in their societies and offering all students and staff real opportunities to obtain meaningful international experience.

5.   Recommendations

Aurora has five overall recommendations for excellent research-rich universities:

1. The EEA and ERA are not just there for EU institutions and services: all higher education and research institutions as well as governments in Europe need to own these strategies. The European Commission should ensure that stakeholders are meaningfully involved in establishing the EEA and ERA.
2. SDGs must be the guiding themes and compass for both EEA and ERA.
3. Europe is larger than the EU. The higher education and research institutions collaborate beyond the EU. Hence, the EEA and ERA should also reach out to the whole of Europe.
4. Aurora Universities Network supports the European Parliament position that the budget for the Erasmus+ programme should be tripled as compared to the 2014-2020 budget in order to achieve all goals set out in the Council's resolution[2] and ERAC advice[7] for a new EEA. However, the budget increase should not be focused on Youth and Sports alone.

   In addition, Aurora Universities Network emphasises that to fulfil all ambitions the budget for Horizon Europe should amount to at least 120 billion euro[9].
5. In order to achieve an effectively integrated EEA and ERA both DG EAC and DG RTD should work closely together rather than in isolation from each other.

6.   Literature:

1. U. von der Leyen (2019). A Union that strives for more. My agenda for Europe. Political guidelines for the next European Commission 2019-2024. Brussels. Weblink (verified 200421): https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/political-guidelines-next-commission_en.pdf
2. Council of the EU (2019). Resolution on further developing the European Education Area to support future-oriented education and training systems. Brussels. Weblink (verified 200408): https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-13298-2019-INIT/en/pdf
3. European Commission (2020). A strong social Europe for Just Transitions. COM(2020) 14 final. Brussels. Weblink (verified 200415): https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/api/files/attachment/860460/Strong_Social_Europe_Communication_and_Annex.pdf.pdf
4. European Commission (2018). A New European Agenda for Culture. COM(2018) 267 final. Brussels. Weblink (verified 200408): https://ec.europa.eu/culture/sites/culture/files/commission_communication_-_a_new_european_agenda_for_culture_2018.pdf
5. Council of the EU (2019). The European Research Area: advancing together the Europe of research and innovation. Brussels. Weblink (verified 200422): https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-6588-2019-INIT/en/pdf
6. European Research Area and Innovation Committee (2020). Opinion of the ERAC Standing Working Group on Open Science and Innovation (SWG OSI) on future Open Science and Open Innovation priorities in the European Research Area (2020-2030). Brussels. Weblink (verified 200422): https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-1203-2020-INIT/en/pdf
7. EUA (2020). European Research Area: How to mobilise research-based knowledge for a better and more sustainable future. Position. Brussels. Weblink (verified 200428): https://eua.eu/resources/publications/917:european-research-area-how-to-mobilise-research-based-knowledge-for-a-better-and-more-sustainable-future.html
8. European Tertiary Education Register. Weblink (verified 200428): https://www.eter-project.com/#/info/about.
9. EUA (2019). Horizon Europe: EUA presents "Seize our common future" call to European Commission. Weblink (verified 200519): https://mailchi.mp/8d117eeb1581/euinvestinknowledge.