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For bold, value-driven investments in Education, Research and Innovation

Input from the Coimbra Group on the EU's next MFF 2028-2034

Preamble:

The Coimbra Group (CG) welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback on the European Union's next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) during this development phase. We highly appreciate the chance, in these challenging times, to engage in this important process and contribute to shaping the EU's post-2027 long-term budget.

To gather insights and experiences and elaborate our network's position, the 39 CG universities, all long-established research-intensive leading European higher education institutions, located in 22 countries, were consulted. Our contribution focuses mostly on the consultations on the EU funding for competitiveness (1) and the EU funding for cross-border education, training, and solidarity; youth, media, culture, and creative sectors; values, and civil society (2) – with a particular emphasis on our views for the future Erasmus+ programme and EU's framework programme for research and innovation (R&I).

The first section presents a set of considerations and recommendations, followed by concrete feedback on:

- Strengthening European competitiveness through bold investment in Research and Innovation
- Developing European values through Education and Mobility
- CG Universities' overall experience with EU funding

We believe our responses provide a comprehensive understanding of the challenges and opportunities identified by the university sector for the next MFF. We look forward to continuing collaborating actively with the European Commission and other EU institutions on this important work.



I. Considerations and Recommendations:

- EU funding programmes are **essential** for our universities, bringing a wide range of **benefits**.
- However current programmes remain largely underfunded. Coimbra Group calls for **significantly strengthened budgets** for the next generation of both Erasmus+ and the EU R&I framework programme.
- We would like to recall Coimbra Group's recent political statement on the next MFF: "Building a Europe based on the pillars of Education, Research and Innovation" (25 February 2025): <https://www.coimbra-group.eu/cg-statement-on-mff-2028-2034>.
- It is important to **ensure that Universities have a clear role in European skills and competitiveness policies**.
- Coimbra Group advocates for Europe's competitiveness in a broader and more sustainable sense than what is often reflected in current EU narrative. While economic performance, technological leadership, and innovation outputs are crucial, from the University's perspective, competitiveness also depends on the long-term investment in human capital, scientific excellence without immediate commercial pressure, and the capacity to enhance interdisciplinary solutions to societal challenges. We would also like to caution against an overly instrumental approach to education in discussions of competitiveness.
- It is crucial to take into account, in the design of the future MFF, that there is an **intricate and inseparable link between research and education** which should be actively improved, notably through efficient bridges between the different funding instruments at EU, national and regional levels.
- **Growing constraints on national budgets** create serious challenges for Universities in the areas of education, training, research and innovation.
- Key improvements for 2028-2034 should focus on improving **simplification and flexibility**.
- Coimbra Group calls for the rapid association of the **United Kingdom and Switzerland** to the next EU funding programmes for education, research and innovation.



On Competitiveness:

- Investing in education and research is a **long-term economic and social investment**, not a cost.
- It is essential to maintain a **stand-alone EU R&I Framework Programme** (FP) in the next MFF.
 - A “one-size-fits-all” system may weaken Europe’s diverse academic and research landscape.
- Regarding the future R&I framework programme (“FP10”):
 - this new programme should ensure a **balanced approach to funding basic research, applied research, and innovation**, and provide adequate support across the entire R&I landscape from curiosity-driven to challenge-driven research and innovation.
 - **Scientific excellence and open competition** should be the guiding principles of FP10.
 - We support a **renewed focus on democratic values, academic freedom, ethics, gender equality, and diversity**. Social Sciences, Humanities and Arts (SSHA) and legal research play a critical role in understanding and addressing both societal and technological challenges and should be well integrated into all challenge-driven elements.
 - To ensure substantial, attractive funding and more reasonable success rates for applicants, it is essential that the **budgets for the ERC and the EIC are increased**.
 - **The ERC and the EIC should have a clear mandate, independence and agility** in governance and operations to maintain the highest standards.
- Funding for **pre-competitive collaborative research** (TRL 2-4) is important for universities. We recommend the **introduction of Research Actions** (RA) to complement the existing Research and Innovation Actions (RIA) and Innovation Actions (IA) instruments.
- **Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions must be reinforced**. See for reference our joint statement with other organisations “We need much more MSCA!” (October 2024): https://www.coimbra-group.eu/wp-content/uploads/Joint_Statement-We_need_much_more_MSCA.pdf
- The scale of the EU’s research ambitions is not matched by the available budget. **Ensuring that EU research funding is both adequately financed and ringfenced** is key to maintaining excellence and global competitiveness.
- The current landscape of EU research, innovation, education, and digitalisation funding programmes remains too fragmented for Universities.
 - Greater harmonisation of rules and the encouragement of **integrated funding schemes** that combine research, education, and innovation in a single framework would significantly enhance clarity and strategic planning for applicants.



- Navigating EU funding schemes remains overly complex:
 - Simplifying procedures, stabilising programmes' rules, and trusting beneficiaries through **more outcome-focused rather than process-focused auditing** could help maximise the time and resources dedicated to actual research.
 - Evaluation processes are generally robust and transparent. Improving evaluators' training, providing more detailed feedback, and embedding clear support for bold, transformative research could help Europe remain at the scientific frontier.
- The **lack of coordination between EU member states and varying national regulations** creates obstacles to cross-border collaboration. Streamlining regulations and enhancing communication between member states would improve EU funding efficiency.
- The **complementarity of different disciplines, and inter-, trans- and multi-disciplinarity**, are essential conditions and a driving force to strengthen all kinds of competitiveness - beyond the technological dimension. EU programmes that would support and encourage long-term, interdisciplinary collaboration between higher education institutions, industry and regional stakeholders, would maximise the impact of EU funding on EU competitiveness.

On Education and Mobility:

- It is necessary to maintain a **stand-alone Erasmus+ programme** in the next MFF.
 - Erasmus+ is the flagship EU mobility programme, fostering European cohesion and intercultural understanding, as well as a cornerstone of educational innovation across and beyond Europe.
 - It is however crucial to **expand flexibility in funds' transfers between regions**, especially for KA171 mobility projects involving third countries associated with the Erasmus+ programme.
 - Erasmus+ is still mostly intra-European. **Collaboration with non-EU countries** should be further supported and made less bureaucratic.
 - Erasmus+ should maintain successful elements like Jean Monnet, Erasmus Mundus scholarships, and the division into Key Actions, but allow for **more strategic flexibility**, especially in Key Action 2.
 - Erasmus+ becomes increasingly complex and administratively burdensome, which can discourage participation. Coimbra Group therefore encourages efforts to **simplify the programme** further, both in the application and management phases of the actions.
 - **Merging various actions and sub-actions should be considered**, in co-creation with the stakeholders.



- Limiting the application forms for smaller actions (e.g., less than 1 million euros) to 10 pages should be considered.
- While each EU programme should retain its specific mission, objectives, and dedicated budget, the EU could significantly reduce the administrative burden by **harmonising application and reporting procedures across programmes** through a common interface or streamlined framework.
- Coimbra Group recommends addressing the **inconsistency in instructions by the European Commission and the Erasmus+ National Agencies**, which can create confusion and increase the administrative burden.
- **European University Alliances** should to a higher extent be able to choose their own paths for reaching the overall objectives of cooperation and quality in higher education.
- Reducing the focus on deliverables and project results in favour of a **more strategic and visionary approach**, based on priorities defined by the European University Alliances, would better serve the overall objectives of the **European Universities Initiative**.
- **Research-based education is crucial for enabling society to benefit from research and innovation.** Continuing education that is also research-based ensures that employees and the labour market can apply up-to-date knowledge in their activities.
- Coimbra Group calls for the association of **Switzerland** to the next Erasmus+ since inception of the new programme.
- We also call for policy makers on both sides of the Channel to be creative in finding ways to include the **United Kingdom** in the next Erasmus+ since inception of the new programme through full or partial association.



II. Strengthening European competitiveness through bold investment in Research and Innovation

The EU's competitive position on the global stage is heavily reliant on the strength of its educational and research systems. To remain at the forefront of global innovation, it is essential that funding mechanisms align with the strategic priorities of both Europe's long-term economic goals and its commitment to democratic values.

Investing in education and research must be seen not as a cost, but as a long-term economic and social investment that underpins Europe's future competitiveness and cohesion. **It is therefore essential to maintain a stand-alone FP in the next MFF, avoiding a "one-size-fits-all" model** that risks undermining the richness and diversity of Europe's academic and research landscapes.

The outcome of research does sometimes, but not always, produce immediate innovation. Although we must be flexible with the current priorities, **we must not forget to keep a long-term view of research, providing financial conditions, academic freedom and room to take risks.** To this end, the **funding of the ERC and of the EIC should be increased**, while **both organisations should keep a clear mandate, independence** and agility in governance and operations to maintain the highest standards

One area where impact could be amplified is the creation of **more agile, medium-scale funding schemes** that sit between small collaborative projects and large Horizon Europe consortia, with fewer country-specific participation regulations.

In the current geopolitical re-adjustment of powers and alliances it is important that the EU in its cooperation at all levels focuses on its inherent **values, strengths, talent pool and innovation capacity**, and does not 'fall into the trap of trend-chasing'. For example, the merging of civil research and defence research programmes in a possible future new structure would pose challenges to universities, especially the ones who have exclusively committed to civilian research.

Europe must invest in the R&I ecosystems that will define the Union's future growth. However the current EU budget allocation for R&I, though substantial, is facing several challenges that limit its potential. **Fragmented funding streams, bureaucratic complexities, and a lack of flexibility in fund allocation hinder institutions from fully leveraging EU resources.**

A key issue is the fragmentation of funding sources, such as Horizon Europe, Erasmus+, and various national funding streams. Universities and research institutions often struggle to navigate the complexities of these programmes. This situation leads to inefficiencies and missed opportunities for mutually benefitting synergies between education and research. To overcome this, the EU must consolidate funding programmes, creating a



more coherent and user-friendly framework. While each EU programme should retain its specific mission, objectives, and dedicated budget, such as a stand-alone FP10, the EU could significantly reduce the administrative burden by harmonising application and reporting procedures across programmes through a common interface or streamlined framework.

Moreover, there is an increasing need for **flexible funding models** that can adapt to emerging priorities hitting beneficiaries. Universities must be able to reallocate resources as new challenges or technological developments arise. Currently, rigid funding criteria often prevent institutions from responding quickly to unexpected needs. Introducing more adaptable models would make the funding system more responsive and ensure that resources are used where they can have the most significant impact.

Another significant concern is the **sustainability of projects** once EU funding ends. Many innovative initiatives face a discontinuity once their initial funding period concludes, stalling progress and undermining long-term success. **The EU should consider mechanisms that promote post-funding support, such as seed funding or co-funding models that bridge the gap between the end of one funding cycle and the beginning of the next.** These measures would encourage institutions to develop projects with long-term sustainability plans from the outset, ensuring that successful initiatives continue to thrive even after EU funding runs out.

Lastly, institutions must be empowered to build institutional capacity. Research support offices, talent management strategies, and the professional development of research managers are fundamental to the long-term success of projects. Investing in the internal infrastructure of universities will enhance the effectiveness of EU funding and strengthen the foundation for future R&I.

In February 2023, CG submitted a [position paper](https://www.coimbra-group.eu/wp-content/uploads/Coimbra-Group-Position-Paper-23Feb.pdf) in reply to the European Commission public consultation on the 'Past, present and future of the European Research & Innovation Framework programmes 2014-2027' which **recommendations are still fully valid and must also be taken into account under this consultation:** <https://www.coimbra-group.eu/wp-content/uploads/Coimbra-Group-Position-Paper-23Feb.pdf>

Furthermore, CG launched, together with several other leading European R&I organisations, the **#ResearchMatters** campaign (<https://research-matters.eu>) which calls for:

- Increased funding for R&D and over 3% of GDP in EU and all European countries.
- Doubling the budget for the EU's next research and innovation programme.
- Protecting the latter by ring-fencing it.



III. Developing European values through Education and Mobility

Education and mobility are central to the EU's vision of fostering a more cohesive, inclusive, and democratic Europe. Programmes like Erasmus+ have played a pivotal role in connecting students and universities across borders, fostering cultural exchange and mutual understanding. However, challenges remain in ensuring that these programmes reach all students, particularly those from marginalised or underrepresented backgrounds.

Erasmus+ in particular would benefit from increased flexibility in funds allocation. The flexibility introduced in the 2021-2027 period - allowing universities to allocate up to 20% of Erasmus+ funding for outgoing mobilities - has proven beneficial, especially for projects involving third countries associated with the programme. Further flexibility, such as the ability to transfer funds between regions or mobility activities, **especially in KA171 mobility projects involving third countries**, would enhance the capacity for cross-border exchanges, making mobility projects more sustainable and better aligned with the needs of both students and institutions.

Despite its positive points, Erasmus+ remains increasingly burdensome. **There is a need to simplify the programme further, both in the application and management phases of the actions.** Merging various actions and sub-actions should be considered, in a co-creation process with stakeholders, as well as limiting the application forms for smaller actions (e.g., less than € 1Mm to 10 pages. By standardising documentation requirements, and creating a more transparent, streamlined platform for funding opportunities, the EU can reduce the administrative burden and allow institutions to focus more on the substance of their projects.

Moreover, the EU's educational funding structures are often fragmented, with overlapping. These fragmented funding streams can confuse institutions about which programmes align best with their goals, leading to inefficiencies. **The EU must work toward greater synergy between education, research, and training programmes, ensuring that funding sources can be combined seamlessly to support holistic projects.** For example, universities could apply for funding that supports both research projects and student mobility, integrating different aspects of the academic experience into a unified initiative. This would enable institutions to leverage the full range of EU resources for maximum impact.

In addition to improving access and flexibility, **the EU should encourage more cross-cultural competence and lifelong learning opportunities.** With the increasing importance of global mobility and the need for a skilled, adaptable workforce, Erasmus+ and similar programmes should evolve to provide more opportunities for non-traditional students and adult learners. Expanding the scope of these programmes to include lifelong learning and blended mobility models would ensure that European citizens continue to benefit from educational opportunities throughout their careers, fostering a more resilient and globally competitive workforce.

Regarding the **European Universities Alliances (EUAs)**, they should to a higher extent be able to choose their **own paths for reaching the overall objectives of cooperation and quality in higher education.** Reducing the focus on deliverables and project results in favour of a more strategic and visionary approach, based on priorities defined by the EUAs, would better serve the overall objectives of the whole initiative.



IV. CG Universities' overall experience with EU funding

Overall, CG Universities describe the experience with applying for EU funding under programmes such as **Erasmus+ and Horizon Europe as positive**. These programmes have played a central role in fostering international collaboration, advancing research excellence, supporting mobility for students and staff, and strengthening the global visibility of European higher education institutions. Open and bottom-up instruments - such as ERC, MSCA, and Erasmus+ mobility schemes - are especially valued for their efficiency, compliance with academic freedom, and ability to nurture long-term, high-quality partnerships.

However, despite this positive engagement, several recurring challenges have been identified. As described above, **a key concern relates to the increasing complexity of application procedures**, including the volume of administrative requirements, the evolving templates, and the usability of online submission platforms. These factors create an unnecessarily high entry barrier, particularly for less experienced applicants and smaller institutions.

Furthermore, CG Universities note that **feedback on unsuccessful applications often lacks sufficient detail, which limits opportunities for improvement and resubmission**. A persistent concern is the mismatch between the volume of excellent proposals and the limited available budget, which results in many high-quality initiatives going unfunded. Additionally, funding rules and rates sometimes fail to reflect the cost realities of different European regions, creating inequities in access and implementation.

Looking ahead, universities call for simplification and stability in both application and reporting processes, more transparent and actionable feedback from evaluators, and a significantly strengthened budget for both Erasmus+ and Horizon Europe.

CG Universities also emphasise the need for **better pre-submission support, improved user-friendliness of digital platforms, more flexible budget allocation at institutional level**, and a balanced approach to funding both basic and applied research across the entire research and innovation landscape. Recognising the role of Social Sciences, Humanities, and Arts, and ensuring their full integration into future programmes, is also highlighted as essential.

Finally, CG Universities underline the importance of **strengthening the international dimension of EU programmes** and expanding opportunities for global academic partnerships in Erasmus+ beyond capacity-building models.

*If you need more information or any clarification, please contact Rúben Castro,
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