

## Optimistic Outlooks for EEA and ERA Synergies

"The EEA and the ERA are more powerful when they work together", Commissioner for Innovation, Research, Culture, Education and Youth Mariya Gabriel said during an R&I Days session on Thursday. Rounding off a discussion on synergies between the two, she echoed the unison dedication to promote cooperation between the European Research Area (ERA) and the European Education Area (EEA) that characterized the plenary session on this last day of the Commission's annual R&I event.

The session "Synergies European Education Area/European Research Area: Towards a Knowledge Strategy" undergirded the aspiration to connect and mutually reinforce them rooted in the ongoing European Knowledge Strategy. Whereas the Strategy's goal is to allow for coordinated education and research policies and investments, the session addressed three related questions:

Firstly; how to strengthen synergies between the ERA and EEA, also considering experiences of the European Universities Initiative; secondly, how the EU best can support this and assist schools and the higher education sector in the digital green and green transformations. Finally, addressing the current crisis the discussion sought to identify common challenges for the education and research world, while supporting lifelong learning, equity, and inclusion in the post-COVID scenario.

Whereas optimism figured prominently, current challenges was depicted amongst others by Hrvoje Meštrić, representing Croatian Ministry of Science and Education, who pointed to the problem and increasing threat of brain drain. The problem that the most talented brains go to more developed parts of Europe has affected Croatia in particular. Nevertheless, key to tackling this issue is mobility, he said, positing the link between research and education as a cornerstone of European competitiveness:

"We in Europe have to open the free market for research for talents (...) both inwards and outwards", he said, stating that the development of ERA depends on the contribution of young people crossing borders to pursue academic careers. Meštrić's problem description was picked up by Gabriel: "I don't like the expression brain drain", she said, suggesting instead the term to "unlock the talent potential" by providing "brain circulation". Whereas it is still too difficult for many to collaborate across borders, issues like this were shortly to be addressed by the two Commission Communications on education, she said, which promises to boost the current impetus created amongst others by the European University Initiative. "This synergy will now be concretised", she said.

Adding to the perceived importance of the subject, Gabriel posited the panel as among the most important for her to take part in during the research and innovation days. Also echoing the enthusiasm over current developments, President of University La Rochelle Jean Marc Ogier said he saw them as a sign that the ERA and EEA have finally found their common ground. "Europe of knowledge exists"; he said. Triumph aside, he also shared thoughts on areas that should be improved, one of which was the recognition of the cultural, linguistic, economical and historical diversity of European states. This is important to provide exchange, he said, suggesting the setting up of a long-term common enterprise to fill that role.

"Complementarity is at the basis of the EEA and ERA", he elaborated. He also suggested a European legal entity accredited to offer European degrees and joint study programmes, in order to promote European research and to employ European professors and researchers.

On a more critical note, Rector at the University of Helsinki Sari Lindblom stressed how insufficient cooperation between the two areas to date manifests in perceptions at the university level that they are competitors. Citing the university's dedication, she contended that knowledge and research institutions should respond to the needs of the world.

Adding to the consensus on the mutual research-education dependency, Maria da Graça Carvalho explicitly included innovation into the equation. Citing the success of the EIT as proof, she spoke of a triangle between the three as a prerequisite for Europe to be competitive. There is still "a need to build better bridges between them", she said, and went on to echo the conference's mantra of how the current pandemic has revealed European R&I needs in terms of global and increased collaboration.

Equally talking in figures, Gabriel stressed her conviction that the research and education areas should position knowledge as a basis for a democratic, resilient and sustainable societies that constitute the so-called knowledge square: "World class, competitive, inclusive and attractive knowledge ecosystem that is "able to cope with challenges and crisis ranging from climate to pandemics in the interest of our citizens".

Whereas in her words "we are counting on you", many of these issues are being addressed in the Commission Communication on the ERA and the one on the EEA, both launched on the 30 September. The EEA Communication presents a reinforced approach to ensure the achievement of a European Education Area by 2025. The European Education Area ties in with Next Generation EU and the long-term budget of the European Union for 2021-2027. The ERA aims at relaunching and revitalising the European research area to make it future-proof, and to increase its ability to address the major challenges of the digital and green (twin) transitions and Europe's resilience following the COVID-19 crisis.