

EUR's EU strategy days 2024

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Universities of the Future – engaged science and education for transformative resilience

2024 is a pivotal year for the European Union and a lustrum year for Erasmus University Rotterdam. To mark such an important year EUR organized *EU Strategy Days* in the EU capital Brussels, exploring key insights into recent developments in the EU R&I and education areas, discussing the future of universities, transformative science, evidence-based policymaking, inclusive and sustainable prosperity, maximizing the impact of knowledge.

While the EU is gearing for the next European elections in June, and the European Commission is stepping up its efforts towards the next Multi-Annual Financial Framework, and towards renewed policies for R&I and education in Europe, our university is celebrating its lustrum and 110 years of pioneering ideas, outstanding research, and positive societal impact.

Driven by our impact ambition and our commitment to become more engaged with the world around us, on 20 & 21 March 2024 we organized the first EUR [EU Strategy Days in Brussels](#), during the [European Commission's official EU R&I week](#). Our purpose was to bring the EUR closer to the EU, and the EU closer to our academic community and our thought leadership. Our objectives were to learn more, to engage, exchange ideas and discuss, to pave ways for new collaborations, and above all, to ensure EUR's next *Strategy 2025-2030* is in line with the changing world around us.

I look back at this strategically important and rather unique visit to Brussels as an inspiring, thought-provoking and entrepreneurial event. Beyond doubt this event placed our university and our work in the spotlight and on Europe's map of transformative thought leaders. Above all, this was a true **EUR community building trip, that made minds connect and matter!**

This successfully rounded-up series of events was not an end, but rather the beginning of EUR's *Eurostar* journey towards the EU. Hereby, I share with you some highlights and takeaways that may help us pave the way and define our next destinations in this journey.

Uniquely engaged

As someone intensively engaged with- and regularly seen in Brussels I can say with confidence that large and senior university delegations, engaging directly with European policy makers and politicians, on various levels and around a range of topics, let alone during the official, [annual EU R&I days](#), is a very rare happening in the European capital. Usually, Brussels is a playfield for interest groups and umbrella organizations. Very occasionally single universities engage directly with the EU policy makers and legislators, offering knowledge and experiences at their disposal. This makes our event rather unique and makes us **pioneers in setting some new waves in the EU policy-science relations, paving the way to true engaged science and evidence-based policy making.**

EUR's commitment towards engaged science, and the strategic importance of our event were recognized, through their participation in our sessions, by some of the most prominent politicians and policy makers in the EU R&I and Education domains. Amongst others we had the honor of hosting and hearing the [EU Commissioner for R&I and Education and Culture](#) Ms. Illiana Ivanova. Instead of the initially planned 10-minute keynote [speech](#), we were very pleasantly surprised by her almost 2-hour-long presence at our event, again, an unusual happening in Brussels. Prior to the conference she engaged in informal and insightful discussions with us, and during the conference she delivered an [inspirational speech](#), praising our direct engagement with the European institutions - essential to evidence-based policy making and citizens science. Visibly triggered by our excellent pitch on inclusive prosperity, [presented by prof. Martin de Jong](#), Commissioner Ivanova unexpectedly remained for good part of the panel discussion as well. Moreover, the day after our conference, at another event, the **Commissioner referred to Erasmus University as leading a wave of inclusive excellence in Europe, promoting alternative ways of measuring societal wellbeing.** And, in the spirit of true evidence-based policy making, the Commissioner expressed an **interest in a possible position paper** on the topic of inclusive prosperity, which we are gladly going to prepare and present to her in the coming weeks.

Together!

Our first EU strategy days event brought together the EUR board, deans, vice-deans and academic leads of some of our most strategic initiatives. We started off in a relaxed manner, with a **get-together**, and for some also **get-to-know each-other**, networking dinner, where also the strategic importance of the trip was brought forward by our President Prof. Brinksma, our Rector Magnificus Prof. Bredenoord and Prof. IJzerman, Dean of ESHPM and lead of Strategy 2025-30 steering group. They were united in their message: **a great opportunity is ahead of us, let's make the most out of it!**

Day two was quite intense, starting with the [briefing session with Neth-ER](#), where Director Rienks took us through the latest developments in the EU political landscape, emphasizing the geopolitical uncertainties and crises that (will) influence the European research and education policies. **Two panel discussions** followed, and after lunch we hosted a **public conference** with the audience both onsite and online, [streamed live](#) via our media partner Science Business. We closed the event with the **EUR alumni townhall event** and a networking dinner.

During the different sessions we hosted number of guest speakers and panelists, incl. EU's Commissioner Ivanova, representatives of the European Parliament; EU Director General for Education, EU Deputy Director General for R&I, the Director of the EU Joint Research Center Seville, the President of the European

Innovation Council, representatives- from the European Research Executive Agency, EIT Digital, universities' and R&I umbrella organizations as well as civil society and youth representatives. **Together**, we reflected on- and discussed topics such as the **future of science** and the **transforming role of universities** in tackling global challenges, in preparing the world citizens of today and tomorrow, in fostering **inclusive and sustainable future** with the **citizen in the centre**. The discussions tackled lots of questions and raised some new ones; they triggered our curiosity and gave us some food for further thought and actions, and moreover they gave us the **stage to shine a light on some of the major initiatives and achievements our university can be proud of**, such as our *Evaluating Societal Impact* program, the *School of Convergence*, the *Erasmus Initiatives*, the *SYNC lab*, *IDEA center*, *NEB CultuurCampus*, *UNIC* alliance....

Science is a powerful catalyst for positive change in our societies

Excellent science is the bedrock of scientific policy advice. In the first panel session dedicated to *Science for Policy and Impact* we talked about evidence-based policy making and the impact science has on society. **Joanna Drake**, EU Deputy Director General for R&I [talked](#) about the essential need of policy makers for **reliable and timely, and above all holistic scientific advice and evidence** in identifying and addressing the grand challenges we are all confronted with. Moreover, she emphasized the need for better **citizen's trust** in both science and democratic governance, and related to that a good quality, accurate and reliable **science communication**. Joanna spoke also about EU's current mechanisms for engaging science in policy making and called upon universities to proactively join the effort. For this to happen, Joanna stressed the importance of **pursuing the reforms in the research assessment systems** asking the universities to incentivize and reward scientists and researchers to (pro)actively engage with policy makers.

According to **Begoña Arano**, Head of the MSCA Department in the European Research Executive Agency, crucial pathway in bolstering universities' role in the science-policy nexus lies in the **Framework Programmes for Research and Innovation**. Thanks to FP financed research projects many researchers have made their way into the roles of expert advisors for different policy actions at EU level. Moreover, individual academics take a proactive part in **reviewing and selecting projects** by joining the [European Commission's evaluators pool](#). Her message to us was: **join the pool as we need more SSH expertise!** This was echoed by our Rector Magnificus **Prof. Annelien Bredenoord** emphasizing **SSH's crucial role in understanding and addressing societal challenges in a holistic manner**. Annelien shared her point of view as the only SSH representative in the High-Level Expert Group on the next Framework Program for R&I. Beyond SSH, Annelien's main message revolved around **the role of researchers** and the need **to encourage diversity in research careers**. The current model, she stressed, where a scientist must be excellent first, and only maybe afterwards care about research's impact on society, must change if we want to create a system where researchers' inputs to policy are effective and impactful. Our Erasmus Chair **Prof. Eveline Crone** joined the discussion and raised the question of science understanding society better. **Before bringing scientific advice to policy, it is crucial that science engages with- and understands society and stakeholders better**, mentioning two main factors influencing this effort: asking the right questions, and ensuring that researchers do not close themselves up in niches. Scientists must ask better questions to understand the groups and elements of their study, and they must work cross-sectors and disciplines. This is of fundamental importance to make sure that scientific advice will go in the right direction. **The ERC is a life changing opportunity in this sense**, as it allows researchers to work on innovative ideas that can give life to whole new research groups, including in social sciences and humanities (SSH).

Dr. Stephane Berghmans, R&I Director at the [European Universities Association](#) brought one more important element into the [discussion](#) - collaboration and inclusivity through **HEIs umbrella organizations and networks**

with influential roles are essential for shaping effective research and innovation policies. He **openly invited our university to better engage** inside the EUA community representing over 800 higher education institutions in the EU and as such in a primary position to leverage its members' expertise to influence EU policymaking.

Key takeaways

- ★ **Science is** not just a source of knowledge but a **powerful catalyst for positive change** in our societies.
- ★ To address the societal challenges, policy makers need **reliable, timely and holistic scientific advice** and evidence, **SSH inclusive**.
- ★ For research and innovation to deliver benefits to citizens, we need better **trust** in both science and democratic governance and for that we need good quality, accurate and reliable **science communication**.
- ★ Before bringing scientific advice to policy, it is crucial that **science engages with- and understands society** and stakeholders better.
- ★ Excellent science is the bedrock of scientific advice however **we need a change** in the current approach where researchers prioritize excellence over societal impact. We need to **cultivate diversity in research careers** for more effective policy inputs since **valuing and rewarding policy engagement** is as equally important as knowledge production.
- ★ **SSH expertise is highly needed** and demanded and universities should **encourage and incentivize** researchers to participate in the FP R&I calls and projects, and moreover to register in the experts' and evaluators database, to ensure that expertise can be found when and where needed.
- ★ Collaboration and inclusivity through **HEIs umbrella organizations and networks** with influential roles are essential for shaping effective research and innovation policies.

Transformative science for resilience

In this panel session we discussed the idea of **repurposing the university missions towards transformative resilience, and the role science plays in the societal, climate and digital transitions**.

Nothing sharpens the mind quite like a good crisis – were the opening words of our keynote speaker [Pia Ahrenkilde Hansen](#), EU Director General for Education. In a world full of challenges and multiple crises, in navigating the societal, environmental, and technological transitions, we need **innovative, flexible and agile ways of thinking and knowledge creation**. She talked also about the necessary path of **change of education in Europe** as we need to equip our students with **future-proof skills and competencies** to match the transitions. And for this **innovation is crucial**. She encouraged us to take every opportunity to **engage with the European University Alliances** because we need to tackle the talent gaps together.

Academia should be more involved in EU level actions to increase its impact on society - [Rosalinde van der Vlies](#) Director *Clean Planet* at DG R&I talked about the need **of cross-discipline solutions** to address the complex global challenges, and about the positive role of universities in this. She mentioned the five missions launched under Horizon Europe, the New European Bauhaus, and the Strategic Energy Technologies Plan as examples of fostering multidisciplinary to create solutions that will help Europe in the societal, climate and digital transitions. Academia should be **more involved** in such actions to increase its **impact** on society.

Prof. [Ole Petter Ottersen](#), Secretary General of The Guild, shared his skepticism with the participants regarding the use of the term *transformative* science. In his words, universities have always had a transformative nature, and rather than asking them to become transformative, **it is crucial to make sure they remain so**. A key themes in this process are **convergence of disciplines and societal engagement**. In addition, Ole Petter reminded the EUR delegation of the risks involved in talking about transdisciplinarity: instead of transcending disciplines, it is important to make them more robust and impactful, and ready to deliver on societal challenges. We need a more focused discussion on the question of the **development of transformative skills**. Prof. [Liesbeth Noordegraaf-Eelens](#), Vice-Dean for Education at the Erasmus School of Philosophy, took a defensive stance on the important role of transdisciplinarity. The **role of diversity** is a cornerstone, according to Lisbeth, when thinking about convergence. However, **before convergence there must be divergence**, she said, mentioning the need to have different views and opinions coming together to consider all sides of the problem at stake. **It is not possible to find a *one-size-fits-all* solution to the social, climate and digital transitions**. With different sectors **coming together**; we can achieve a larger point of view that includes different disciplines for a **holistic solution**. The role of **community engagement** is key in this process, as society can better define what challenges are to be solved.

[Salvatore Moccia](#), [talked](#) about the [European Innovation and Technology Institute](#) (EIT) as a key player in the transformation of universities that not only **unites universities around Europe**, but also puts them in **direct contact with business and industry** to better understand the needs and the skills required by the market. Any university, Salvatore said, can be a member of EIT and can start an education programme under its flag. The benefits include **expanding a university's outreach towards like-minded institutions and offering students more opportunities** to get experience in industrial environments, beyond the classrooms and laboratories.

Key Takeaways:

- ★ We are moving towards the **4th generation of university**, with **education, research, innovation and engagement for societal impact as 4 core missions**.
- ★ In a world full of complex challenges and multiple crises, **transdisciplinary solutions and societal engagement** are of crucial importance.
- ★ Transformative resilience, adapting to- and overcoming crises is achieved by **innovative, flexible and agile ways of thinking and knowledge creation**, crucial in navigating the societal, environmental, and technological transitions. And universities have a key role to play there.
- ★ We need policies to lay down the foundation for **universities to innovate** and build new ways of thinking and knowledge creation (engagement with the European Research Area, European Strategy for Universities, the European Innovation Agenda, European University Alliances, New European Bauhaus...)
- ★ Universities have always had a transformative nature, and rather than asking them to become transformative, it is crucial to make sure they remain so. What we need is a more focused discussion on **the development of transformative skills**. We need to **equip our students with future-proof skills and competencies** and for this **innovation** is inevitable and critical.
- ★ We need **flexible education programmes** that not only unite universities around Europe, but also put them in **direct contact with society**, business, and industry to better understand the skills required by the market and the possible applications of research for market-creation purposes.

- ★ **Convergence across disciplines** and **community engagement** is crucial for finding **holistic solutions** to the most complex challenges.
- ★ The European Institute of Innovation and Technology (EIT) is EU's knowledge triangle instrument and the **largest European innovation ecosystem** - it connects universities and business, through enabling universities' outreach towards like-minded institutions, companies, and other stakeholders, and offering students more opportunities to get experience in industrial environments, beyond the classrooms and laboratories. **Any University can become a member of one of the 10 EIT knowledge communities.**

Inclusive and Sustainable Prosperity: Re-thinking the role of universities

With sustainability ranking high on the global agenda, **Europe needs a better way to measure its prosperity and societal wellbeing and universities have a key role to play** in developing and promoting the new, sustainability-conscious metrics that are needed. That was the view of the speakers at the public conference *Inclusive and Sustainable Prosperity: Re-thinking the role of universities* that we organised in the afternoon on the 21st of March, streamed live via our media partner Science Business. The video recordings of the conference can be accessed via [this link](#).

In his [opening words](#) **Prof. Ed Brinksma**, referred to 2024 as a lustrum year that marks a transition between strategic periods for Erasmus University Rotterdam, as well as a pivotal year of changes for the EU. He emphasized **our university's commitment to sustainable and inclusive prosperity**, which is part of our current Strategy 2024, and will remain part of our next Strategy 2025-30. ***We want to maintain the vision, which is behind the current strategic period, which is to foster positive societal impact,*** he said.

During her [keynote speech](#) **Commissioner Ivanova** talked about the fundamental role universities play in promoting inclusive and sustainable prosperity, by fostering the right conditions for innovative ideas to tackle big challenges together and across sectors and borders, linking it to transdisciplinarity and citizens engagement. Ivanova complemented the EUR for our outstanding work around diversity and inclusion, referring also to 'the IDEA-net project, and to UNIC, as European university *focusing precisely on social inclusion in university life, as well as in the broader context of superdiverse post-industrial cities.*

After the key-note speech the panelists had a very interesting and inspiring discussion, exchanging different views and ideas on what is needed for a just, sustainable & resilient economy, questioning the conventional metrics of measuring prosperity focused on gross domestic product, without factoring in environmental costs, inclusiveness, or societal well-being.

Our bookkeeping is in order, but society's housekeeping is not. [According to Prof. Martin de Jong](#), 'it has become crystal-clear that **inclusive prosperity goes beyond the way wealth is traditionally measured** (through GDP) and **includes various aspects of life** (domestic duties, healthcare, education, housing, happiness, sense of community, life-work balance, climate resilience, biodiversity, availability of natural space, and many more) **which are not- or insufficiently expressed**. There is growing **discomfort** with- and **distrust in traditional ways of measuring wealth**. Moreover, he pointed out that issues around sustainability do not stem from a lack of resources or financing, but rather from how those resources are distributed. **Inclusive prosperity may be the proper alternative that safeguards the solidity and solidarity of our societies**, but realizing it is quite a challenge'. Martin [added](#), universities and research have a critical role to play. He took the opportunity to talk about EUR's commitment 'to examining inclusive prosperity as a

leading knowledge provider in Europe' and announced the launching of a **EUR-wide, multidisciplinary Inclusive Prosperity Institute**.

This is our final planet. Still, many of our policies act as if it's not. [Stientje van Veldhoven](#), former Dutch Minister and EU official, currently Vice-President and Director Europa World Resources Institute echoed this, and talked about the key role universities will play in developing and promoting the **new, sustainability-conscious metrics** that are urgently needed because a GDP-based approach fails to indicate where wealth is distributed, and it ignores the burdens future generations may bear.

We haven't inherited the planet from our ancestors, we have borrowed it from our children. [Mikel Landabaso Alvarez](#), Director of Fair and Sustainable Economy at the EU Joint Research Center, talked about the urgency of the matter, adding that addressing complex challenges requires **different tools, mindsets and approaches** from those traditionally used, which contributed to creating some of the challenges such as climate change, biodiversity loss, raising inequalities. He highlighted a Commission-led attempt to categorize criteria that go beyond GDP, the [Resilience Dashboards](#), and announced the launch of the [ACTION book: Innovation for place-based transformations](#), adding that **universities should be rooted locally to promote innovation that can compete at a global level**.

We need to create talents, not only attract the best of the best from other countries. [Michaela Karamperi](#), New Economy Coordinator at Generation Climate Europe, a network of climate-action youth organisations, questioned whether there is enough **political will** for integrating the new criteria. She said that communities and the public may struggle to understand **what beyond GDP means**, because they focus on more immediate problems, such as housing or agriculture. Veldhoven added that policymakers should better articulate the benefits of the new approach by **explaining its impact** on peoples' health and overall quality of life. Moreover, universities should provide policymakers with facts, building the foundation for evidence-informed policies. *Science is absolutely essential, and we should try and get these science-policy interfaces working even better*, she said.

Martin de Jong talked also about the importance of **co-creation** processes. Successful transitions, whether green or digital, require co-creation, where scientists work together with industry and government to decide which areas to focus on. In these co-creation processes, providing **opportunities for youth** is essential.

[Gosse Vuijk](#), senior policy analyst in the cabinet of [Christian Ehler](#), German MEP, stressed the role of universities in engaging with EU policy makers and inspiring debates by sharing experience and expertise. Gosse made a clear point - **universities should proactively engage directly with the European Parliament** rather than wait at a distance for the EU legislator to 'defend European science'. He complimented the EUR for this great effort and highly relevant event agenda.

Participants also discussed **changes required in the research system**. According to Prof. **Eveline Crone**, to transform the research system, **universities need voices of the scientists of the future**. Gosse Vuijk echoed this and called for more fundamental research **funding** for universities.

Finally, Commissioner **Ivanova** said the Commission's objective is to ensure **inclusive excellence**, enabling every individual to contribute to the well-being of society, regardless of their background, gender and economic situation. She added that **long-term investments in research and innovation are essential for fostering prosperity**.

Key takeaways

- ★ Achieving inclusive and sustainable prosperity requires **collaboration across sectors**, including government, educational institutions, and businesses, to develop and promote **holistic indicators** that **consider not only economic, but also environmental and social factors**.
- ★ Successful transitions, whether green, social or digital, necessitate **co-creation** among researchers, industry, and government to prioritize areas of focus at a local and global levels alike. In these co-creation processes, providing **opportunities for youth** is essential.
- ★ **Universities have a crucial role to play** in advancing sustainable growth, inclusiveness, and societal well-being by engaging with communities and policymakers, and by developing- and advocating comprehensive metrics beyond GDP.
- ★ Policymakers should **better articulate the benefits** of the new approach and metrics by explaining its impact on peoples' health and overall quality of life.
- ★ **Changes in the research system** are essential to include voices of the future, provide **adequate funding** for universities, and ensure long-term investments in research and innovation for fostering inclusive excellence and prosperity.

Town hall event with EUR alumni

The last event during the EUR 2024 Strategy Days in Brussels was the Town hall gathering and networking reception with our large network of EUR alumni in Brussels. The theme of the event was **Valorising and translating of knowledge into our society and markets**. The event was opened by [Sue Martin](#), Director EUR Alumni Office, followed by the welcoming speech of Prof. [Ed Brinksmma](#), President of the EUR who also introduced our **inspirational speaker**, [Michiel Scheffer](#), President of the [European Innovation Council](#). Michiel [talked](#) about market valorization of knowledge and innovation, and about the ways for universities to better connect to- and benefit from the EIC schemes. We also heard very interesting **testimonials and personal stories** from our alumni: [Caroline Nagtegaal-Van Doorn](#), Member of the European Parliament, [Rosalinde van der Vlies](#), Director Clean Planet DG R&I, [Bart Neerscholten](#), Tech-to-Market Project Advisor at the European Innovation Council and [Rinske van den Berg](#), Advisor at the European Research Executive Agency. We also had the pleasure to **reconnect and network with around 100 alumni during the evening reception**.

I look proudly back at the quite intensive event and program and would like to complement and thank everyone for being fully committed and engaged all the way through! The EU Strategy Days were not an endpoint but the beginning of a journey towards deeper EU engagement and influence. By engaging directly with EU policymakers, we highlighted our commitment to societal impact and evidence-based policy. **Moving forward, we aim to build on these foundations, fostering deeper collaborations and ensuring our strategies align with the evolving European landscape.**