

RETHINKING HIGHER EDUCATION IN EUROPE – AI, COMPETITIVENESS, AND THE FUTURE OF GENERATION Z

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ABSTRACT

JEL: I23, O33, I21, F15 This paper examines the transformation of higher education in Europe in the context of artificial intelligence, digitalisation, geopolitical change, and increasing global competition. It focuses on the opportunities and risks associated with AI, including personalized learning, improved accessibility, reduced administrative burdens, and the development of skills required for a rapidly changing labour market. At the same time, the paper highlights challenges related to algorithmic bias, misinformation, academic integrity, and the need for pedagogical adaptation. Particular attention is given to the importance of critical thinking, creativity, ethical judgement, and human-centred approaches to AI. The paper also emphasises the role of European cooperation, Erasmus+, and the European Universities Alliances in strengthening competitiveness, innovation, employability, democratic resilience, and a shared European identity. It argues that the future of European higher education requires a balance between technological transformation, global competitiveness, and the protection of European values and academic standards.

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INTRODUCTION

We are living through a period of profound transformation. **Artificial intelligence, digitalisation, geopolitical instability, and fierce global economic competition** are reshaping our societies at unprecedented speed. In this context, **higher education is no longer only an education issue** — it has become a strategic issue for **Europe’s competitiveness, industrial renewal, resilience, and last but not least democracy**.

Europe’s universities are **places of learning**, but they are and have to be also **engines of innovation, research, and social progress**. It’s no overstatement to say, that they are **places where the future of Europe is being shaped**.

The question before us is not, whether and how **digitalisation, artificial intelligence and global disruptions of all kinds** will transform higher education. They already are. **The real question is** whether Europe will shape these **transformative shifts according to our own values and vision** - and whether we will manage to perform the transformation fast and good enough.

MULTIANNUAL FINANCIAL FRAMEWORK (MFF) AND THE EUROPEAN PROGRAMS

And I think we all can agree, that **we simply must**. Our work here in the institutions must reflect these changes; **the next MFF and the European programs** we are currently again working on **must rise to these challenges**.

These programs first need **adequate funding** to meet the growing demands.

Furthermore, I am convinced that **we must stop thinking of programs like Horizon and Erasmus+ as separate silos**. We need to approach them **more strategically**—that is, in a connected way—to **generate synergies and maximize their impact**. This is also a demand that universities themselves have repeatedly and strongly emphasized.

I am therefore very grateful to the rapporteur in CULT, Mr. Zdrojewski, for including this very explicitly in his draft report on Erasmus+, where he demands that **synergies should be actively pursued** between the Programme and other instruments, **in particular the European Competitiveness Fund, Horizon Europe, National and Regional Partnership Plans**. And fortunately, there seems to be **very broad support for this in CULT**, based on what was said in the debate this morning.

I would very much hope that **other committees** would also consider the promising **synergies with Erasmus+ — and there in particular the European Universities Alliances**, to which I will come back once more later.

Today we are also talking about **how higher education itself** is changing, for example, as a result of AI.

Yes, artificial intelligence offers enormous **opportunities**. It can **personalise learning, improve accessibility, support multilingual cooperation, and reduce administrative burdens** for teachers and researchers. **Digital tools** can make education **more flexible and help students develop the skills needed** for a rapidly changing labour market.

Europe urgently needs these skills if it wants to remain competitive globally — in **research, innovation, green technologies, and the digital economy**.

But we should also be **honest about the risks**. AI is not neutral. **Algorithms** can reproduce **bias, misinformation** can spread more easily, and **academic integrity** faces new challenges. Universities must therefore **adapt not only technologically, but also pedagogically**.

Education in the digital age cannot focus primarily on **memorisation**. It **must focus on critical thinking, creativity, ethical judgement, and the ability to distinguish reliable information from manipulation**. In a world shaped by AI, **human skills** become even more important.

And this is where **Europe** has **a unique role to play**. There are **no models**, that combine excellence with values, that **we could simply copy**. We need to **create them ourselves** and take leadership in promoting a **human-centred approach** to artificial intelligence — one that protects **fundamental rights, personal rights, academic freedom, transparency, inclusion, and democratic principles**.

International cooperation in higher education is, in times like these, equally **essential**. Programmes such as Erasmus+ are **among the European Union's greatest success stories**. They strengthen **skills and employability**, but they also create something even more important: **a sense of European identity and belonging**.

At a time when polarisation, disinformation, and geopolitical tensions are increasing, **this dimension matters enormously**. Europe needs **not only highly skilled graduates but also engaged citizens** who understand the value of **democracy, pluralism, and European cooperation**.

This is also why the **European Universities Alliances** are so promising. In my view they are among the **most visionary projects in European education** today. By bringing together universities from different Member States, they create truly **transnational campuses** with **joint curricula, shared research, virtual mobility, and innovative teaching methods**.

These alliances show how we can **overcome fragmentation** in the European Higher Education Area by connecting **universities of all sizes**, improving **recognition of qualifications, reducing administrative barriers**, and encouraging **more flexible learning pathways**. But they should not only strengthen competitiveness — they should also strengthen **shared European values and democratic resilience**. And experience shows: **They do**.

Because **competitiveness alone will not sustain the European project** - with all its achievements, many in the outside world envy us for. Higher education must reflect exactly this **balance between becoming future-proof without compromising values and standards**. Let's do everything in our power to support them in this challenging endeavour.