

**7 October 2020****European research and educational policy: Good ideas, impending cuts**

Yesterday the Senate of the German Rectors' Conference (HRK) deliberated on escalating developments in European research and educational policy.

In Berlin today, HRK President Prof Dr Peter-André Alt stated his views on this:

“We are currently witnessing contradictory developments. On the one hand, we are pleased to see that the EU Commission is giving the university sector a central role in its initiatives for a European Education Area and the further development of the European Research Area. The calls made by the federal and state governments for the EU Commission to promote research and mobility also stress the importance of universities. On the other hand, at the end of July heads of state and government agreed to cut funding for research and education by €10 billion for the period 2021 to 2027. The key budget negotiations between the European Council and the European Parliament will begin this week.

It is promising that the EU Commission has so clearly acknowledged universities as a “strong link” between education and research and as a crucial provider of the knowledge quadrangle of education, research, innovation and culture. The EU Commission created the European Education Area as an ambitious model for future European cooperation in higher education. It is designed to create conditions that facilitate the development of university alliances in studying and teaching, as well as in research and innovation, throughout Europe.

We are open to ambitious goals such as a joint European qualification, simplified procedures for establishing joint degree programmes and a European quality assurance system. However, institutions across the entire university sector ought to be involved more intensively in the discussion surrounding how this should be achieved, and not just the recently established “European higher education alliances”, which we very much welcome. Furthermore, future structures should demonstrate sufficient flexibility and respect academic freedom in view of the different traditions in Europe. In this context, it is very encouraging to see that the Federal Ministry of Education and Research intends to highlight the importance of academic freedom from a specifically European perspective during the German EU Council Presidency.

We welcome the fact that member states with previously limited capacity for innovation are being encouraged to invest more in education and research, and that the EU supports this process. The objective must be to facilitate access to and participation in excellent research everywhere. The concept of “distributed excellence” is of great importance for cohesion in Europe. Developing a set of measures to link higher education and top-level European research

more closely is an important and appropriate step for which German universities are well prepared.

However, it is regrettable that the importance of leading international basic research and the major role of the European Research Council (ERC) have not been acknowledged to a greater degree in the communications of the EU Commission. Indeed, strong basic research creates the foundation for the vitally important development of new, environmentally friendly and digital technologies.

In their in-depth Bundesrat statement on the future of the European Research Area, the federal states demonstrated that they intend to play an active role in shaping the European development of the education and research sector. The design of a clearly defined framework for the governance of the European Education Area being pursued by the Commission must incorporate the federal states as providers of higher education and schooling.

Yet above all these constructive approaches hangs the Sword of Damocles, in that the EU's medium-term financial planning for the years 2021 to 2027, which is currently being negotiated, sets the wrong priorities. The plans of heads of state and government to introduce cuts jeopardise the announced expansion of European cooperation in education and research within programmes, which will not be feasible without substantial funding. The federal government and the European Parliament ought to take urgent action to readjust the European financial framework in the budget negotiations now under way. We need not only a rapid but also a forward-looking agreement for a strong Europe."

[Statement of the Bundesrat](#) (available only in German)

[Brief summary of the Directorate-General for Research and Innovation on the European Research Area](#)

[Brief summary of the Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture on the European Education Area](#)