

Eurodoc Response on “A Competitiveness Compass for the EU”

Last week a draft for the European Commission’s “A Competitiveness Compass”, currently under discussion by the College of Commissioners, was leaked. There are some good tendencies in the draft, such as the renewed commitment to invest in R&D and finally reach the 3% target, set more than 20 years ago in Barcelona in 2002¹. Regrettably, the proposals put forth in the leaked draft seriously jeopardise Europe’s ability to maintain a strong position in basic research, which is crucial to ensure that the Union is not reduced to solely being an economic market as also the Guild has highlighted².

The prosperity of the Union is built on more than a monetary economy; it rests upon strong democratic traditions and values, such as a strong civil society and the freedom and independence of the judiciary, the media, and the sciences. The Competitiveness Compass acknowledges the urgent need to close Europe’s innovation gap, particularly in comparison to the U.S. and China. However, the suggestion that “the European Research Council and the European Innovation Council need to be aligned along the same strategic interests and cooperate more closely to achieve results” jeopardises Europe’s strong and independent science, which is particularly disconcerting considering how academic freedom has come under threat in recent years.

Ensure the independence of the European Research Council

In a previous statement “Eurodoc Response on the Future of FP10 and ERC” released on 11.10.2024, we motivated the importance of maintaining a strong and independent ERC, as many other stakeholders have done³.

Article 13 of the Charter of fundamental rights⁴ establishes the importance of the freedom of the sciences in the Union explicitly stating that “The arts and scientific research shall be free of constraint. Academic freedom shall be respected”. Thus the call for the European Research Council (ERC) to align closely with industrial policies is particularly alarming in its flaunting of the values on which the Union rests.

The position papers on the visions for FP10 released by the member states as well as organisational stakeholders show an unmatched consensus acknowledging the success of the ERC. Member States from all regions of the EU call for ensuring that excellence remains at the core of the ERC and that its independence is preserved⁵. This highlights the important role of the ERC not only for basic research but also for driving innovation⁶. As stated by Mario Draghi, “**its sound reputation is built on a focus on excellence, independent decision-making, and a**

¹ [Barcelona European Council, 15 and 16 March 2002, Presidency Conclusions.](#)

² [Europe’s Competitiveness must build on R&I excellence](#), The Guild.

³ E.g. see statements from European Institutions and Committees: [ERAC](#), [ERC](#), and the [ITRE Committee](#), statements from National Funders of [Austria](#), [Finland](#), and [France](#) (CNRS), as well as statements for stakeholder organisations such as [Business Europe](#), [COIMBRA](#), [ISE](#), and [LERU](#).

⁴ [CHARTER OF FUNDAMENTAL RIGHTS OF THE EUROPEAN UNION](#)

⁵ See e.g. the statements made by public authorities from [Czech Republic](#), [Denmark](#), [Estonia](#), [Germany](#), [Netherlands](#), [Portugal](#), and [Spain](#)

⁶ An analysis from 2023 of the FP7 and FP8 shows that more than 40% of the ERC grants lead to [patents](#).

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rigorous, impartial evaluation system.” These are the foundations that have made the ERC essential to the competitiveness of Europe⁷.

Acknowledge the role higher education and research institutions

Groundbreaking research and innovation requires funding of the research, of the institutions, and of the individuals conducting the research: There will be no ground breaking research tomorrow if we do not ensure adequate funding for higher education and the universities today. While education, including higher education, is a competence of the member states, it must be emphasised that high quality higher education and higher education institutions remains the backbone and infrastructure of research and innovation across the Union. Member states need to live up to their 2012 commitment to ensure the *highest level of public funding for higher education*⁸.

Framework programmes, such as Horizon Europe, play a central role in stimulating economic growth and innovation⁹. However, rather than investing in basic research, the ERC has had to operate with the same funding levels since 2007 **ERC grants have not been corrected for inflation, which in consequence means a decrease in funding per project**. Both the ERC and the **Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA)** can only fund a fraction of the **high-quality proposals** they receive, attesting to the unrealised potential for European research and innovation.

Concurrently, the governments of the member states have failed to invest in higher education and higher education institutions. This failure concerns all regions of Europe. In this historical moment, it cannot be overstated how investments in higher education are investments in our democratic future—as emphasised by the member states in their commitments to the EHEA. It is of utmost importance that investments in higher education and higher education institutions are targeted in such a way that they reduce inequalities between geographical regions and contribute to a balanced brain circulation. Investments in higher education and higher education institutions are known to drive innovative capabilities and should therefore be consciously utilised to improve the economic prospects of less economically strong regions.

While all member states of the Union are equally a part of EHEA, many still fail to recognize doctoral candidates as research professionals. The financial situation for many doctoral candidates as well as other early career researchers attests to the lack of recognition of their academic qualifications, their status as professionals, and, in consequence, their crucial contributions to furthering Europe’s research and innovation. Considering that this group of research professionals is a significant driver for the fifth freedom—the circulation of talent and knowledge—, it is sobering that not more care is given to protecting their social rights and security. The EU thereby risks suppressing career opportunities for the very innovators expected to drive the competitiveness that is at the core of this Commission’s strategic vision.

⁷ [The future of European competitiveness – In-depth analysis and recommendations, page 250](#)

⁸ [EHEA - The Bucharest Communiqué 2012](#)

⁹ For HE Each euro invested generates a return of up to €11 in GDP over 25 years. Horizon Europe strategic plan 2025-2027 analysis, p.9.

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A call for a better approach and for remembering the values the Union is built on

If Europe is to remain a global leader in innovation, it must broaden its vision beyond industrial competitiveness. The Competitiveness Compass must be revised to:

1. **Ensure the independence of the ERC, which must remain autonomous and not be subsumed under industrial agendas.**
2. **Reinforce the Union's commitment to scientific freedom in the upcoming European Research Area Act.**
3. **Focus on investing in higher education and research at national and European level.**
4. **Tackle the reduction of precarity of research careers by addressing obstacles faced especially by early career researchers and by ensuring they enjoy the full social rights of the Union.**
5. **Ensure broad stakeholder inclusion in discussions, including researchers at all career stages, research performing organisations and research funding organisations.**

Europe cannot afford to chase short-term industrial gains while hollowing out its research foundations. A true Competitiveness Compass must not only guide industries but also empower the people and ideas that will shape Europe's continued democratic future.

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Eurodoc, the European Council of Doctoral Candidates and Junior Researchers, is a grassroots federation of 26 national associations of early career researchers (ECRs) from 24 countries across Europe. Eurodoc was established in 2002 and is based in Brussels. As a representative of doctoral candidates and junior researchers at the European level, Eurodoc engages with all major stakeholders in research, higher education, and innovation in Europe.

