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Why the EU should rethink its push for a digital research and education “lighthouse”

Written by **Amanda Crowfoot** on 30 March 2020 in **Opinion Plus**

Europe must connect its ambition of being a digital leader with initiatives already happening at its universities, says Amanda Crowfoot.



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Europe must take a leading role in the digital transformation. This is the bold vision of the new European Commission. This website uses cookies to store information on your computer, and browsing the site indicates your acceptance of this. and it is the right vision. Knowledge is undisputedly at the centre of this ambition, but, to harness this, Europe needs a system that can provide skills for the transition (http://www.euro-council.europa.eu/en/press-communications/press-summaries/p16600) research and innovation (http://www.euro-council.europa.eu/en/press-communications/press-summaries/p16600) functioning innovation ecosystems where knowledge can circulate. If these things are not in place, then there will be no leading role for Europe.

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It is clear that universities will play a central role in Europe’s digital transformation. They are the main producers of new knowledge and providers of skills, as well as key centres of innovation. But to find out how Europe can lead, we must take a systemic approach to the challenges we face. This is where the European Commission’s vision falls short. When it comes to the role of universities in the EU Digital strategy, the idea is to build a so-called “lighthouse” of excellence that can provide cutting-edge research, attract global talent and boost digital skills. Yet, the challenges that we are facing do not need a lighthouse, they need a network of institutions that can work together to ensure that the whole system works. Due to its transversal nature, digital research should be conducted within institutions that house many different disciplines. Only multidisciplinary and collaborative research, such as that provided by universities, will allow Europe to build a digital ecosystem of excellence.

High-level skills such as those of developers and researchers are needed across the continent. If Europe’s economy is to be boosted by digital technology, we need to ensure that institutions across the EU are training well-qualified programmers and data specialists ready to serve companies in their regions. We also desperately need more women in tech everywhere.

New knowledge is increasingly produced through co-creation with businesses, local authorities and citizens, not downwards towards end-users from an ivory tower. Therefore, Europe must make establishing strong networks of universities a top priority, to ensure that they can cooperate with their neighbours and other universities. This is also how new knowledge is taken up. University graduates go to local companies with new knowledge, while start-ups and spin-outs from universities provide new services and solutions. One of Europe’s great strengths is having its research excellence spread out in many, large institutions instead of a few small ones. Moreover, European universities cooperate across borders in a way that is the envy of the rest of the world. We must harness that strength.

“A Multiannual Financial Framework that continues to underfund Horizon Europe and Erasmus will not take Europe to the level of systemic action that we need”

Instead of imagining a lighthouse, Europe must connect its ambition of being a digital leader with initiatives already happening at its universities. The idea of the European University Initiative - to support strategic alliances of universities - has already received great attention, as have new ways to support innovation ecosystems in the EU’s next framework programme for research and innovation and support for regional digital innovation hubs and digital skills. These are all European initiatives that can contribute to a European university system that is the foundation of our knowledge driven digital transformation. For that, we also need a strong European Research Area and a European Education Area that connect to and strengthen the ongoing initiatives in the Bologna Process. But we also need funding that matches any ambition. A Multiannual Financial Framework that continues to underfund Horizon Europe and Erasmus will not take Europe to the level of systemic action that we need.

Data must be part of this agenda as well. Europe has inched its way towards Open Science in recent years, but now it is time to take the plunge. Industrial data is a recent product of the Commission's digital package. However, sharing research data has a long history in the scientific community. The European Open Science Cloud that aims to make research data open and FAIR (Findable, Accessible, Interoperable and Reusable) has been under development for years. The Commission and EU Member States must make this a high priority as it would boost the knowledge creation at the heart of the digital package and consolidate Europe as a global research leader and frontrunner in Open Science.

We must abandon the idea of a European lighthouse for digital research and education. Instead, we must focus on a series of ambitious and systemic initiatives that are already happening in European knowledge policymaking. These are the ones that will make the difference if they are recognised and strengthened as key contributors towards making Europe a digital leader.

For more information about the European University Association, you can visit their website at: www.eua.eu (<https://www.eua.eu/>)

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