

ECIU key messages for the upcoming ERA Act

Potential of ERA Act

The European Consortium of Innovative Universities (ECIU) is calling upon the European Union and its Member States to harness the full potential of the upcoming European Research Area Act (ERA Act) to further develop the European Research Area (ERA). In times of geopolitical uncertainty and the need for competitiveness and technological advancement, we cannot afford to continue as before. We must strengthen our European 'research house': reinforce its foundations, make it more attractive to talent and adapt it to evolving needs.

Barriers to the free circulation of researchers, scientific knowledge and technology continue to contribute to the fragmentation of the ERA. Addressing these barriers is crucial to building a more integrated and resilient European research ecosystem—one that is capable of tackling challenges that extend beyond national borders. The ERA Act must be Europe's answer to the fifth freedom as proposed by [Enrico Letta](#) (2024).

The ECIU supports the overall aims of the ERA Act, particularly its potential to:

- enhance knowledge valorisation in Europe;
- support the societal impact of research;
- invest in the latest technologies;
- strengthen the link between education, research and innovation (R&I);
- promote societal engagement.

In this context, it is crucial to acknowledge the significance of tackling global challenges such as the energy transition, digitalisation and the increasing use of artificial intelligence, which require collaborative efforts that transcend national borders. The ERA Act should ensure that Europe continues to lead the way in innovation while responding to urgent societal needs.

Additionally, ECIU underlines the importance of national commitments in achieving the 3% R&D target, as well as the need for stronger coordination of policies and investments between Member States and the EU. Coordinating research efforts is essential for aligning EU strategic priorities with national funding strategies. It is equally important to ensure that this coordination includes all countries participating in Horizon Europe to foster a truly international and inclusive ERA.

Synergies with Innovation Act

The ERA Act is key to strengthen European competitiveness, and strong synergies with the Start-up and Scale-up Strategy and the upcoming EU Innovation Act are crucial. A more integrated ERA in which knowledge can flow freely across borders, sectors and disciplines will drive innovation.

Innovation, particularly in deep tech, is rooted in research. However, for research to have a real impact, its outcomes must reach society. Mechanisms such as knowledge valorisation, technology transfer and interdisciplinary collaboration are vital to ensure that discoveries are translated into solutions for societal challenges. Research and innovation are not separate tracks — they are interdependent. Priorities that serve both domains include reforming research assessment, supporting diverse career paths, attracting talent, and enabling a non-linear innovation pipeline. Taking a holistic approach to these issues will foster ecosystems in which researchers, entrepreneurs and other societal actors can work together to create impactful solutions.

In line with ECIU's vision, the Innovation Act should adopt a mission-driven, challenge-oriented approach that incorporates SSH perspectives, ensuring that innovation is inclusive, ethical, and socially relevant. Aligning research and innovation policies will help to build a resilient, agile and human-centric European innovation landscape.

Potential for knowledge valorisation

In strong synergy with the Innovation Act, the ERA Act is a key opportunity to boost Europe's competitiveness by advancing knowledge valorisation. To support knowledge valorisation, the ERA Act must promote an entrepreneurial culture in Europe. For example, by strengthening the collaboration between universities and businesses, and recognise entrepreneurial achievements.

Universities are central for knowledge valorisation: They drive societal impact through research, innovation and support for local ecosystems. The ERA Act must clearly acknowledge and reinforce their pivotal role in transferring knowledge for economic and social benefit.

To strengthen the valorisation and deployment of knowledge, Europe must invest in the skills and professional support required to access and use intellectual assets and research data. The support for intermediaries (i.e. Knowledge Transfer Offices) to connect academia, industry and public authorities must be improved. Furthermore, a framework for measuring societal impact must reflect the various forms of value — see the [ECIU Impact Case Studies for inspiration](#).

Cross-border collaboration is crucial to boost innovation and enhance Europe's competitiveness. European innovation ecosystems must be better networked, and universities are a leading actor of those ecosystems. In this way, Europe ensures much of the knowledge produced by researchers will have a bigger chance to be exploited. As has been highlighted by the [Draghi report](#), we must invest into networks of universities, start-ups, large companies and venture capitalists. It is those networks that account for a large share of successful commercialisations in high-tech sectors. Strengthening these networks, providing them with the infrastructure and resources they need, is a crucial step to putting

research and innovation at the heart of our economy, as stated in the [Political Guidelines for the Next European Commission 2024–2029](#).

Link to higher education

The ERA Act is an opportunity to strengthen the links between research and education, and link to the European Education Area to foster more integrated and effective knowledge ecosystems, with universities as central actors. A higher level of awareness on and improved complementarity between research and education is needed to strengthen cooperation between academic, public, and private entities, this will help aligning research and innovation with broader societal goals.

The ERA Act must develop the legal framework for establishing the fifth freedom as proposed by Letta. This will help consolidating European higher education institutions (HEIs) at the forefront of global R&I and foster more robust cooperation between HEIs and the other R&I actors.

Modernising research assessment

The ERA Act is an opportunity to increase the integration of societal impacts into research evaluation frameworks. This will support the work done by initiatives such as CoARA. Europe must support the careers of innovative researchers through dedicated recognition/award and funding schemes, for example through a European institute reward for researchers.

Societal relevance must systematically be considered when assessing research. A broad definition and evaluation of impact is needed, recognising indirect and cumulative pathways. Co-creating impact with stakeholders is key across all stages of research. The ERA Act should support such an approach and include these principles in the legal framework of the European Research Area to ensure we enable the much needed transformation, make societal impact a widespread practice and anticipate future transformations.

A European approach to citizen science

The ERA Act can help working towards a much-needed European approach to citizen science, as engaging citizens boosts the societal uptake of implementable solutions to societal challenges. Applying citizen science when setting the research agenda leads to a more democratic and inclusive process, as well as to valuable results directly connected to societal needs.

To empower citizens more, it is necessary that the ERA Act not only creates awareness about the topic itself but also applies it in the process of realising the European Research Area. This is a valuable opportunity for involving citizens more in defining research priorities, agendas, and in the execution and dissemination of research projects.

Universities need support to make their knowledge creation function accessible to wider society and citizens, enabling the co-creation of solutions to complex societal challenges.

Guiding principles for inclusive engagement are needed to promote and value scientific research and the impact of citizen science on society. Examples are common approaches for public engagement in R&I and science communication. Definitions, best practices, mutual learning reports and communities, handbooks and guidelines are needed on connecting science and citizens.

Strengthen AI in science

ECIU welcomes the European Commission's ambition to strengthen Europe's global position in artificial intelligence (AI) in the [AI Act](#). The ERA Act must support this ambition by empowering universities, researchers, innovators, and their communities to advance science and key technologies in an interdisciplinary way. The ERA Act should support the scientific foundation, technological breakthroughs, and skilled talent that are critical for Europe's success in AI: The development of trustworthy, competitive, and societally beneficial AI. Investing in infrastructures, ecosystems and ethical approaches is key.

ECIU Universities are increasingly embracing artificial intelligence (AI) as a transformative force in scientific research. We recognize AI not just as a tool but as a collaborator in science across the fields and disciplines. At the same ECIU Universities are engaged in the defining ethical dimensions of AI in science. It is very important to ramp up investing in AI infrastructure, interdisciplinary centres, and doctoral and postdoctoral programmes to scale up AI-enabled research and foster collaboration within ecosystem.

The ERA Act should require AI systems in critical sectors such as medicine, health, energy, and transport to integrate explainability and transparency as core principles, support research and innovation in explainable AI that embeds domain expertise into model design and training, and establish evaluation frameworks to ensure models are accurate, interpretable, trustworthy, and ethically aligned, while also addressing the bias challenge by mitigating uncertainty and biases in training data to prevent skewed predictions, flawed experimental design, and harmful decision-making.

Europe faces a reproducibility crisis and an ongoing gap between basic research and applied innovation; therefore the ERA Act should establish impact, reproducibility, and translation as central evaluation criteria alongside scientific excellence. To ensure that investments lead not only to high publication volumes but to trustworthy results, reproducible methods, and tangible contributions to health, industry, and society. Embedding these standards will strengthen public trust in science and enhance Europe's global reputation for research integrity.

The ERA Act should embed interdisciplinarity at the core of its AI in science strategy, recognising that many of today's challenges such as climate change, public health, sustainable industry, cannot be solved within disciplinary boundaries. AI can provide the computational and analytical linkages needed to integrate evidence from multiple

domains. The ERA Act should therefore support collaborative programmes, cross-domain infrastructures, and career pathways that reward interdisciplinary research and innovation.

The ERA Act should recognise data, AI tools, and computing resources as strategic assets for science by ensuring researchers in critical domains have access to large-scale, high-quality, and domain-specific datasets through interoperable European infrastructures, reducing fragmentation of data and know-how, and supporting sustainable data management by making annotation, labelling, and curation eligible for funding, investing in skilled personnel, and recognising data stewardship as a core component of open science.

Targeted policy measures are essential for accelerating the responsible adoption of AI in European science and research. Advancing AI requires stronger cross-country collaboration, the sharing of expertise and resources, and closer engagement with stakeholders. Defining and exchanging best practices, strengthening a European data sharing strategy, and attracting like-minded partners will be crucial in unlocking AI's full potential in science.

Background on the ERA

Since its inception in 2000, the ERA represents the EU's ambition to have researchers, scientific knowledge and technology circulate freely and encouraging it to become more competitive (art. 179 TFEU). The ambition to create a single market for research, innovation and technology has relied on voluntary commitments from member states so far. Following the publication of [Enrico Letta's report](#), which called for research and innovation to be placed at the heart of the single market, the European Commission announced plans for an ERA Act to tackle the fragmentation of research efforts across the bloc. This first-ever legislative initiative in the field of research and innovation is now due in the second half of 2026.

More information

[European Research Area](#)

[European Research Area Policy Agenda 2025–2027](#)

[Draghi report on competitiveness](#)

[Letta report on the Fifth Freedom](#)

[Ursula Von der Leyen, Europe's Choice: Political Guidelines for the Next European Commission 2024–2029](#)

[ECIU Impact Case Studies](#)