



Navigating the Future: Strengthening Democracy through Education and Research

Conference Report from the UNICA Days 2024 in Brussels

March 2024



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Network of Universities
from the Capitals of Europe



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"Navigating the Future: Strengthening Democracy through Education and Research"

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Introduction

On 28 February to 1 March 2024 European student organisations, stakeholders, and policymakers came together with the UNICA community to participate in the first edition of the UNICA Days in Brussels. The event was hosted at the European Parliament's Info Hub to mark an auspicious moment ahead of the European elections on 6 to 9 June. It also represented a significant step towards shaping the future of the network.

The UNICA Days featured some of the key topics and audiences needed to in chart a course for Europe's higher education environment. Under the overarching theme "**Navigating the Future: Strengthening Democracy through Education and Research**," participants had the chance to network with their peers from around the UNICA membership and meet with stakeholders and decision-makers shaping higher education policy in Europe.

Universities are becoming ever more aware of the interconnectedness between higher education, scientific research, and European politics. Democracy, anchored in active citizen engagement and well-informed decision-making, benefits from the important role of universities. Education, built on inclusive foundations, remains the clearest path for knowledge to be shared and developed across generations and communities. Research, in the core scientific form nurtured by universities, is the seed of the technological innovation needed to travel forth confidently into an ever-changing landscape.

This awakened spirit of societal engagement comes at a time of crisis, change, and opportunity for Europe. Academic communities have needed to adapt to a pandemic and conflicts while advancing the transition to new sustainable practices and digital technologies. In these recent years, universities have gained valuable experiences that they are ready to share and develop with policy and stakeholder communities. The UNICA Days brought together their perspectives on the key themes for democracy, education and research so that participants could build bridges and chart courses for the future.

I. Opening Speeches

The event's opening session began with a video address from Iliana Ivanova, European Commissioner for Innovation, Research, Culture, Education and Youth. Commissioner Ivanova commended the contributions of university networks in fostering transnational cooperation among academic communities and building the groundwork for the achievements of European policy initiatives and university alliances.

"UNICA is the best example of a successful promoter of transnational cooperation in academia. ... Your work with communities and stakeholders is the key to ensure the success of these initiatives. We count on you to help us shape the future of higher education in Europe."

Iliana Ivanova



Sorin Costreie, UNICA President, welcomed the session's keynote speakers, **Ligia Deca**, Minister of Education of Romania and **Igor Papič**, Minister of Higher Education, Science and Innovation of Slovenia. At this auspicious occasion at the European Parliament, the ministers led a discussion that set the stage for the sessions on democracy, education, and research to follow. This opened on the topic of civic engagement. Minister Deca affirmed the importance of fostering youth participation and informational resilience for universities. This is a priority since the agreement of the Council Conclusions on Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference in 2022. Minister Papič commented on the role of universities in this area. Universities are composed of microsocieties, specialised communities of research and education that see the world through a precise lens. Europe's universities should adopt a vision for and responsibility to society.

A recurring element in the ministers' conversation was the balancing between government action for universities and their institutional autonomy. Minister Papič discussed the Slovenian government's commitment to raise science and research funding to 1.5% of the country's gross domestic product. The most favourable source of research and education funding for universities would nevertheless be the EU, particularly through streamlined instruments. Minister Deca complemented this perspective with a discussion of the Romanian government's initiative to match funding universities receive through the European Universities alliances. It is the administration's view that the alliances ensure that the benefits of internationalisation reach all parts of the university. As environment for transnational academic cooperation in Europe continues to evolve, Sorin Costreie encouraged participants to ponder the role of university networks, alliances, and partnerships they would wish for the future.

II. Democracy Session

The session on **the democratic mission of universities ahead of the European elections 2024** opened with a video message from **Maria Walsh** that lauded the passionate ideas of students and encouraged universities across Europe to give young people the knowledge and spaces they need to participate in democracy.

"As we approach the EU parliament elections in June 2024, I find it important to discuss the pivotal role that universities play in shaping the democratic landscape. They serve as hubs for voter engagement as well as fostering public debate much needed. We need to ensure that across our universities we are talking about the importance of voting."

Maria Walsh



This led the way for a panel discussion that focused on mapping the changing landscape that universities face, with opportunities for them to engage students as well as pressures on their role as democratic institutions. The session was chaired by **Julio Cañero Serrano**, Vice Rector for International Relations, University of Alcalá and Member of the UNICA Steering Committee.

Student Engagement and Civic Education

There is a growing debate as to whether Europe's universities have and are achieving a societal mission beyond scientific education and research. **Rita Dias**, President of the Erasmus Student Network, made the case that they do. Yet more can be done to foster the participation of young people in democratic life and academic opportunities, particularly for those who face social and economic barriers. This is particularly visible with student mobility. At the same time, international and students' offices are given enough to accomplish with the resources they have. **Horia Onița**, President of the European Student Union reinforced this with the point that it is at the local level where European aspirations for greater youth participation are turned into reality. Therefore, European institutions, university networks, and student organisations should focus on giving

students the information and encouragement for them to harness their potential to generate impact from the bottom up.

The participants also discussed the changing informational and political space. **Zygmunt Lalak**, Vice Rector for Research at the University of Warsaw emphasised a growing trend within populist rhetoric that chooses EU initiatives as an easy target. The civic engagement of young people should, therefore, aim beyond electoral participation and give students the tools to make informed decisions for their future. Julio Cañero Serrano noted the accomplishments of the Erasmus Programme as a project to foster European integration and understanding; though more needs to be done to fully give students access to mobility. Horia Onița shared his perspective in representing student unions where many young students can engage in a democratic structure and learn the impact that the EU has on them for the first time. Rita Dias made a point that resonated throughout the conference, investing more in students and recognising their informal learning is worthwhile because the students of today will be the politicians, educators, and researchers of tomorrow.

University Autonomy and Academic Freedom

The panellists also discussed what the elections represented for universities as democratic institutions in themselves. **Florian Trauner**, Dean of the Brussels School of Governance at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel elaborated on the challenge that a persistently below average turnout among young voters can pose for democracy. This leaves a generation susceptible to distrust and disengagement from online information and experiences. This is particularly relevant for universities, which provide necessary spaces for democratic exchanges and debates. For this reason, university autonomy has been a regular target of authoritarian actors. Therefore, university initiatives to engage students also serve a greater purpose beyond voter turnout. **Henrik Wegener** emphasises that academic freedom is a core condition for universities to achieve their democratic mission. Institutions in authoritarian states may appear similar to our universities. The key difference becomes apparent when the political imperatives are put before scientific knowledge. This was seen particularly during the coronavirus pandemic, when universities across the EU were able to independently present evidence and be honest brokers in policy discussions at a critical moment.

Sorin Costreie reiterated UNICA's enduring commitment to the academic and democratic values that are held across Europe. Collaborating with other universities in a shared vision of academic values enhances individual institutional resilience, empowers the impact of the network collectively, and strengthens the concept of, and need for, democratic societies.

UNICA's Vote for Europe Campaign

UNICA launched the Vote for Europe campaign on 31 January 2024. Alexandra Duarte, UNICA Project and Communications Officer, presented the campaign's video competition, which aims to give students from UNICA member universities a platform to share their ideas, experiences, and visions for the future ahead of the European elections on 6 - 9 June 2024. This initiative will play a key role in the realisation of UNICA's commitment to foster democratic engagement and civic awareness within the university community. The campaign is supported by the Erasmus Student Network (ESN) the European Students' Union (ESU), the European Parliament and the European Commission.

III. Education Session

The session on **the developments in transnational cooperation on education in Europe** started with video messages from **Marcos Ros Sempere**, Member of the European Parliament, and **Milan Zver**, Member of the European Parliament. Both messages focused on key priorities for the European Parliament's Committee on Culture and Education. In particular, these are the European Universities initiative, the joint European degree, and the Report on the Implementation of the Erasmus+ Programme. Each message also featured its author's own perspective and interest. Marcos Ros Sempere focused on the imperative of easing participation in higher education while Milan Zver outlined a vision for the universities of the future.

"Higher education must have no barriers, this is the main message that we, the Members of the European Parliament, must continue to advocate in order to promote transnational cooperation in European education."

Marcos Ros Sempere



"We need the new generation of universities, the new mission of universities, the so called the third generation of universities. ... It seems that both the authorities and stakeholders have interpreted the reform of the tertiary education too much as a technical project. We have not paid enough attention to the reform of curricula, study programs and education outcomes. But the path is correct. The Bologna process will bring the new university that is going to be focused on higher levels of understanding and more practical applicability of knowledge and skills."

Milan Zver



The session was chaired by **Romiță Iucu**, Coordinator of the UNICA EduLAB, Co-Chair of the FOREU Subgroup on the European degree, Ambassador of the Magna Charta Observatory, and former Member of the EUA Learning and Teaching Steering Committee Initiative. He moderate a discussion that delved into a variety of stakeholder and policymaker viewpoints on the developments in higher

education and transnational cooperation. These gravitated around prominent EU initiatives, notably the European Universities alliances and the Joint European Degree.

Marie-Anne Persoons, Advisor for International Policy at the Department of Education and Training of the Flemish Community of Belgium, presented takeaways from her experiences as Vice-Chair of the Council of Europe's Steering Committee for Education. The CoE has a history of engagement with education cooperation since the European Cultural Convention in 1954. In particular, it has gathered expertise on the recognition of qualifications across Europe and contributed to the Bologna Process. Following the Reykjavik Summit in 2023, the CoE launched its Learners First strategy for 2024-2023 with a renewed focus on supporting the democratic mission of higher education in these times of backsliding. Marie-Anne Persoons elaborated on the work being done turn this reorientation into reality. The CoE will be particularly active on the key themes of academic freedom, the democratisation of science, and the challenges posed by digital technologies and artificial intelligence.

Vanessa Debiais-Sainton, Head of Unit for Higher Education in the Commission's Directorate General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, drew a connection to this growing topic of universities recognising their democratic mission. Higher education is indeed a foundation for responsible citizenship that enables young people gain the green and digital skills needed by an evolving and competitive labour market in Europe. Therefore, innovative approaches are needed in education and teaching. Vanessa Debiais-Sainton noted that discussions on the blueprint for a future joint European degree would need to focus on accreditation. The design and delivery of joint degrees would benefit from the framework of the existing Bologna Process. A question and answer round also gave participants the chance to discuss updates on developing policy files, such as the Council Recommendation on attractive academic careers.

Adapting Education to Evolving Landscapes

The panel discussion opened with a call from **Elisa Gambardella**, President of the Lifelong Learning Platform for stakeholders to rethink the silos dotting the education landscape. Promoting a holistic approach to higher education plays a crucial role in the creation and dissemination of knowledge. This field has seen the gains from bridging transnational boundaries. Building relations with civil society and expanding the scope of learning activities would only strengthen higher education. **Stéphane Lauwick**, President of the European Quality Assurance Register presented the role of his organisation as an enabler of transnational cooperation and asserted that the field is moving towards lifelong learners. In times when the frameworks and practices of education are being questioned **Liviu Matei**, Head of the King's College London School of Education, Communication & Society shared his thoughts on the current trajectory of the massification of education. These discussions have awakened aspirations as well as questions. For instance, the idea that universities

can be more than national, which is embedded in some of the discourse on the European Universities alliances and joint European degree.

Building a Transnational European Education

Anna-Lena Claeys-Kulik, Deputy Director for Policy Coordination & Foresight, European University Association discussed the objectives and sustainability of EU initiatives. This has been a concern for stakeholders, particularly members of the European Universities alliances. **Rita Dias** pointed that EU policymakers should remember that many institutions and students remain outside these initiatives. The evolving landscape of higher education is then both an opportunity for adaptation as well as a time to ensure the accessibility, inclusivity, and importance of universities. The panellists also pondered whether the Bologna Process was achieving European ambitions fast enough. **Horia Onița** discussed the arguments made in favour of microcredentials, that they would garner inclusivity and employability for students. **Marie-Hélène Jobin** offered the view that microcredentials formed one part in a broader effort to make European universities world-leading education providers and empower academics to be educational diplomats.

UNICA's Partnerships with ESU and ESN

In a significant development aimed at fostering greater collaboration in education and research, UNICA formalised its partnership with ESU and ESN with a signing ceremony during the event's education session. UNICA President Sorin Costreie signed the respective Memoranda of Understanding with Horia Onița, President of ESU and Rita Dias, President of ESN. This moment at the UNICA Days marks one more step on a long path of beneficial collaboration between the three organisations.

III. Spokesperson's Session

A special session of the event featured a speech by and conversation with **Delphine Colard**, Head of the Spokesperson's Unit and Deputy Spokesperson of the European Parliament. With the session marking 100 days before the European elections, Delphine Colard discussed the important role of universities in fostering civic education and youth engagement with the elections. 2024 is a prominent year for elections and an important year for democracy. This moment gives Europeans

an occasion to look back on the changes we have seen. 2020 was shaped by the coronavirus pandemic, which sparked new conversations on dependencies to China and efforts to procure vaccines and medicines across Europe. 2022 saw the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Europeans are also acting on the climate emergency and responding to digital challenges. Finally, the EU is discussing whether to change itself, its procedures and membership. Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia have now joined the countries negotiating their accession to the Union.

"At a time when the world is facing wars and crises, we need more universities like you. We need more people who are committed to strengthening democratic debates, where ideas for a better future can be debated. The teaching of critical thinking that you, universities, are teaching is of such importance in a world where disinformation is used to seek polarisation and chaos."

Delphine Colard



The ensuing conversation, moderated by **Anastas Gerdjikov**, former Rector of Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" and UNICA Steering Committee Member, allowed participants to delve deeper into the European Parliament's efforts on disinformation and its role in engaging young voters. Academics have had a key role in clarifying the concepts and practices of disinformation actors. **Ignasi Salvadó-Estivill**, Director of Alianza 4 Universidades highlighted the science-based knowledge being produced at universities that could reinforce the work of policy communities. Universities are indeed a crucial part of the wider effort to build civic resilience to tactics that flood information channels and reduce democratic spaces so that people disengage. Delphine Colard noted that across Europe groups of young citizens, many of whom will have the chance to vote for the first time, were starting local initiatives to encourage their peers to vote. Universities have the opportunity to support their students in this endeavour.

UNICA's Partnership with the European Parliament

The session featured a message of thanks from Delphine Colard to the European Parliament's Youth Outreach Unit and UNICA for achieving the institution's first Communication Partnership with a university network. This collaboration stands as a testimony to the UNICA Network's commitment to a vision of civic universities. The partnership features joint efforts to foster democratic engagement through initiatives such as the Vote for Europe campaign and events such as the European Youth Week.

IV. Research Session

The session on **the visions for a new European research & innovation strategy** opened with a video message from **Maria da Graça Carvalho**, Member of the European Parliament. In her message, she reiterated a call for the next Framework Programme budget to be expanded and for it to enhance the current orientation towards research excellence, widening participation, funding innovation, creating synergies, simplifying instruments and the communication of project results.

"The next European Commission and Parliament will work to ensure that the European Union remains attractive, competitive, and creates opportunities for the next generation. We must boost higher education, science, and innovation."

Maria da Graça Carvalho



The session's chair **Marius Gilbert**, Vice Rector for Research and Valorisation at the Université libre de Bruxelles set the stage for the panel discussion by sharing a personal experience that spoke to the heart of the evolving role of researchers in a changing world. As the coronavirus outbreak turned into a worldwide emergency in 2020 scientists without experience in politics or communications were called on to advise the government and speak to the media out of urgent necessity. These diverse communities gradually overcame their own ways of working and talking to better collaborate together in the face of a common mission. Thanks to steady improvisation and mutual learning journalists soon became fluent in the vocabularies of specialised subjects such as epidemiology.

Adapting Research to Changing Times

The results of years of investment in fundamental research were also seen in the rapid development and availability of vaccines. However, some initially visible challenges persisted throughout the pandemic. The interfacing between researchers and society was not enough to alleviate tendencies towards vaccine hesitancy. Academics often found the notions of science and technology to be conflated. Aversions to technological tools could then lead to distrust of the broader scientific process. In these moments, the presence of social scientists was missed. The response to the pandemic had not broken a more general academic propensity to work in silos. These observations informed three currents of the panel discussion that followed. That conversation began with a strong sense that the success of any vision for the future of research in Europe would rest on more than the dissemination of scientific knowledge throughout the public, rather the fostering of a genuine scientific culture among the citizens.

"Science is viewed as something that produces certainties and makes discoveries; most people do not see it as something that evolves."

Marius Gilbert



The session also featured an acknowledgement of the crises Europe faces today. **Claude Catala**, President of the Academic Senate of Paris Sciences et Lettres University raised the point we will indeed face new crises in the future where our capacity for innovation may be a key factor in the survival of our civilisation. This forms a clear argument for the valorisation of fundamental research, which is the seed of innovation. In times of crisis we need curiosity. A key component to this spirit of inquiry is interdisciplinarity. At the event's opening session **Minister Papič** raised the point that, at a university, there are as many answers to a problem as there are research communities. Claude Catala's response at the research session was that perhaps the views of universities are complicated because the problems we see in reality are multifaceted. Sorin Costreie shared his personal experience as a philosopher of mathematics, a field that shows the importance of conversations among the formal, natural, and social sciences. They share a common aim in the pursuit of truth, which can be achieved together from different angles.

Balancing Science and Technology

The importance of building bridges between academic communities also highlighted the relationship between science and technology. **Dan Andréé**, Brussels Representative of the Stockholm Trio University Alliance presented the argument that the EU's Framework Programme can be regarded as more of a political instrument than a research programme, since its most important function is to support innovation that addresses the priorities identified by the European Commission. At present, this gives a special weight to the green and digital transitions. While the successive Framework Programmes have seen increased overall budgets since the first in 1984, their specific support to fundamental research in Pillar II has seen a proportional decrease. These discussions, ahead of the start of the EU's tenth Framework Programme in 2028, are an opportunity to reimagine this balance.

European funding instruments are nevertheless an important complement to national funding mechanisms. **Helena Roche**, Vice President for Research, Innovation and Impact of University College Dublin made this point to reiterate that a budget of €200 billion for the next Framework Programme is requested and needed by research communities across the EU. This is particularly true for universities in countries where research and development investment remains below the target 3% of gross domestic product set at the European Council Barcelona Meeting in 2002. This should benefit scientists contributing to projects at each and every level of technological readiness. Indeed a forward-looking programme will go further to valorise transnational and interdisciplinary cooperation while recognising that the EU itself may soon be larger, as more countries aspire to join.

Charting a Course to the Next Horizon

The evolution of the EU's policies and instruments serves as a reminder of the value of exchanges between academics and policy communities. **Ariadni Terzopoulou**, Leader of the European Research Area Governance Team at the Commission's Directorate-General for Research and Innovation commend the efforts of elected representatives and university leaders in raising awareness for the importance of the next Framework Programme. The ensuing discussion delved into the areas where policies impact programmes and where programmes impact science. These included the need for administrative streamlining, the value of disciplinary diversity, the weight of indicators on researcher's choices, and the challenges faced by coordinators who manage transnational partnerships.

In this shared effort to mark the bridges that are needed to connect communities, the panellists also pointed to one crucial relationship, that between the researchers of the present and the future. Claude Catala reminded the participants of **Rita Dias'** comment from the education session, that among the students of today there are the researchers of tomorrow. Marius Gilbert gave a closing statement for the session that emphasised the importance for universities to be ambassadors for science. In times of stability or crisis and in conversation with citizens or elected representatives, research offers the answers that make our visions for the future possible.

V. Liaison Officers' Session

The event concluded with a session dedicated to the liaison offices and officers representing universities in Brussels, chaired by **Dimitrios Karadimas**, former Vice Rector of the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens and Member of the UNICA Steering Committee. The prior vision-oriented discussions were given shape as colleagues with different backgrounds and diverse institutions shared practice-based experiences and advice on how they gave a voice to their respective universities. The session began with a presentation on UnLiON, Universities Informal Liaison Offices Network, by **Massimo Busuoli**, Director of the NTNU Brussels Office and Chair of the UnLiON Secretariat. The informal network provides its membership of over 50 offices representing more than 150 universities with an arena of exchange where the participants share information, nurture collaboration and multiply news.

A liaison office in Brussels can offer its institution a presence in policy discussions and insights into developments for international cooperation and funding programmes. For that offer to have meaningful impact liaison officers also need to be integrated into conversations within their

university. **Brandusa Bitel**, Brussels Representative and Deputy Director of Research and Development of the Carol Davila University of Medicine and Pharmacy shared how her dual role enables her to connect with the university's leadership responsible for research and internationalisation. **Ignasi Salvadó-Estivill**, Director of the Alianza 4 Universidades emphasised the value of universities developing an institutional strategy in facilitating his engagement on their behalf.

The priorities of a representative also need to adapt to the changing times. **Orsolya Lugmayer**, Liaison Officer for Eötvös Loránd University and Corvinus University of Budapest described how her familial relationship with the academic leaderships and constituents remained constant while her focus may shift to new areas, such as research security. **Eduardo Raul Sánchez Custodio**, European Research and Innovation Projects Officer of Rey Juan Carlos University and University of Alcalá shared his view of a family conversation where the focus can travel from university initiatives for democratic engagement to legislative developments for digital technologies.

Universities also exist as constituents of cities, regions, and countries. The liaison offices with such a wider geographic base were able to share how universities can engage in broader discussions beyond higher education policy. **Birgitte Wederking**, Director of the Greater Copenhagen EU Office described how representing research-intensive universities as part of their metropolitan region gives their office the means to better connect research-makers to research-users. **Markos Papadopoulos**, Brussels Coordinator of the European Office of Cyprus noted that representing different interests required an organisational culture of fairness and compromise.

The session concluded with a parting offer from UNICA President **Sorin Costreie** to build on this session to continue the beneficial exchange of ideas and experiences between the two networks. He extended an invitation to the many UNICA member universities without a permanent presence in Brussels to consider the UNICA network as their liaison to the EU, which can share their vision for the democracy, education, and research of the future.

Conclusions

The first edition of the UNICA Days represents an important step on the path towards a democratic, inclusive, and innovative future for the higher education environment and its constituents. The event's aim, to chart a course towards a shared vision for institutions with a societal mission is one that resonates across Europe's universities. The knowledge gained and relationships made over these three days will continue to impact this journey in the months and years ahead.

Ahead of the European elections, the event emphasised the importance of universities fostering student engagement and a civic spirit. Democracy cannot be taken for granted. Young people

across the EU will soon have their first opportunity to cast a vote and raise their voice for the future they hope for. Universities will play a pivotal role in providing spaces for debate and reliable information on participation.

The evolving landscape of transnational cooperation in higher education was discussed at the event. Many perspectives deserve a seat at the table. It is imperative that EU policymakers and university communities continue to work together on the ambitious initiatives that have the potential to make Europe a world-leading destination for learning and teaching.

The conference highlighted the vital contribution of scientific research in addressing the problems of today and building the future of tomorrow. The achievements of university researchers are deeply tied to the successes of policy, learning, and technological innovation. The nature of research itself is adapting, as there is a greater understanding for the value of perspectives that bring together diverse disciplines. Supporting this endeavour to understand and interact with the complex world humanity inhabits means supporting both fundamental and applicable research.

These discussions were greatly enhanced by the exchange of ideas with representatives of Europe's students. They offered valuable insights into key topics, including the struggle against online disinformation, the learning experiences unlocked by mobility, and the early integration into a culture of scientific excellence. A vision for the higher education sector must focus on the students of today, as they will be the policymakers, educators, and researchers of tomorrow.

UNICA is proud to have been able to deliver this event at such an auspicious moment before the elections and such a distinguished location at the European Parliament. Thanks to this collective effort from the network, its partners, and guests, the universities from the capitals of Europe are one step ahead as they navigate the future.





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