



University of Zagreb



## Science|Business Widening Initiative event

### “FOSTERING INNOVATIVE CAREERS”

**Organized by UNICA, University of Zagreb,  
Science|Business and UNIC European University**

**Hosted by the University of Zagreb**

**Thursday, 26 – Friday, 27 March 2026**

#### Background and Rationale

In recent months, European policy debates have increasingly centred on how to reboot the continent's economy in a fast-changing global environment – not least in response to the US' new approach to Transatlantic cooperation. As cooperation between major nations gives way to sharper competition and polarisation, Europe is being forced to confront structural weaknesses that have accumulated over time – and, more urgently, to agree on major reforms that might reverse current trends and restore longer-term parity with the US and China.

Against this backdrop, the Presidents of the European Council and Commission recently announced a new “One Europe, One Market” roadmap and action plan – intended to strengthen competitiveness and strategic autonomy – which will be presented in March and delivered by end 2027. While this approach reinforces EU policy-making as the locus of power, it also highlights an enduring tension. Namely, that while the institutions can agree to act on universal challenges (such as COVID, energy or critical raw materials), issues whose urgency varies significantly across member states – including talent shortages and skills mismatches – receive less attention. Yet it is precisely these national and regional bottlenecks that will determine whether Europe can translate strategic ambition into tangible economic and societal gains.

In this respect, the European Research Area (ERA) offers a useful example of both the potential and the limitations of EU-level coordination. Its added value has been widely recognised for over two decades, but its implementation remains highly uneven, particularly with regard to the percentage of GDP member-states invest in research and innovation. Similarly, for the key recommendations of the “**Align, Act, Accelerate**” report to become reality, scientific communities across the EU27 would have find new ways to align and work with practitioners whose skills complement their more narrow areas of expertise and specialisation. The EIT's knowledge triangle model offers one well-tested approach to doing so, supporting entrepreneurial skills development, while the upcoming ERA Act will push these forms of cooperation a step further.

A comparable shift in perspective is now required in **the European Higher Education Area (EHEA)**. Universities must be repositioned and reinforced as core strategic assets for Europe's competitiveness, with a renewed focus on their three-dimensional role in talent creation. Europe



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needs top-level professionals – including researchers, innovators, managers and civil servants – who are not only capable of understanding not only the potential of cutting-edge research and technologies, but also their deployment to achieve the goals of specific policies. In this context, European competitiveness will increasingly depend on the strength of universities and their cross-border collaborations, supported by instruments such as **Erasmus+** and **European Universities Alliances**.

This agenda is reflected in the mandate set out for the European Commission Vice-President responsible for social rights and skills, quality jobs and preparedness, including work on the **European Education Area** to promote a common approach to skills development, learning mobility, quality and inclusiveness. Key initiatives include the **strengthening of Erasmus+**, progress towards a **European Degree**, continued support for **European Universities Alliances**, the development of an **EU Teachers Agenda** to improve working conditions and career prospects, and the exploration of a **European Schools Alliance** to enhance cross-border cooperation and mobility. On March 26-27, the Science|Business Widening initiative – in partnership with the UNICA Network and UNIC Alliance, and hosted by the University of Zagreb – will convene a high-level public debate of ways to foster innovative careers as a critical element of strengthening European economies and public services. Bringing together influential organisations from east and west, north and south, the conference will explore the pivotal role of universities in developing Europe's innovation potential and fuelling the skills pipelines across sectors that will enable the EU to compete and thrive in an uncertain world.



### Strategic Relevance

This conference is timely. The Commission Policy Work Programme will shape the 5<sup>th</sup> freedom, via several policies and draft legislative initiatives. While the ambition and the expectations are high, the freedom alone will not result in a change. It depends on the local university stakeholders' courage and ambition.



### Objectives and expected outcomes

The conference aims to address the following **key objectives**:

- To **elaborate the role of universities** to support the EU ambition on competitiveness.
- To discuss the **evolution of the 5<sup>th</sup> Freedom for the Education**, and understand the **hindering factors**.
- To highlight the **opportunities for the talent** entering the labour market from universities.
- To support the articulation of a **Science|Business report** that reflects key recommendations and perspectives from the speakers and participants.

The **main outcome** will be a **report coordinated by Science|Business**, reflecting the discussions, insights and recommendations of key stakeholders. This paper will be disseminated broadly to inform the UNICA membership and the European level stakeholders.



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University of Zagreb | Thursday, 26 – Friday, 27 March 2026

**Venue:** University of Zagreb, Rectorate, Hall A1 (ground floor) |

Address: Radoslava Cimermana 88, Zagreb

**DRAFT PROGRAMME** (as of 3 March 2026)

**Overall Chair: Edit Herczog**, Chair, Science|Business Widening Initiative

#### Thursday, 26 March

12:00-13:00	Registration & Welcome lunch
<b>13:00-13:30</b>	<b>Welcome addresses</b>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Jurica Pavičić</b>, Vice-Rector for International and Inter-Institutional Cooperation, University of Zagreb</li> <li>• <b>Edit Herczog</b>, Chair, Science Business Widening Initiative</li> <li>• <b>Luciano Saso</b>, UNICA Secretary General</li> </ul>
<b>13:30-14:00</b>	<b>Keynote speech</b>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Manuel Heitor</b>, Full Professor, Instituto Superior Técnico, University of Lisbon, former Secretary of State for Science, Technology and Higher Education in the Government of Portugal</li> </ul>



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14:00-15:30	<b>Session 1   Research careers in Academia</b>
	<p><b>Chair: Luciano Saso</b>, UNICA Secretary General</p> <p><b>Speakers</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Archie Clements</b>, Pro-Vice Chancellor Research and Enterprise, Queen's University Belfast</li> <li>• <b>Marcela Linková</b>, Head, Centre for Gender and Science, Institute of Sociology, Czech Academy of Sciences</li> <li>• <b>Simon Marti</b>, Head of the Council for Doctoral Education, European University Association</li> <li>• <b>Miroslav Rajter</b>, Associate Professor, Faculty of Law, University of Zagreb</li> <li>• <b>Vladislav Slavov</b>, Head of International Programs and Exchange Sector, Technical University of Sofia</li> <li>• <b>Mostafa Moonir Shawrav</b>, Executive Director, Marie Curie Alumni Association</li> </ul> <p><b>Q&amp;A</b></p>
15:30-16:00	Coffee break
16:00-17:30	<b>Session 2   Careers in the public sector from local to European</b>
	<p><b>Chair:</b> TBC</p> <p><b>Speakers</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Erwan Marteil</b>, Head of Unit, Strategy and Policy - Prevention and Preparedness Capacity building, DG ECHO, European Commission (TBC)</li> <li>• <b>Goranka Lalić Novak</b>, Assistant Professor, Faculty of Law, University of Zagreb</li> <li>• <b>Gabrijela Radić</b>, Managing Director, Head of Split Office, RISE Research and Innovation Services</li> </ul> <p><b>Q&amp;A</b></p>
19:30	Networking dinner (venue TBC)



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## Friday, 27 March

8:30-9:00 Welcome coffee

### 9:00-10:30 Session 3 | Job creation

**Chair: Denitsa Nikolova**, Programme Manager, Science|Business

#### Speakers

- **Nina Begičević Ređep**, Professor, Faculty of Organization and Informatics, University of Zagreb
- **Miro Hegedić**, EIT Community Officer, EIT Community Hub Croatia; Partner, Smion
- **Gabriela Kostovska Bogoeska**, Director, Foundation for Management and Industrial Research

#### Q&A

10:30-11:00 Coffee break

### Session 4 | How to win the future?

11:00-12:30

**Chair: Edit Herczog**, Chair, Science|Business Widening Initiative

#### Speakers

- **Eszter Salamon**, CEO, Parents International
- **Gojko Bežovan**, Professor, Faculty of Law, University of Zagreb
- **Dipti Pandya**, Chair of the European Association for Research Managers and Administrators (EARMA); Director of Research, University College Dublin; Co-Chair, International Network of Research Management Societies (INORMS)

#### Q&A

12:30-12:45 Concluding remarks & closing

12:45-13:45 Farewell lunch