



UNICA Strategic Plan

2026 - 2027



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

UNICA - Network of Universities from the Capitals of Europe presents its 2026–2027 Strategy, building on the achievements of previous years and responding to the dynamic European higher education landscape.

With headquarters in Brussels and a unique position at the intersection of academia, policy, and civic engagement, UNICA strengthens the role of **capital-city universities as engines of knowledge, innovation, and societal impact**.

The strategy is structured around **five Strategic Objectives**: advancing innovative, digital, and inclusive learning while safeguarding academic freedom; fostering policy dialogue and strategic partnerships; promoting sustainability and the green transition; enhancing research and innovation capacity; and strengthening universities' civic and urban engagement.

Each objective is linked to measurable actions, indicators, and targets, ensuring accountability and tangible results.

Implementation is guided by **four Strategic Pillars**: empower institutions, connect universities, advocate for higher education, inspire change. These pillars provide the **operational framework to mobilise the network**, facilitate peer learning, foster collaboration, and amplify member universities' voices at European and global levels.

By **combining ambition with actionable strategies**, UNICA strategic plan 2026–2027 supports its members in addressing contemporary challenges, scaling innovative practices, and reinforcing the societal, democratic, and global contribution of capital-city universities.

This strategy underscores UNICA's commitment to shaping a stronger, more inclusive, and sustainable European higher education and Research landscape.

CONTEXT AND STRATEGIC POSITIONING

UNICA enters the 2026–2027 period with renewed ambition and a **clear sense of responsibility to strengthen the role of capital-city universities as engines of knowledge, innovation, and civic engagement**, while amplifying their collective voice in Europe and beyond.

This period coincides with the **final years of Erasmus+ and Horizon Europe in their current forms**, creating a critical moment to consolidate achievements in education, research, and institutional cooperation and to **prepare strategically for future European frameworks**.

At the same time, UNICA's mission extends beyond programme cycles, responding to a **wider geopolitical and societal context marked by growing instability, disinformation, and declining trust in democratic institutions**, where universities play a vital role as spaces of critical inquiry, evidence-based debate, and international cooperation.

Positioned at the heart of Europe's capitals and headquartered in Brussels, UNICA occupies a unique space at the intersection of academic expertise, public policy, and civic life, enabling the network to **translate institutional experience into European dialogue** and to support its members in addressing shared challenges.

Building on the achievements of the 2024–2025 strategy and structured around a clear set of strategic objectives and pillars, the 2026–2027 strategy provides a **coherent framework to strengthen collaboration, enhance impact, and reinforce the long-term contribution of capital-city universities to Europe's societal, democratic, and global ambitions**.

STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES AND PILLARS

The UNICA Strategy for 2026–2027 translates the priorities of the 2024–2025 Strategic Plan into a focused framework for implementation and measurable impact, based on **five objectives and four pillars**, to ensure coherence between ambition, implementation, and impact.

This Strategic Plan ensures **continuity with UNICA's long-term vision** while responding to the evolving policy, institutional, and societal context of European higher education. It **supports member universities during a decisive period** characterised by the conclusion of major EU funding programmes, increasing expectations regarding universities' societal roles, and the need for stronger collective positioning at European level.

 **Strategic Objectives** define the outcomes UNICA aims to achieve over the 2026–2027 period.

They are **thematic, measurable, and aligned with European policy priorities**, addressing key areas such as innovative and inclusive education, research and innovation, sustainability, civic engagement, and policy dialogue.

 They answer the question: *What outcomes does UNICA aim to deliver for its members and for the European higher education community in the next two years?*

 **Strategic Pillars** define how these objectives are achieved.

They represent the **operational and programmatic approaches** through which UNICA mobilises its network, expertise, and institutional capacity.

 They answer the question: *Through which mechanisms, modes of engagement, and collective actions will UNICA deliver its objectives?*

STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES

UNICA delivers its impact during the 2026–2027 period through **five Strategic Objectives**:

01

Advance innovative, digital, and inclusive learning, while safeguarding academic freedom

02

Foster policy dialogue, stakeholder engagement, and strategic partnerships

03

Promote sustainability and the green transition

04

Strengthen research and innovation capacity and excellence

05

Enhance universities' civic and urban engagement and foster the active participation of students and alumni

01

UNICA supports its members in developing **innovative and inclusive teaching and learning** practices, strengthening digital education, and reaffirming **academic freedom** as a fundamental value underpinning European higher education.

02

UNICA strengthens its role as a **platform for dialogue** between universities, policymakers, and stakeholders, contributing collective, evidence-based input to European higher education, research, and innovation policy.

03

UNICA facilitates collaboration and peer learning on **sustainability, climate action, and green campus** practices, supporting universities in advancing European and global sustainability objectives.

04

UNICA enhances cooperation, policy engagement, and capacity-building in **research and innovation**, supporting member universities in addressing European priorities and increasing their competitiveness and societal impact.

05

UNICA promotes deeper engagement between universities, cities, civil society, students, and alumni, recognising the central role of capital-city universities in fostering **inclusive, democratic, and resilient urban environments**.

STRATEGIC PILLARS

The five Strategic Objectives are implemented through **four Strategic Pillars**, which structure UNICA's operational approach and ensure effective delivery across the network. The pillars provide continuity across thematic areas while allowing flexibility to respond to emerging needs.



Expected results:

- Stronger institutional leadership in sustainability, digitalisation, and civic engagement
- Increased readiness to implement European reforms and participate in EU funding programmes

Expected results:

- Strong institutional connections and increased joint initiatives
- A culture of collaboration and mutual learning across the network

Expected results:

- Greater visibility of member universities' interests
- Institutional perspectives reflected in EU policy debates

Expected Results:

- Increased visibility of higher education's societal impact
- Scaling of innovative and transferable approaches

ALIGNMENT WITH EUROPEAN POLICY FRAMEWORKS

UNICA plays a strategic and bridging role in advancing European education and research policies. It connects institutional realities with EU-level frameworks, ensuring that policy is not only understood but shaped, tested, and implemented through higher education institutions deeply embedded in national and civic ecosystems.

UNICA's actions directly support the implementation of key EU policy frameworks and initiatives, including:

- The **European Education Area (EEA)** and **European Higher Education Area (EHEA)**
- The **Digital Education Action Plan (2021–2027)**
- The **European Strategy for Universities**
- The **European Green Deal**
- The **European Research Area (ERA)**
- The **Union of Equality, European Skills Agenda**, and **European Pillar of Social Rights**
- The **Competitiveness Compass**

And evolving initiatives such as the **Erasmus+ Programme**, **Horizon Europe**, and the **European Universities alliances**.

How UNICA's activities address these priorities.

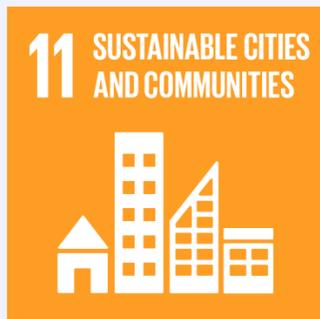
UNICA operationalises these frameworks through a structured programme of member-led activities addressing a range of topics within the main thematic clusters, including capacity-building workshops, policy dialogue events, and strategic publications. All are designed to empower HE institutions, inform EU decision-making, and strengthen the civic and social mission of higher education.

ALIGNMENT WITH GLOBAL POLICY FRAMEWORKS

While UNICA's activities are primarily anchored in European policy priorities, the network also aligns its work with selected global policy frameworks, in particular the **United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)**. This alignment reflects the role of universities as global actors and knowledge hubs, while remaining grounded in UNICA's core mission and areas of action.



UNICA aligns with SDG 4, in particular targets 4.3, 4.4, and 4.7, by promoting inclusive, **high-quality higher education**, lifelong learning, and **skills development**. Through capacity building, peer learning, and policy dialogue, UNICA supports digital transformation, **academic freedom**, and **education for sustainable development**, contributing to **global citizenship** and institutional resilience.



UNICA's focus on the civic and urban role of universities aligns with SDG 11, notably targets 11.3 and 11.1. By **fostering collaboration between universities, local authorities, students, and civil society in capital cities**, UNICA contributes to inclusive and sustainable urban development and to the role of higher education institutions as drivers of community engagement.



UNICA contributes to SDG 17, particularly targets 17.16 and 17.17, through **structured cooperation among universities, policymakers, and partners**. Its network-based approach strengthens multi-stakeholder partnerships, knowledge exchange, and coordinated action at European and international level.

MONITORING AND REPORTING

Implementation of the 2026 Work Plan will be monitored throughout the year through quantitative indicators and qualitative feedback. Results will inform internal reporting, annual reviews, and future planning, ensuring continuous improvement and accountability across the network.

CONCLUSION

The UNICA Strategy 2026–2027 positions capital-city universities at the forefront of Europe’s academic, societal, and civic life. By focusing on innovative and inclusive learning, sustainability, research excellence, policy engagement, and urban and civic involvement, the strategy strengthens the capacity of member institutions to respond to evolving challenges and opportunities.

This strategy reflects **UNICA’s commitment to nurturing resilient, forward-looking universities** that serve their communities, contribute to evidence-based policy, and reinforce the democratic and societal foundations of Europe.

Learn more about UNICA at unica-network.eu



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