

STATEMENT ON THE FUTURE OF EUROPE

ANCHOR EDUCATION, RESEARCH & INNOVATION FIRMLY IN THE FUTURE OF EUROPE

The Conference on the Future of Europe will identify the most pressing challenges for our continent in the decade ahead. Any conceivable answer to these challenges will necessarily have as its point of departure education, research, and innovation. That is why we plead for anchoring knowledge – broadly conceived – in the proceedings and outcomes of the Conference.

Knowledge is the starting point for European answers

Two years into the health crisis, we have seen the fundamental contribution of knowledge (broadly conceived as education, research, and innovation) to society. Developing a vaccine against Covid-19 has led to over 75% of the EU population being fully vaccinated following tremendous cooperation and coordination by European researchers & innovators. To overcome the crisis and rebuild the economy, Europe has decided to invest along two axes: the green and the digital transitions. Wherever this could be of interest, education, research, and innovation are ready to contribute and to help address the challenges that come with these transitions. For instance, the shift to digital education took a great swing, supported by acceleration plans for educational innovation with IT¹, but the crisis also laid bare the growing risk of inequality among youth. The looming climate crisis also poses a great risk to future generations, and we must bundle and prioritize efforts as we did for battling Covid-19. That is why we believe that knowledge should be centre stage in the outcomes of the Conference on the Future of Europe. EU citizens have expressed in several recent Eurobarometers² that we should invest more in education and research. Now is the time for follow-up.

The Dutch knowledge community stands ready to contribute

The education, research and innovation organisations of the Netherlands stand ready to contribute to the twin transitions. It is our responsibility to align education, research, and innovation with the needs, values, and expectations of society to ensure all citizens can reap the benefits of knowledge. A few recent examples demonstrate the commitment of the entire knowledge sector. The results of the H2020 Green Deal call show the great interest among Dutch publicly funded research institutions in providing solutions for wicked problems in interdisciplinary, collaborative EU projects focused on EU added value. Cooperation in public-private partnerships, such as the Centres of Vocational Excellence and Expertise, builds regional ecosystems around all levels of education, research and innovation, penetrating the very fabric of society. This year's intergovernmental treaty on the automatic recognition of higher education qualifications shows how the Netherlands and its partners from the Benelux and Baltics can form a blueprint and field lab for European enhanced cooperation on education³.

¹ SURF, VSNU, VH - [Acceleration plan for educational innovation with IT](#)
saMBO-ICT – [Press ahead digitalisation](#)

² [Special Eurobarometer 500: Future of Europe, Eurobarometer on European citizens' knowledge and attitudes towards science and technology, Flash Eurobarometer 497 - Citizens' awareness and perception of EU regional policy](#)

³ [Benelux/Baltic cooperation in higher education: Multilateral Treaty on automatic recognition of qualifications](#)

Developing a true European Knowledge Area

Answers to the challenges to Europe's future depend on the free movement of knowledge. Building a European Knowledge Area, in which education, research and innovation thrive, starts by connecting the many blocks on the European knowledge chain to eventually integrate regional ecosystems into a pan-European knowledge ecosystem. This calls for further integration and strategic support for innovation at EU level. We look forward to working together with the French presidency and the European Commission to develop this further. Accelerating the development of the European Research Area (ERA), European Education Area (EEA) and the innovation agenda will require (financial) commitment at European, national, regional as well as institutional level to build a pan-European knowledge infrastructure.

European strategic autonomy hinges on our knowledge base

Knowledge is one of Europe's primary resources. However, current geopolitical developments remind us that Europe is at a crossroads, raising the question of how Europe can achieve open strategic autonomy in a multilateral world. In our view, innovation, research and digitalisation play a determining role in global politics. International cooperation and coordination in research, innovation & education are therefore key to ensuring both the EU's future sustainability and its role on the world stage. We will need to formulate a European answer, namely building up our excellent knowledge base as a necessary precondition for achieving open strategic autonomy and tech sovereignty and strengthening and expanding this knowledge base towards industry via technology infrastructures. In this regard, we support the increased focus on aforementioned aspects in the green and digital agenda of the Commission. Legislative frameworks such as Fit for 55 and the Digital Decade can be an effective instrument to project soft power, and their design should establish the conditions that allow research and innovation to flourish, for example through the use of the innovation principle. Therefore, knowledge should prevail in all policies as a prerequisite for geopolitical muscle.

Investing in knowledge is key

To remain competitive in the world, Europe must raise public investments in research, education, and innovation. Knowledge is the only resource that grows with use: recent research shows the standard of living of Dutch citizens will grow by 10% in 2040 if the Netherlands commits to the Lisbon target⁴. This principle also applies to Europe at large. Supporting inclusive education and research across the chain, for instance through structural and temporary recovery & resilience investments, will generate new knowledge, leading to an even higher return on investment. Without a structural investment of 3% of GDP in R&D, the implementation of the green and digital agendas will inevitably be delayed, with considerable risk for Europe's competitive edge.

The Conference on the Future of Europe is a major opportunity to rethink Europe's priorities for the 21st century. Together we must find a firm role for education, research, and innovation in the conference proceedings, lest we ignore the sectors that will provide the solutions to Europe's most pressing problems. We are open to engage in the dialogue or debate on this.

⁴ Hugo Erken, Frank van Es & Erik-Jan van Harn - Nut en noodzaak van (publieke) kennisinvesteringen