

Exploring Possible Futures of Transnational Cooperation of European Universities to Enhance Resilience

Anna-Lena Claeys-Kulik and Thomas Jørgensen

The sense that we are living in uncertain times with accelerated change at various levels is widespread. War, economic instability, artificial intelligence, migration and refugees, political polarization and democratic backsliding—and above all climate change and the sustainability challenge—are driving change for universities, for Europe and for the world.

In such times, it is particularly important to take a step back from the daily hustle and bustle and think about the future strategically, using tools that spark the imagination, that help to envisage possible futures, prepare for different possibilities, and enhance resilience. In such times, certain paradigms are challenged, and we may need to find new ways of relating to and working with changing circumstances. This way, we can imagine and define new narratives of a future beyond the current multiple crises.

During the past years, the European University Association (EUA) has conducted an exercise to look at the implications of long-term trends for European universities, as well as imagining possible futures on the basis of these trends. The outcomes are distilled in the report [“What If? Exploring Possible Futures of Transnational Cooperation for Europe’s Universities.”](#) It explores likely influences on the future of university cooperation in Europe in the next decade, and analyses drivers of change in six dimensions: political, economic, societal, technological, legal, and environmental. The report outlines four forecasts of possible futures for transnational university cooperation.

The focus of the work has been on transnational cooperation. This has long been a key feature of Europe’s university landscape, including bilateral student exchange, small scale projects, research collaboration, and, more recently, deep strategic cooperation in the transnational alliances fostered by the European Universities Initiative. Cooperation across borders is part of the strength of the sector and is driving excellence and innovation. However, various crises and trends are impacting university cooperation and making it more complex. Therefore, it is important for universities to look at the future of transnational cooperation and work with different possible scenarios.

Four Possible and Imaginative Futures for University Cooperation

The report explores concrete situations: what if the international office closes because nationalist politics have made it irrelevant? Or to the contrary, how might a university rector handle the announcement of an ever-increasing influx of international students in a scenario where national student numbers are decreasing due to rapid demographic decline?

The report outlines four forecasts to describe possible futures for transnational cooperation between European universities: growth, constraint, collapse, and transformation. The analysis was inspired by the methodology of the Institute for the Future in Palo Alto, California.

Growth

International cooperation continues to grow as a key area of activity for universities. One important long-term trend here is demographic decline in Europe, and political strategies using immigration to keep local communities alive. Universities thrive on the

Abstract

The article explores possible futures of transnational cooperation of European universities outlining drivers of change and four forecasts developed in the context of the European University Association’s project “Universities and the Future of Europe” (UniFE). It makes a pledge for using foresight and futures thinking in combination with strategic decision-making to enhance the resilience of universities in times of uncertainty and accelerated change.

influx of international students, but communication to the wider community is delicate, as not everyone is comfortable with the influx of foreigners.

Constraint

Geopolitical division prompts European policy makers to limit universities' international ties.

Geopolitical division prompts European policy makers to limit universities' international ties. The European Union has enlarged eastwards and is a global power, so it uses academic cooperation as a carrot as well as a stick to further its international interests. Universities here try to follow shifting political agendas to seize opportunities and limit risks.

Collapse

In this scenario, a nationalist government has moved to force universities to “preserve the historic cultural composition of our territories,” and clamped down on international cooperation. Moreover, an environmental disaster has made flight travel prohibitively expensive. In this environment, transnational cooperation ceases as a strategic activity.

Transformation

European Union member states respond to geopolitical, economic, and demographic pressures by pooling competences and resources. University alliances grow into superuniversities in a single market for higher education within an enlarged European Union. This creates a distribution of labor in a two-tier system where smaller, national universities serve local communities and do not have access to EU research funds.

Forecasts as Tools for Reflection

These forecasts are intended as neither accurate predictions nor normative recommendations. They are tools for reflection and creative thinking, extrapolated from the drivers of change and intended to inspire discussion. All European universities would benefit from making futures thinking and strategic foresight methodologies part of their planning.

Doing so means first examining data and evidence; there are large and obvious trends that have the potential to upend universities' activities. However, there is a need to be precise about what are the facts and what is interpretation: demographic decline is factual, but terms like “populism” are normatively loaded and need to be defined more precisely to be constructively applied to forecasts. Rigor is needed to get forecasts and scenarios right. They need to be grounded in evidence of emerging trends, but bold enough to spark discussions and provoke new insights. Examining trends should be sober and factual, but not a straitjacket that blocks creative and agile thinking, leading to bold assumptions, lightly held.

Backcasting: From Vision to Strategy

As a second step, the forecasts and scenarios can then be analyzed looking at the impact they would have on universities. From there a picture of a preferred future, a vision can be put together. Following that a backcasting exercise can start to identify what needs to be done in the present to shape the future in a positive direction. Building forecasts for the future should deepen these exercises and imagine new types of outcomes and action. This is where using these methodologies has added value: to take participants out of their comfort zone and enable them to articulate new visions and actions.

Policy Development: From Foresight to Action

To achieve lasting impact, foresight must go hand-in-hand with strategic decision-making, in universities and at the policy level. This is why in combination with the foresight report, EUA has released policy messages that call for a renewed social contract for Europe and its universities. Here, the association lays out how universities and policy makers can work together to shape a strong, open and future-proof Europe: pointing to the importance of the governance of research and higher education at the European level, but first and foremost underlining the importance of universities contributing to society with their own voice and values, without being instrumentalized by external policy agendas.

One point that has received most attention in the “renewed contract” is the call for a “university check,” so that European Union regulation, for example in the digital field,

*Anna-Lena Claeys-Kulik is deputy director for policy coordination and foresight at the European University Association (EUA).
E-mail: anna.lena.kulik@eua.eu.
X: [@AnnaLenaKulik](https://twitter.com/AnnaLenaKulik)*

does not have unintended negative impact on universities. The attention to this specific issue could be a sign that higher education institutions are more integrated in society than in the past, with the consequence that regulation outside university walls have immediate impact: privacy rules have consequences for student data practices, and regulation of online platforms on repositories for open science and open education. This is a new frontier for the future of universities. ▲

Thomas Jørgensen is director for policy coordination and foresight at the European University Association (EUA). E-mail: thomas.jorgensen@eua.eu. X: [@Thomas_E_Jorgen](https://twitter.com/Thomas_E_Jorgen)

Abstract

The arrival of Javier Milei, an admirer of libertarian theorists such as Murray Rothbard or Friedrich Hayek, to the presidency of Argentina raises endless questions. For example, whether his almost exclusively economic free-market views will be able to provide answers to the current educational crisis, with four out of 10 university entrants dropping out during the first year. Likewise, will his privatizing vision affect the public financing of the scientific system and national universities?