

## **Policy Brief**

Innovating Higher Education –  
EIT launches a EUR 27 million call

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**May  
2021**

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## Introduction

The year of 2020 and its series of abrupt and unprecedented changes did not spare the field of higher education. With the start of the global pandemic in the spring of 2020, universities and research institutions were forced to transition a remote form of work, research and instruction. Having overcome the initial shock and transformation phase, a majority of higher education institutions are currently running their third semester partially or entirely online.

The past year thus brought fundamental changes in the way universities work, and boosted the debate about the very objectives and purpose of higher education. Debates over its efficiency and effectiveness were revived, deepening the existing argumentation divide between the advocates of quantitative outputs measurement (such as employability or GDP) on one hand, and qualitative social sciences approach geared towards intangible skills such as critical thinking, on the other.

In the meantime, students, supervisors and university staff have had to grapple with the transformed reality of remote teaching. While some celebrated its time flexibility, others claimed widespread negative impacts on mental health. Many students were forced to weigh the quality of student experience against the tuition expenses incurred. While these debates are far from over and resolved, one thing seems to be clear. The process of rapid digitization in order to deliver lectures and tutorials remotely is seen as revolutionary - as, in standard circumstances, it would have taken years to complete. On a more

strategic level, the tectonic shift of higher education is also seen as an opportunity to further improve and adapt the sector to the post-COVID new normal.

## EU boosting HigherEd Innovation

In this piece of [Europeum](#)'s Horizon Innovation series, we take a look at the innovation potential of higher education, in a sense of connecting universities with impactful startups and NGO initiatives. Beyond the described digital revolution, the issue of innovation and entrepreneurship, widely debated at universities and the relevant public-private fora long before the pandemic, now takes center stage. If ad hoc and contingency adaptation of higher education can be carried out so swiftly across levels, then planned and systematic innovations could have a large-scale, strategic impact on universities, professors, staff and students. A fresh look on the new ways how they can learn, do research, communicate and mobilize partner organizations - such as NGOs and startups in specific areas of expertise - is long overdue. Bringing together academic knowledge, research potential and practical experience can have a major impact – on universities, students and local startup scenes, not to mention the local communities.

Mobilizing such complex communities to harness their knowledge potential often requires nonnegligible organizational effort and funding. In any case, innovating along with companies, start-ups and research institutes gives the higher education sector an opportunity to recover from a difficult COVID experience to build back better. This not



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only refers to the relevance and impact of universities for their communities, but also for social and economic development of their localities and regions.

In other words, helping universities to facilitate innovation and (social) entrepreneurship by making meaningful connections to start-ups and research institutes can bring positive social and economic impacts. It is precisely the innovation capacity of higher education that is the objective of the HEI Initiative recently launched under the [European Institute of Innovation & Technology](#) (EIT).

## The EUR 27 million Innovation call currently open

The program titled [Innovation Capacity Building for Higher Education](#) falls under the 2021 – 2027 EIT Strategy, and its overall objective is to boost innovation and entrepreneurship at European higher education institutions. In line with the general funding priorities of the EU's Horizon framework, it builds on connecting higher education and research organizations across the EU to build capacities in the sector, which is key for future development and prosperity of Europe.

The program will fund 23 pilot projects - each one with a maximum budget of EUR 1.2 million – between 2021 and 2023. The HEI will support the following activities:

- Transforming institutions
- Connecting universities, business and research organizations
- Innovation and business support services
- Connecting education and entrepreneurship
- Mobilization of knowledge



Institutional change



Partnerships



Innovation



Entrepreneurship



Knowledge sharing

*Impact areas of EIT [Innovation Capacity Building for Higher Education](#), April 2021.*

To be eligible for funding, a *consortium of at least four organizations* must be formed. Three of these must be higher education institutions from different countries (at least one must be an existing partner of an [EIT KIC](#)). In addition, at least one consortium partner must be a different type of organization, such as a private company, start-up, research institute or a public agency.

The key objectives and timelines can be found in the [HEI Factsheet](#). Detailed guidelines are described in the [Pilot call for proposals](#). The call for applications is currently open, closing on the 25<sup>th</sup> May 2021.



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## Unleashing the innovation potential

The higher education sector across the EU has a lot to gain by supporting and enabling social entrepreneurship and innovation. Many universities and research centers have done so successfully - this is an opportunity for others to follow suit. The current funding initiatives could become seed investments that will ultimately lead to establishing regional university-research-industry clusters in many locations across Europe. In turn, these can boost regional employment and economic growth, and revive regions that would otherwise be left behind by the current transformation momentum. The unprecedented times of change, coupled with the current EU funding opportunities, can help build foundations for strategic development of higher education and industry – well beyond the 2027 funding milestone.



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## About the series

This EUROPEUM series addresses the transformative momentum of Europe which is met by the beginning of the 2021-2027 Horizon funding cycle. The latter gives Europe a unique opportunity to address the societal and environmental challenges ahead.

This series of articles introduces some of the key components and programs of Horizon's innovation pillar. For this purpose, it discusses the trends, objectives and specific program calls, focusing predominantly on areas of private-public collaboration, capacity building and higher education.

[More about the series](#)

## About the author

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## About EUROPEUM

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Co-funded by the  
Europe for Citizens Programme  
of the European Union