

EIT Higher Education Initiative

REIMAGING RESEARCH, INNOVATION AND EDUCATION

HOW INTEGRATED RIE
SYSTEMS CAN BOOST
EUROPE'S COMPETITIVENESS

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ABOUT THIS REPORT

EU policymakers regard the domains of research, innovation, education (RIE) and skills as critical to drive the EU's future competitiveness, resilience and autonomy in an increasingly turbulent world, characterised by geopolitical upheaval, rapid technological change, and intensifying global competition.

To address the new demands on Europe's talent and innovation systems, the EIT Higher Education Initiative conference on October 16 explored some of the key upgrades and innovations required to align RIE systems and organisations behind the EU's strategic agenda. Part of the two-day EIT Education and Skills Days, the conference focused on bold new models that will keep education at the forefront of innovation, and the role of universities in this evolution.

As the only EU funding programme targeted at innovation in higher education, the EIT Higher Education Initiative aims to connect educators and industry within Europe's largest innovation ecosystem, and ensure that innovation thrives. To date, the Initiative has invested more than €120 million, trained more than 118,000 people, and supported more than 2,000 start-ups.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The discussions during the conference gave rise to the following conclusions and recommendations:

TRANSFORMING EUROPE'S EDUCATION SYSTEM

- > The universities of the future should be learner-centred, opportunity-driven, and impact-oriented.
- > By prioritising relationships and social impact, rather than enrolment numbers, degrees, publications, or patents, universities could become platforms for collaborative innovation.
- > The educational system should be driven by the opportunity to choose an individual path and by the joy of learning.
- > Universities need to strike a better balance between traditional lectures and more practical industry-oriented learning. For example, more applied, modular formats, such as micro-credentials and professionally-oriented learning, may help re-engage students.
- > Diversity is the foundation of successful innovation and a key strength of European universities.
- > Finding teachers willing to embrace change is critical for reinventing talent development models in Europe.

REIMAGINING UNIVERSITY-INDUSTRY COLLABORATION

- > Driven by policy and rankings, universities have spent decades trying to look alike, but it's time to stop imposing one-size-fits-all solutions. Each university should scale its own uniqueness, rather than follow a standard model.
- > Universities should open their doors to collaborations with small and medium-sized enterprises. To address the differing rhythms of corporations and universities, start with smaller, short-term collaborations.
- > Connectors, such as science parks, bridge builders, and local networks, can play an important role in engaging local business ecosystems
- > Even brief industry exposure can transform academics into better collaborators.

EMBEDDING THE ENTREPRENEURIAL MINDSET IN HIGHER EDUCATION

- > Universities must build strong systems to identify potential entrepreneurs and support early venture creation.
- > Soft skills, including critical thinking, willingness to take risks, and learning from failure, are essential.
- > Universities continue to struggle with encouraging researchers to pursue entrepreneurship. Programmes that help PhD students turn their research into products or startups offer a promising approach.
- > Engagement can be rebuilt through role models and safe environments where students and business representatives can meet and interact.
- However, if universities step into investor roles, that may introduce moral-hazard issues, such as conflicts of interest in the academic decision-making
- Reconnecting students with meaningful learning is the essential first step to engaging them in entrepreneurial activities.

In summary, the recommendations call for universities to embrace more personalised learning paths, deepen practical collaboration with industry, especially small and medium-sized enterprises, and create environments that nurture entrepreneurial skills and diverse forms of excellence.

PLATFORMS FOR COLLABORATIVE INNOVATION

The universities of the future should be learner-centred, opportunity-driven, and impact-oriented. This is the view of Hannes Raffaseder, CEO and President of St. Pölten University of Applied Sciences, President of E³UDRES² [European University Alliance] and President of EURASHE [European Association of Institutions in Higher Education]. A keynote speaker at the conference, Raffaseder proposed the idea of a “triple” or even “quadruple mandate” for education, ideally challenge-based, mission-oriented research, human-centred rather than machine-centred innovation, and involving open community engagement.

The key strength of Europe lies in diversity, according to Raffaseder, and diversity is the foundation of successful innovation. He proposed viewing universities as platforms for collaborative innovation, contrasting platform-oriented and product-oriented institutional models. Traditional universities, he explains, are product-oriented—they measure success by enrolment numbers, degrees, publications, or patents. The future, however, lies in platform universities that prioritise relationships and social impact.

In Raffaseder’s view, Europe’s universities must move beyond compliance and standardisation to become creative, adaptive and collaborative forces for innovation and societal progress, and he encouraged academics to embrace uncertainty rather than waiting for the perfect moment to act.

Reflecting on whether expectations of universities are too high, Raffaseder said that ambition and realism must coexist. Universities need bold, visionary goals, but also practical steps toward achieving them. If they lower their aspirations, they risk becoming obsolete. Finally, Raffaseder cited the declining number of students as evidence of the growing pressure on higher education institutions, insisting that universities need to adapt proactively through new forms of collaborations.

His keynote set the stage for a broader discussion on the systemic challenges that Europe’s education and innovation models must now confront.



Hannes Raffaseder the CEO and President of St. Pölten University of Applied Sciences, President of E³UDRES² and President of EURASHE contributing to a live Q&A with **Simon Pickard**, Network Director at Science|Business moderator of the session.

BUILDING EUROPE'S INNOVATION-READY TALENT ECOSYSTEM

One of the key challenges for Europe's education system is to raise a new generation that is willing to take risks and pursue entrepreneurial and creative careers. During the first panel discussion, Reimar Müller-Thum, CEO and Chancellor of CODE University of Applied Sciences in Germany, expressed the view that education should never be linear, but rather a space where curiosity and open-mindedness guide individual learning. This individualised model, according to Müller-Thum, empowers genuine creativity and ownership of learning. "It's really about excitement and there is a certain degree of freedom to do whatever you want and have a professor next to you that makes sure that if you need help you get help," he said.

“ IT'S REALLY ABOUT EXCITEMENT AND THERE IS A CERTAIN DEGREE OF FREEDOM TO DO WHATEVER YOU WANT AND HAVE A PROFESSOR NEXT TO YOU THAT MAKES SURE THAT IF YOU NEED HELP YOU GET HELP REIMAR MÜLLER-THUM

Defining talent as the combination of ability and passion rooted in curiosity and openness, speakers also discussed the role of exceptionally-talented students in uplifting the system. István Vilmos Kovács, director of learning and teaching at Budapest Metropolitan University, said that they shouldn't just be fast-tracked through education, but taught a sense of responsibility toward their communities, so that they strengthen collective creativity and growth rather than focusing solely on personal achievement.

Finding teachers willing to embrace a new approach is clearly critical for reinventing talent development models in Europe. Recruiting new professors has become increasingly difficult due to outdated qualification rules, such as requiring a PhD, according to Müller-Thum. In contrast, the Institute of Making at University College London has built its own pipeline, where former students become interns and eventually staff, creating a self-sustaining community of people who "get it." Zoë Laughlin, director of the Institute, said that human connection now outweighs technical skills. "It's much harder to teach someone good on a machine to spend three hours talking to people than the other way around," Laughlin said.



From left to right: **István Vilmos Kovács**, the Director of learning and teaching at the Budapest Metropolitan University and Reimar **Müller-Thum** the CEO and Chancellor of CODE University of Applied Sciences in Germany discussing during the panel.

She also suggested a radical reimagining of lifelong education, saying she'd create a system where every citizen receives 20 years' worth of "education tokens". Fifteen of those could be used by parents to cover early education, while five years would belong to each person who can use them at any point of life, on anything they chose to do.

“ IT'S MUCH HARDER TO TEACH SOMEONE GOOD ON A MACHINE TO SPEND THREE HOURS TALKING TO PEOPLE THAN THE OTHER WAY AROUND ”
ZOË LAUGHLIN

She envisions this as a joyful, liberating offer rather than a transactional system, explaining that alongside free education, people would receive a universal basic income during those years. This way, anyone could spend time exploring learning without financial or social penalty: "You could do two years on cake, one year on watchmaking, and keep the rest for when you're sixty." The key idea is to replace obligation with curiosity and generosity—to make education an act of freedom, not pressure. Laughlin argues that this shift would spark "a fantastic joy productivity engine," where people naturally devote themselves to learning because they love it, not because they must.

In her words, the true mark of success is when someone walks through the door and says, "Wow, I can just do it?"—that spark of discovery that transforms learning from compliance into creation.

The participants discussed whether a non-traditional approach to education can be scaled. Kovács advocated for a balance between traditional lectures and practical, industry-linked learning. He argued that universities must reform their systems to recognise diverse forms of excellence, proposing three parallel tracks: research-based progression, recognition of external professional success, such as an Oscar-nominated filmmaker, and pedagogical excellence.



Zoë Laughlin, Director of the Institute of Making at University College London

REIMAGINING UNIVERSITY-INDUSTRY COLLABORATION

In the second panel of the conference, speakers discussed how universities, businesses, and policymakers can co-create more open, dynamic ecosystems for innovation and learning. Universities have spent decades trying to look alike, driven by policy and rankings, but it's time to stop forcing one-size-fits-all solutions, according to Arno Meerman, founder and CEO of the University Industry Innovation Network.

Building on this point, Meerman praised unconventional models, such as CODE University, Minerva, Hyper Island, and Kaospilot, as examples of external disruptors reshaping higher education. He compared higher education to an orchestra: "We need people who sketch out where we're going and create new types of music... and we also need people who can conduct this, who can make sure we all move in the same space and place."

“ WE NEED PEOPLE WHO SKETCH OUT WHERE WE'RE GOING AND CREATE NEW TYPES OF MUSIC... AND WE ALSO NEED PEOPLE WHO CAN CONDUCT THIS, WHO CAN MAKE SURE WE ALL MOVE IN THE SAME SPACE AND PLACE ”
ARNO MEERMAN

The discussion then turned to persistent gaps between universities and small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). While large corporations with R&D departments have well-established links to universities, SMEs often feel locked out, said Martin Mähler, CSR Manager Academia DACH - University Relations, IBM Germany. "From their point of view, this is a closed world. They don't even know where to start—or where to end," Mähler noted. He added that for real innovation ecosystems to emerge, universities must open their doors and bridge the cultural divide between academic curiosity and industrial pragmatism.

Expanding on the industry-academia dynamics, Mähler acknowledged that corporate impatience often clashes with academia's slower rhythm. "Industry is quarterly-driven. Universities think in years. You have to bring time and patience," he said. As a solution, he proposed smaller, agile collaborations instead of long, bureaucratic partnerships. "Don't start with a three-year PhD grant. Start with a hackathon over a weekend," he added.

“ INDUSTRY IS QUARTERLY-DRIVEN. UNIVERSITIES THINK IN YEARS. YOU HAVE TO BRING TIME AND PATIENCE ”
MARTIN MÄHLER



From left to right: **Arno Meerman** the Founder and CEO of the University Industry Innovation Network contributing to the panel discussion with **Martin Mähler** the CSR Manager Academia DACH - University Relations at IBM Germany

According to Mähler, companies already have volunteers eager to engage. What's missing is structure and facilitation. By creating these smaller bridges, he argues, universities and companies can build trust and a shared rhythm, paving the way for deeper, long-term collaboration.

The conversation also highlighted the importance of connectors: science parks, bridge builders, and local networks that unite startups, corporations, and universities. Ebba Lund, CEO of International Association of Science Parks and Areas of Innovation, recalled that science technology parks were born in the 1950s to connect academia with the marketplace. "Initially that was a quite complex task for the science parks to find a common language. I think we are getting closer to now industry and academia speaking a common language when they are working to translate scientific research into market-ready solutions," Lund said.

“ INITIALLY THAT WAS A QUITE COMPLEX TASK FOR THE SCIENCE PARKS TO FIND A COMMON LANGUAGE. I THINK WE ARE GETTING CLOSER TO NOW INDUSTRY AND ACADEMIA SPEAKING A COMMON LANGUAGE WHEN THEY ARE WORKING TO TRANSLATE SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH INTO MARKET-READY SOLUTIONS
EBBA LUND

She added that Europe is at a special moment, and that creating enabling environments with skilled and dedicated professionals who can help scale the spillover effects of university-industry collaboration is key. Lund also underscored the need for trust-based ecosystems rather than project-based partnerships. "Relationships, not contracts, are what make ecosystems last," she said.

“ RELATIONSHIPS, NOT CONTRACTS, ARE WHAT MAKE ECOSYSTEMS LAST
EBBA LUND

Finally, the panel called for universities to open up to professionals with real-world experience and to reward external engagement. The speakers agreed that even brief industry exposure can transform academics into better collaborators.

All in all, the discussion focused not on simply reforming universities, but on redefining collaboration as a shared mission where education, research and industry grow stronger together. Answering the audience concerns about whether these innovative, partnership-driven models can scale without losing their authenticity, the panel agreed that scaling doesn't mean copying. Each university should scale its own uniqueness, not a standard model.



Ebba Lund the CEO of International Association of Science Parks and Areas of Innovation

EMBEDDING THE ENTREPRENEURIAL MINDSET IN HIGHER EDUCATION

The final panel discussed the challenge of embedding an entrepreneurial mindset in higher education, focusing on the need for new teaching approaches and learning pathways. The discussion started with defining entrepreneurial mindset. Ronan Cunningham, director at DCU:Innovate, expressed the view that entrepreneurs are driven by dissatisfaction with the status quo, and institutions should empower them with the tools and environment to create impact.

According to Cunningham, universities must build strong systems to identify entrepreneurs and support early venture creation. He argued that universities should avoid trying to recreate everything internally and instead bring in external expertise. “Let’s not recreate the wheel, let’s bring them on a partial basis: fractional CFOs, regulatory experts, mentors coming from industry,” he said.

Participants also underscored the importance of soft skills: critical thinking, risk-taking, and learning from failure.

Rita Anson, co-founder at Nordic Ignite and member of the board at European Business Angel Network EBAN, highlighted how beneficial it would be for academic ventures to access hands-on, rather than purely academic, expertise. She argued that universities should integrate investors and seasoned entrepreneurs directly into their incubators so that spin-offs receive investment readiness, meaning a clear and fundable path to scale, as well as business development support.

However, panellists also noted that universities face a persistent challenge in motivating researchers to choose an entrepreneurial path. Mercè Segarra, vice-rector for entrepreneurship, innovation and transfer, University of Barcelona, highlighted the difficulty of persuading researchers to protect their results before publishing, calling intellectual property management a big challenge. She explained that the University of Barcelona tackles innovation by mixing disciplines: putting business, chemistry, social sciences together to approach problems from multiple viewpoints.



The final panel discussion including (from left to right): **Mercè Segarra**, Vice- Rector for entrepreneurship, innovation and transfer at the University of Barcelona, **Rita Anson**, Co-Founder at Nordic Ignite and Member of the Board at EBAN and **Ronan Cunningham**, Director at DCU:Innovate

According to Segarra, institutional change requires long-term collective leadership. For example, Catalonia's universities built an entrepreneurship network over ten years. She highlighted shared programmes, such as "From Science to Market," which helps PhD students translate their research into products or companies and has already produced seven or eight spin-outs in four years. She called for a future where university incubators become true investor magnets: "Let's put more investors inside the universities even if we are not formal educators," she said.

**“ LET'S PUT MORE INVESTORS INSIDE THE UNIVERSITIES EVEN IF WE ARE NOT FORMAL EDUCATORS
MERCÈ SEGARRA**

Speakers also cautioned against universities acting as investors, arguing it creates a moral hazard and that the real goal should be designing spaces with enough collision points between students, researchers, mentors, and investors.

Finally, the panel reflected on how to break out of traditional divides so that all types of institutions: research universities, applied sciences, and vocational schools can collaborate meaningfully in fostering entrepreneurial mindsets.

Anson of Nordic Ignite said that engagement can be rebuilt through role models and safe environments. She highlighted an example from Norway, where BI Norwegian Business School has created a space called The Village, allowing students and business angels to meet and interact.

Cunningham of DCU:Innovate argued that universities must rethink their entire approach to teaching, and that more applied, modular formats, such as micro-credentials and professionally oriented learning, may help re-engage students. He concluded that reconnecting students with meaningful learning is picture of Merce the necessary first step to engage them in entrepreneurship activities.



Mercè Segarra and Rita Anson during the closing panel

CONCLUSIONS

To remain competitive in a fast-changing world and strengthen its resilience, and strategic autonomy, Europe needs to reimagine how its universities educate, innovate and connect. Declining student engagement, widening skills gaps, and rapid industrial shifts make it imperative for universities to evolve without delay. Europe must empower its institutions to embrace new models that reward diversity, practical collaboration, and entrepreneurial thinking.

The EIT Higher Education Initiative is seeking to drive this transformation by mobilising its community and its tried-and-tested funding methodology to connect universities, industry, and learners. The Initiative is aiming to be a catalyst for the innovative approaches called for in this report, from more personalised learning pathways to stronger links with SMEs and more widespread entrepreneurial thinking in higher education.