

Universities of The Netherlands

To the President of the European Commission
To the European Commissioners

Date 28 April 2025 *Our reference* EU Transparency Register:
Telephone 994694795829-46
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Subject **Safeguarding European R&I Funding**

Dear President Von der Leyen,
Dear Commissioners Zaharieva, Séjourné, Serafin, and Hoekstra,

Europe is facing unprecedented challenges, from geopolitical uncertainty to dwindling competitiveness, rapid climate change, and increasing threats to democracy. As the European Commission is preparing the EU's next multi-annual financial framework, we, the Universities of the Netherlands, are deeply committed to contributing to a resilient and future-proof Europe. We are thankful the European Commission shares these same goals and has presented plans to strengthen our continent. We can only agree with you that we must put Research and Innovation (R&I) and Science and Technology at the centre of our economy if we want to reach these shared goals.

We strongly believe that the only way we can tackle future challenges and make Europe more competitive is by investing substantially in R&I. Knowledge and innovation are constant powers in a rapidly changing world, and the European Framework Programmes have provided a stable tool to develop this knowledge and innovation over the last decades. For this we need all kinds of knowledge: industrial innovation as well as fundamental research.

We are therefore worried that the Commission's Communication on the EU's Competitiveness Compass and the Commission's Roadmap for the 2028-34 budget make no reference to a tenth Framework Programme for R&I (FP10). This has raised great concerns amongst the Dutch and European academic research community. We fear that in the next MFF, the EU's R&I investments will be mistakenly blended into the Competitiveness Fund and will be dominated by the EU's strategic priorities, as proposed in the competitiveness agenda.

We recognise the urgent need for boosting the EU's global competitiveness and strategic autonomy and agree that a substantial increase in R&I investments is needed to achieve that. However, **research and innovation investments must be approached with a long-term outlook**. They must seek to reinforce Europe's robust R&I ecosystems to produce knowledge and innovations for decades to come, even for problems that we are not yet facing. **It is precisely by transcending political agendas that R&I can best contribute to tackling societal challenges and help Europe remain one step ahead**. As such, investments cannot, and should not, serve only the EU's strategic priorities as laid out in the Competitiveness Compass agenda.

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We must also stress that there is **no industrial competitiveness without scientific autonomy and academic freedom**. And there will be **no industrial competitiveness without societal competitiveness**, or without a good balance between technological and social innovation. As the Draghi report points out, Europe's social model must be at the centre of our competitiveness strategy.

For the past 40 years, the European Union's Framework Programme for R&I has been an essential instrument that has facilitated **free movement of scientific knowledge** that has resulted in **groundbreaking and innovative ideas**. It has done so in part thanks to **small- and large-scale collaborations** among universities and scientists from various disciplines, between science and society, and between science and industry across the whole of Europe, and beyond. This has led to **great achievements and societal advancements**, which we can proudly call **our European way of living**, our freedom, our flourishing wealth, human dignity and rights, culture, excellence in medical and social care, economic welfare and progress, climate and environmental protection, and technological developments. Much of this progress in Europe and in our societies **results from the curiosity, wisdom and inspiration**, the wealth of opportunities that Europe has offered us, and **our ability to collaborate across borders, sectors and disciplines**. **This has been enabled by 40 years of continuous investments in European R&I**. This goes to show that, while the Framework Programmes can be improved, they must retain the commitment to focus on the entire R&I continuum, including through collaborative research to boost the EU added value of investments.

The Netherlands exemplifies how investments in scientific research and collaboration can transform small countries into global innovation leaders. Over the past decades, the Netherlands has grown into a high-performing R&I country, ranking 5th among EU member countries and 8th globally. This success is due to the quality of our highly ranked universities and our scientists, robust R&I investments, worldwide collaborations, excellent scientific output, high-tech exports, and effective policies. **Much credit** goes also to **the unique EU Framework Programmes for R&I that have provided budget and plentiful opportunities** for our scientist to investigate and answer the toughest and most important questions of our time, and to look into the future ahead of us. **This has contributed substantially to the EU's global competitiveness**, with the Netherlands' share into the EU economy being on average 6.5%, making it punch far above its population weight.

Despite this, the Dutch government is imposing severe measures on R&I in the Netherlands, which will damage both the Dutch and European knowledge economies. If the EU Competitiveness Fund were to replace the EU's most successful investment instrument, the Framework Programme for R&I, and if the European Commission were to steer the EU's R&I policy towards the strategic priorities of the industrial competitiveness agenda, **both the EU and Netherlands would risk losing great talent, scientific excellence and innovation leadership**. This would result in daunting consequences, not only for the EU's industrial base and our global competitiveness, but also on our democracy, our security and our freedom. It would, in fact, widen the innovation gap with the USA and China.

In this conflict-ridden, instable and rapidly changing world, funding, facilitating and fostering R&I has become critically important for the future of Europe. With a strong research culture, open science, technology and innovation, Europe can show that democracy, the welfare state, personal freedoms (including academic freedom) go hand in hand with economic development, competitiveness, sustainability and secure and thriving citizens.

Therefore, **the Universities of the Netherlands** call for:

- unremitting and substantial EU investments in R&I -220 billion as called for in the Heitor report- continuing 40 years of highly successful, standalone and strong Framework Programmes for supporting both independent bottom-up and challenges-driven precompetitive R&I, based on the excellence principle and

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along the entire research pipeline in Europe. Like the ministers in their Warsaw Declaration we urge the Commission to “build on the legacy of self-standing framework programmes.”¹

- These investments must be supported at all levels, including at national level. Member-states must be encouraged to reach investments of at least 3% GDP in R&I.
- increased, stable and ringfenced budget for Europe’s researchers, innovators and educators, for investments that will boost Europe’s industrial and societal competitiveness;
- European R&I policy that transcends political agendas and instead safeguards scientific freedom, fosters collaborations and free movement of ideas and knowledge across borders, sectors and scientific disciplines. We must together move towards implementation of a fifth freedom;
- simplified rules and reduced administrative burden that will make the next FP for R&I more attractive and beneficial for researchers and innovators alike.

We urge you to act decisively and champion for continuous and safeguarded R&I funding, covering the entire spectrum of fundamental to applied research and innovation, fully integrating social sciences and humanities, ensuring sound balance between technical and social innovations. Only in this way will we secure a prosperous, inclusive, competitive, and sustainable future for Europe.

The Universities of Netherlands offer its wealth of knowledge, hands-on experience and innovative minds to design an effective, efficient, and impactful Framework Programme. We are ready to help you in shaping European R&I that will future-proof Europe and our European way of life. **Together, we can ensure that Europe remains a beacon of innovation, freedom, and progress.**

Yours sincerely,

UNL President

Caspar van den Berg

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¹ Warsaw Declaration, 11 March, 2025. Pg: 2.