

[UK](#)[Europe](#)[USA](#)[Australia & NZ](#)[About Us](#)[Sign in](#)[Go back](#)

OPINION

03 MAR 2025

Union of Skills needs education and research at its heart

By Orla Feely

Share



Image source: David Naval / Universidad Politécnica de Madrid

Forthcoming proposals will show whether EU plans on competitiveness match the rhetoric, says Orla Feely

Industrial competitiveness is arguably the EU's biggest priority. [Mario Draghi's report on that topic](#), published last September, made for sobering reading, and developments since then in geopolitics and advanced technologies have only made the message more urgent.

Late January saw the Commission release its **Competitiveness Compass**, a framework to steer its work to support competitiveness through three core areas: innovation, decarbonisation and security.

The next milestone on this journey will come on Wednesday, with the publication of the Commission's proposal for a Union of Skills. This will be an important document: competitiveness depends fundamentally on the availability of skills. In the words of the Compass, "the foundation of Europe's competitiveness is its people".

The Compass further reports that despite record employment, skills shortages persist, particularly in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (Stem). Nearly four in five small and medium-sized enterprises struggle to find workers with the right skills.

The Union of Skills must enable a fundamental shift in ambition, ensuring that skills development, talent cultivation and knowledge creation meet the needs and ambitions of Europe's economy and society. This will require innovative policies, strategies and funding instruments to equip Europe and its people to lead in developing and applying the technologies that will underpin not only competitiveness but also security and sustainability.

Vital ingredient

An essential element of this will be the contributions of Europe's higher education and research institutions to developing advanced talent, translating research findings and delivering impact. Europe will not become more competitive without a strong and engaged higher education and research sector. This was a central theme of **the Align, Act, Accelerate report, led by Manuel Heitor**, on the EU's framework programme for research and innovation.

The Union of Skills must connect research, education and innovation, ensuring a robust talent pipeline in support of Europe's leadership in science and technology.

The European **Commission's recent communication on the EU's next long-term budget**, which will run from 2028-34, highlights that future competitiveness depends on fostering "a new age of invention and ingenuity, putting research and innovation, science and technology, at the centre of our economy". The Commission's forthcoming proposal for that budget, expected this summer, will be a benchmark for its commitment to turning ambitions into reality.

The Union of Skills should be the mechanism to cultivate the expertise and talent needed to drive this transformation. Part of that should include strong support, including significantly increased and dedicated budgets, for flagship programmes such as the Erasmus+ student mobility scheme and the next framework programme. Doubling their budgets would signal that the Commission is serious about realising its goals.

Alongside this, Europe's labour market needs a coordinated and ambitious approach to align skills with the current and future needs of industry and society. The Commission's plans for a **Stem Education Strategic Plan** and Basic Skills Action Plan are welcome, but realising

them requires robust and dedicated European programmes for research, innovation and education.

That includes strengthening existing European initiatives such as Erasmus+ and the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA). Another EU initiative, the [European university alliances](#), should become a laboratory for advancing skills development and pioneering new approaches to education, research and training.

Talent magnet

Building a Union of Skills means removing barriers to cross-border skills development and recognition, and collaboration in research-based education and training. The blueprint for a [European degree](#) published last year shows how to break down such barriers in a way that would enhance educational mobility and talent development without disrupting national qualification frameworks and quality assurance processes.

More broadly, the ['fifth freedom' for education, research and innovation](#)—advocated last year in another EU-commissioned report by Enrico Letta—is crucial to leveraging Europe's full strength in science and technology.

Europe should position itself as a global magnet for science and technology talent: addressing visa, immigration, and residency issues, and scaling up initiatives such as the Choose Europe scheme being piloted in the MSCA this year.

Achieving the necessary reforms and investment in skills, expertise and talent development will require the European Union, member states, industry, academia and other societal partners to work together. Cesaer stands ready to join this effort. Now is the time to turn vision into action, ambition into reality, and policy into progress, preparing Europe and its people for the challenges and opportunities of today and the decades ahead.

Orla Feely is president of the Cesaer group of European science and technology universities and president of University College Dublin.

[View this article on Research Professional](#)

Related links

[**Orla Feely on X**](#) 
