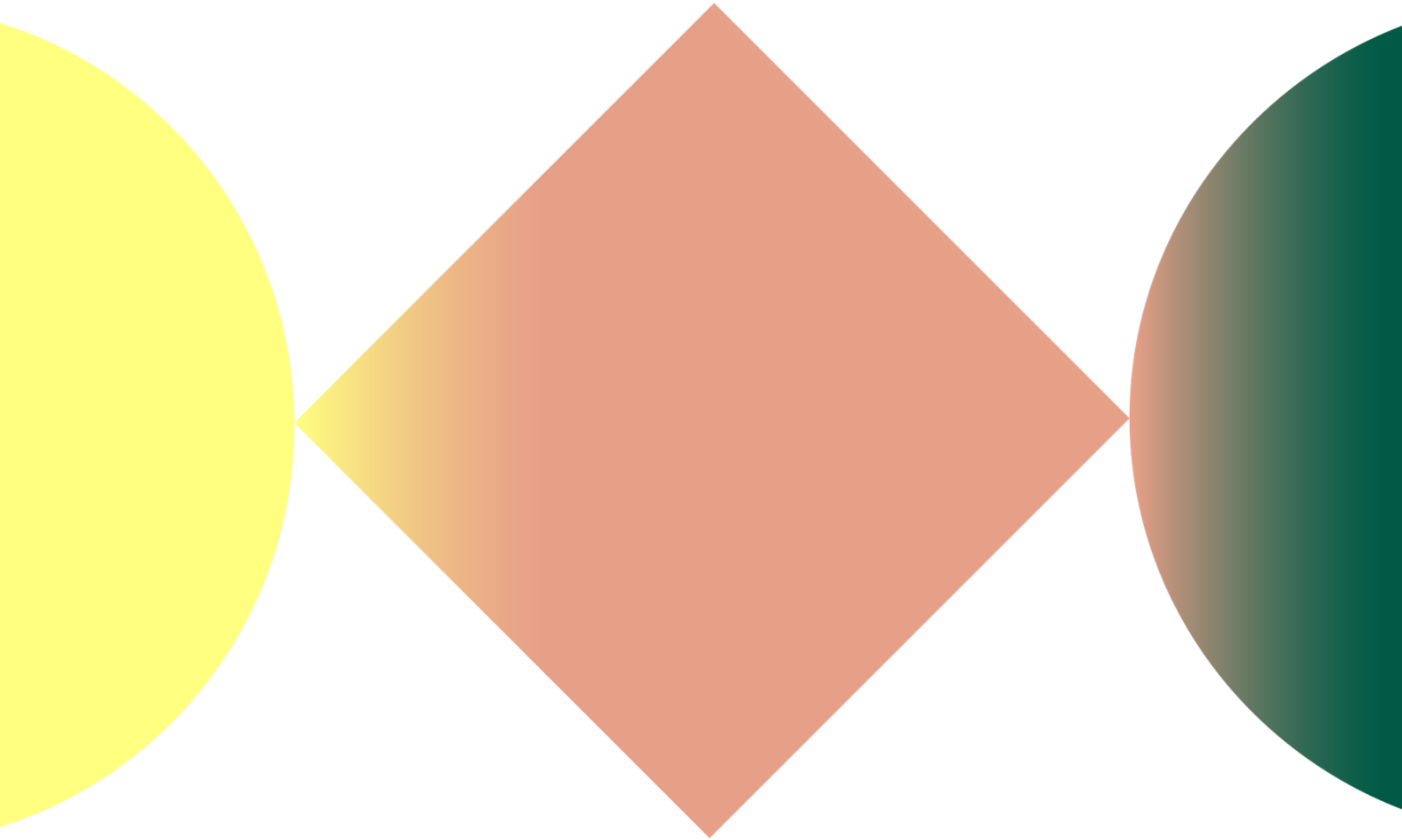# Learning, Values and Impact

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The Visionary Team
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The Process
- Online meetings: 19/4/2024: kick off; 12/6/2024; 29/7/2024; 12/09/2024, 4/11/2024
- Panel Discussion "Re-Inventing the University of the Future: Una Europa as an Institution and an Expectation" during the Una Europa Student Congress in Berlin: 19/9/2024
- Face to face in Berlin: 19 – 20/9/2024

Executive Summary

The University of the Future will enhance its impact on society through excellence in teaching and learning, along with a commitment to European values within mainstream education (part 1). It will also enhance direct impact on various facets of the societal ecosystem, including policy, the economy, culture, and the individual development of citizens (part 2). UNA Europa plays a role in catalyzing institutional policies, strategies and frameworks and organizing collaboration to enhance the impact of its partners (part 3). These are main elements to realize these perspectives:

1. **Introduction:**

The University of the Future aims to significantly impact society by developing comprehensive institutional vision that enhances both student personal development and societal advancement. This vision emphasizes the integration of education, research, innovation, and societal engagement, anchoring universities in their unique identities and missions.

2. **Institutional Vision and Strategies:**

To realize their vision, universities must implement strategies that align with their defined goals, necessitating visionary leadership across all institutional levels. This vision will shape the university's unique identity, grounded in its mission and core values, and will influence its educational curricula, continuing education efforts, and research initiatives. While maintaining autonomy, universities operate within governmental frameworks influencing various operational aspects, such as funding, access, and accreditation. Striking a balance between institutional autonomy and governmental frameworks is essential for creating opportunities that benefit students and society alike. A strategic leadership is required to profile the institutional vision related to societal changes over time.

3. **Excellence in Education**

In the University of the Future, prioritizing research-based curricula should prepare students to face future challenges. Essential components of effective curricula include integrating current research, promoting critical thinking, developing research skills, and providing hands-on opportunities. This includes designing coherent programs that integrate robust core courses with optional elements for flexible learning pathways, while also prioritizing interdisciplinary connections. The ethical dimension must also be embedded to equip students for responsible decision-making in addressing complex societal issues. As pedagogies evolve, universities should leverage advancements in digital technologies to enhance learning flexibility and engagement. European universities have a unique advantage by offering integrated bachelor's and master's programs, which should be maintained instead of being replaced by fragmented skill-based courses.

4. **Core Values and Ethics**

Upholding the core values enshrined in the Treaty of the European Union—such as human dignity, democracy, and equality—is essential for universities. These values should be embedded in curricula of the University of the Future to prepare students for responsible decision-making in their lives. Moreover, addressing significant challenges across European countries, such as the rule of law and migration, can be stimulated through interdisciplinary initiatives among universities, particularly within the UNA Europa framework

5. **Preparing Students for Future Knowledge Environments**

As new knowledge environments emerge, driven by advancements such as AI and XR, the University of the Future equips students with the skills to navigate these continuing changes effectively. Curricula should promote cognitive skills and awareness of the ethical implications associated with new technologies. Institutions in UNA Europa might work collaboratively to establish the necessary infrastructure for digital learning, ensuring that students are proficient in utilizing these emerging tools.

6. **Inclusion and Equity**

Ensuring equity of educational opportunities is fundamental to fostering an inclusive society. Universities have a responsibility to support underrepresented and disadvantaged groups throughout their academic journeys. By expanding access to education, universities can enhance social cohesion and promote democratic participation.

7. **Student Well-being**

Creating a safe and supportive learning environment is essential for student well-being. Universities should facilitate a culture of open discourse and critical thinking while safeguarding freedom of expression. Providing mental health support and fostering communities of learning will empower students to thrive academically and personally.

8. **Internationalization**

The University of the Future must emphasize internationalization by providing students with global experiences and preparing them for competitive international labor markets. Collaborations with institutions in the Global South can enhance knowledge transfer and address socio-economic disparities, fostering sustainable partnerships that contribute to global development.

9. **Financial Accessibility**

To ensure meaningful impact, it is crucial that higher education remains affordable, securing financial stability for students, as rising costs of tuition and accommodation pose significant challenges. Maintaining the perspective that higher education is a public good, universities must advocate for adequate public funding and policies that support affordable tuition and housing. Ensuring a stable financial environment is essential for students to succeed academically and fully engage in their university experience.

10. **Lifelong Learning**

The University of the Future must embrace lifelong learning as a core mission, addressing the demand for continuing education that facilitates personal and professional development. Developing high-quality, flexible, affordable, and scalable educational opportunities, such as micro-credentials, will ensure that individuals can adapt to the rapidly changing job market. This includes establishing new structures, like extension schools or continuing education centres, to foster active participation. Digital platforms and provisions will be necessary components in meeting the diverse needs of adult learners.

11. **The Meaning of University Impact on Society**

Universities significantly impact various aspects of society, including policy, the economy, culture, and individual development. They promote scientific thinking and democracy, drive innovation and economic growth through research and innovation partnerships and enhance cultural values and social cohesion by engaging with diverse stakeholders in society. Moreover, universities support personal and professional development by addressing individual learning needs and promoting well-being.

12. **Creating Impact in Society**

Creating societal impact relies on promoting scientific thinking and democratizing knowledge while adhering to core values. Open access to scientific research enhances engagement and public discourse but is necessitating a re-evaluation of relationships with the publishing industry. Furthermore, the University of the Future should engage more in science-based communication to build trust and enable informed discussions on critical issues in society. The university should commit more to continuing professional development for equipping students with the skills necessary to navigate in an evolving labour market.

13. **Collaboration with Stakeholders to Implement Impact across Society:**

Meaningful societal impact requires collaboration across social, economic, and cultural contexts. Partnering with governmental and regional organizations allows universities to influence public policy; collaboration with economic actors drives innovation and skill development; and engagement with cultural institutions enriches societal values

and understanding. Working with civil society enhances inclusivity and active citizenship, further strengthening the social tissue.

14. **Institutional Policies and Structures:**

To effectively impact society, the University of the Future must implement specific institutional policies and structures for open access, broader science communication, continuing education, interfaces and collaboration with external stakeholders. Universities can extend their societal impact through expert consultancy and research projects in collaboration with governmental and civil society organizations, thereby contributing to informed decision-making and sustainable development in various sectors

15. **The Role of Una Europa**

The Una Europa alliance aims to maximize its impact through collaboration among partner universities and collective efforts at the European level. By sharing best practices, developing joint degrees, and innovating digital solutions, universities can enhance their educational offerings and amplify their societal contributions.

For reaching its goals as an alliance, UNA Europa should engage in mutual exchange and benchmarking to balance institutional autonomy with governmental frameworks, and enabling universities to maximize their contributions to education, research, and innovation. Expanding its activities to encompass partnerships with institutions in the Global South will further enhance the alliance's global impact.

16. **Conclusion and Next Steps**

To realize the University of the Future, proactive measures and concrete initiatives must follow this vision. Continued dialogue among university leaders, including symposiums and conferences, will foster collaboration and ensure lasting impact aligned with the outlined objectives. The UNA Europa alliance encourages the prioritization of actionable steps to drive progress in higher education, ensuring that universities play their role in shaping a better future for society.

Part 1. Una Europa Future UniLab: Impact of European universities on students

1.   Institutional vision

Profile

To create a significant impact on society, the University of the Future needs to develop a comprehensive institutional vision that outlines the role of education in both student personal development and the societal advancement. This vision will define the university's unique identity, anchored in its mission, core values, and areas of expertise in science and education. Such a profile will permeate educational curricula, continuing education initiatives, the professional development of alumni, and research and innovation activities. It embodies the knowledge square, highlighting the complex interconnections between education, research, innovation and society at large. Universities can have a more significant impact on society when education, research, innovation, and societal engagement are integrated, ensuring that they contribute not only to the advancement of knowledge but also act as catalysts to the development of society as a whole.

Strategies

To realize this vision, universities must develop and implement strategies that consistently align with it. Achieving this requires **visionary leadership** that is shared across all levels of the institution. While European universities value autonomy, they are not entirely independent[1]. They operate within broader governmental frameworks that influence their development. These frameworks establish essential conditions for university operations, including strategic priorities, funding schemes, accreditation processes, quality assurance of curricula, student access, and various societal stakeholder requirements. A crucial factor for students is to ensure that access to university education remains affordable, particularly regarding tuition fees and housing expenses, and that principles of inclusion are respected.

For the University of the Future to thrive, it should find **a fair balance between university autonomy and governmental frameworks**, creating opportunities that impact both individual students and society. Such a balance will allow university leaders to enhance education within their institutions through **robust strategies that permeate all levels**. This includes fostering an environment where academics can excel in curriculum and course development, leveraging rich teaching and learning experiences. As technological advancements, particularly in AI, evolve, universities must maintain a **strong and adaptable technological learning infrastructure** and provide **continuing professional development and support services** for teaching staff to design innovative, technology-based learning formats.

Curricula and courses designed to promote high-impact student learning provide the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary for future professions. This includes **integrating values and ethics** to equip students for responsible decision-making, while also **preparing them for emerging knowledge environments** that incorporate ICT, AI, and XR technologies.

In this future university landscape, **subject-based communities of practice** will be very effective and motivating for fostering continuous innovation among academics. These communities will facilitate the exchange of teaching strategies, the integration of new technologies, and opportunities for peer evaluation and review of innovative

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[1] See also: Lauriilard, D. (2012), Teaching as a design science, building pedagogical patterns for learning and technology, Rotledge, New York and London.

practices. Such collaborations could be extended to a university alliance like UNA Europa, amplifying peer experiences and internationalizing expertise while enabling the sharing of resources through access to open educational resources and learning design tools. This collaborative approach can reduce the costs associated with innovation and encourage faculty to build upon each other's work.

Moreover, the strategies of the University of the Future should include **regular institutional evaluations** that provide research evidence, inform practices and serve as a necessary foundation for continuous innovation and progress.

Finally, universities must offer a **consistent lifelong learning system**, providing diverse forms of continuing education to address the rapidly evolving needs of society.

Una Europa vision

The mission of the Una Europa university alliance is to create collaborative educational offerings that equip students for the future. By providing multidisciplinary, research-driven education across all levels of higher education, Una Europa aims to prepare students for an interconnected and rapidly changing world. The alliance is committed to fostering a genuinely European inter-university ecosystem, utilizing their combined strengths to address global and societal challenges through interdisciplinary cooperation.

2. Excellence

In an evolving society and educational landscape, the University of the Future must prioritize research-based curricula to prepare students for future challenges effectively. This entails designing high-impact learning experiences that integrate scientific knowledge and methodologies, fostering deep-level learning. Key components of effective curricula include incorporating cutting-edge research findings, promoting critical thinking, developing research skills, and providing hands-on research opportunities. It includes the integration of scientific frameworks, systematic thinking, and a critical awareness of knowledge-related issues within specific fields and across interdisciplinary boundaries.

Moreover, an ethical dimension must be embedded within these curricula, equipping students to address complex societal challenges like climate change and migration responsibly. As pedagogies evolve with advancements in digital technologies—such as AI and extended reality—teaching methods can offer more flexible, interactive, and immersive learning experiences. By embedding these principles into thoughtful curricula, university leaders can ensure that students are prepared to contribute ethically to society while enhancing the overall quality of education.

Research-based curricula

The University of the Future will empower students to address future challenges by adopting research-based curricula developed through thoughtful curriculum and course design. Creating research-based curricula goes beyond simply producing educational content. It also entails designing high-impact learning experiences that lead students to deep level learning.

Shaping research-based content

Research-based curricula consist of various elements that seamlessly integrate research into the learning process, allowing students to interact with current knowledge and methodologies relevant to their field of study. Key components include:

1. Integration of Research Findings: the curriculum should integrate the most recent research findings, theories, and methodologies, enabling students to learn from the latest advancements and innovations within their fields.

2. Encouragement of Critical Thinking and Inquiry: students must develop critical thinking skills through inquiry-based learning, which involves questioning established knowledge, analyzing data, and evaluating evidence to grasp complex concepts.

3. Development of Research Skills: the curriculum should focus on the development of research competencies, including data collection, analysis, interpretation, and reporting. Students need to learn how to design studies, conduct literature reviews, and apply appropriate research methodologies.

4. Hands-On Research Opportunities: offering students opportunities to participate in practical research projects—either individually or in groups—provides them with valuable experience. This may include lab work, field studies, or community-based projects and service learning.

5. Emphasis on Interdisciplinary Approaches: Research-based curricula frequently integrate interdisciplinary perspectives, promoting collaboration across different fields. This approach helps students recognize the interconnectedness of knowledge and equips them to address complex real-world challenges.

6. In**tegration of Theory and Practice**: The curriculum bridges theoretical knowledge with practical application, helping students understand how research contributes to advancements in their field.

7. Exposure to Academic Inquiry: Students actively collaborate with faculty members and researchers to gain a deeper understanding of academic research processes. Activities may involve attending seminars, participating in research projects, or using faculty research as a basis for their assignments.

8. Encouragement of Original Research: As students advance, especially at the graduate level, they should be encouraged to pursue original research that leads to theses or dissertations, thereby contributing new knowledge to their respective fields.

9. Presentation and Communication Skills: Research-based curricula should create opportunities for students to present their findings, enhance their ability to communicate complex ideas effectively, receive feedback, and engage in peer review, mirroring the academic discussions typical in professional research settings.

10. Promotion of Lifelong Learning: By adopting a research-based approach, the curriculum fosters a lifelong learning mindset, motivating students to consistently seek new information, engage with emerging research, and adapt to advancements within their fields.

Curriculum and Course Design

Curriculum and course design play a central role in shaping educational content and facilitating high-impact learning experiences. By aligning the structure of curricula and courses with theoretical principles, universities can significantly improve students' learning experiences and better meet their diverse needs.

Central to curriculum and course design are **cognitive processes**, which inform how educational content is organized to optimize sustainable learning. Key cognitive factors include understanding the dynamics of short-term and long-term memory retention, maintaining student attention and engagement, fostering problem-solving and critical thinking skills, managing cognitive load, and creating personalized learning paths.

A research-based university curriculum and associated educational design prepares students to not only absorb knowledge at a surface level but also to create it, nurturing their growth as critical thinkers, innovators, and active contributors to their respective fields and society, promoting **deep level learning**.

Despite the critical importance of these elements, curriculum and course design often receive less attention compared to administrative, organizational, and marketing priorities. In the University of the Future, university leaders must **prioritize educational design** to improve overall educational quality and effectiveness, especially as curriculum and course design are increasingly influenced by the integration of educational technologies.

Coherent and robust curricula

To foster holistic and deep level learning, curricula must be **cohesive and reflect the profile of the university**, consistently aligning with its mission and identity. They should integrate robust core courses with optional components that offer flexible learning pathways, preferably including international learning opportunities. Furthermore, curricula should promote interdisciplinary connections to encourage innovative problem-solving.

Curricula must be designed to reflect the latest scientific developments, but also societal needs, and global challenges. They should reflect a **balance between fundamental theoretical knowledge and the trends and strategic demands of the labour market**, ensuring students acquire the relevant skills and knowledge needed. Curricula should not only respond to current market demands but also anticipate future developments.

However, to enable deep-level learning, bachelor's and master's programs should **avoid being segmented into a fragmented range of short, skill-oriented courses** that result in fewer academic degrees being awarded. Curricula in the University of the Future should be content-rich, emphasizing comprehensive knowledge rather than predominantly and one-sided focusing on skills-based training.

European universities have a **comparative advantage over many institutions in other regions** by providing integrated bachelor's and master's programmes without a rigid cut after the bachelor's degree, usually completed within four to five years. This competitive edge, combined with interdisciplinary connections, enhances the quality of education, benefiting both the economy and society as a whole. This advantage should be sustained in the future.

Core values and ethics

The University of the Future is not neutral. It upholds ethical standards, critically examining society as it is while fostering the ethical values necessary for how it should become. Core values are incorporated in the Treaty of the European Union (Article 2), such as human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law, and respect for human rights, including inclusivity and respect for minority rights.

These fundamental EU values are further strengthened by the specific academic values adopted by European universities through the Bologna Process, which emphasizes academic freedom - allowing for unrestricted teaching, research, and publication - and institutional autonomy, granting universities full independence in their operations.

University must embed and uphold these core values, with curricula designed to integrate ethics and principles that prepare students to make responsible and informed decisions in their future lives. This objective can only be realized if the university as an institution itself commits to upholding these values in its institutional practices, interactions with staff and the administration.

Core values of the European Union present numerous significant challenges across European countries. These challenges can be addressed either by individual universities or collaboratively by UNA Europa universities through interdisciplinary joint educational initiatives in various areas[2]:

• **Rule of Law**: Ensuring all member states adhere to the rule of law has been a persistent issue. Some countries have been criticized for undermining judicial independence and media freedom, which threatens the democratic fabric of the EU.

• **Migration and Asylum:** the EU's approach to migration and asylum has been a contentious topic. Balancing humanitarian responsibilities with security concerns and the capacity of member states to accommodate migrants has proven difficult.

• **Economic Disparities:** economic inequality between member states can lead to tensions and undermine the principle of solidarity. The financial crises and differing economic policies have sometimes strained relationships within the EU.

• **Geopolitical Challenges**: external threats such as terrorism, conflicts, and geopolitical tensions (e.g., the war in Ukraine) put pressure on the EU to maintain its values while ensuring security and stability.

• **Climate Change**: addressing climate change requires coordinated action and significant policy shifts, which can be challenging to implement uniformly across all member states.

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[2] European Parliament (2022), Protecting EU Values, European Parliament Think Tank,
https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2022/729391/EPRS_BRI(2022)729391_EN.pdf

- **Populism and Nationalism**: the rise of populist and nationalist movements within some member states poses a challenge to the EU's values of democracy, human rights, and solidarity. These movements often promote policies that conflict with EU principles.

Preparing students for emerging knowledge environments and systems

In the future, new knowledge environments and systems driven by advancements in **ICT, including (generative) Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Extended Reality (XR),** will emerge across society and influence everyday life. Education must equip students to effectively navigate and adapt to these complex and dynamic knowledge systems both within their fields of specialization and across disciplines in their overall professional lives.

As a result, **students at all levels (From BA to PhD) should be empowered** to use these technologies effectively in their course-related learning activities, such as investigating new concepts and challenges, collecting and critically analysing data, synthesizing information, articulating concepts in group discussions, collaborating on projects, participating in practical exercises, coding, and writing essays. These activities help develop the cognitive skills that students will require in the future.

Well-designed curricula should also raise **awareness of the ethical implications** associated with these new technologies. They pertain to content (e.g., trustworthiness, reliability, bias, and alignment with European values), academic integrity (e.g., authenticity, honesty, fairness, and proper citation of sources in assignments or essays), and legal concerns (e.g., intellectual property, privacy, and consent). This awareness will impact students' attitudes in their future lives.

Considering the rapid development of these technologies and the costs involved, UNA Europa universities may benefit from collaborating to establish and share the necessary **technological infrastructure** for education while finding effective methods to empower students to use these tools responsibly.

Teaching and learning approaches in the University of the Future

In the digital era, teaching and learning have experienced substantial **transformation** compared to traditional approaches that depended solely on lectures and textbooks. Following the COVID-19 crisis, digital practices have become increasingly integrated into higher education throughout Europe. In degree programmes, three primary modes of teaching and learning are frequently utilized, often in combination, with each necessitating systematic course design. These methodologies are anticipated to further evolve and become more evidence based as ongoing research continues to inform best practices:

- **Synchronous hybrid teaching and learning** involves a course design that accommodates both on-site (in-person) students and remote (online) students simultaneously.
- **Blended teaching and learning** refers to a course design that intentionally combines online and offline learning activities.
- **Online distance teaching and learning** is characterized by a continuous physical separation between teacher and student within the course design.

The introduction of **artificial intelligence (AI)** will further disrupt this transformation by enhancing various aspects of the learning process, such as facilitating the exploration of new concepts and assisting with essay writing. Additionally, different forms of **extended reality (XR)** merge physical and virtual environments, enabling the creation of interactive learning materials and enhanced science experiments. These developments provide new opportunities for knowledge-rich instruction and the development of complex skills. Furthermore, digital teaching offers scalability, allowing institutions to effectively accommodate both large and small student groups while delivering personalized and intensive learning experiences for all. New technologies influence the essence of university teaching and lifelong learning. They transform education by making learning more interactive, engaging, and immersive.

The three mentioned settings, along with the further transformation of education through new technologies, will significantly impact teaching and learning in the University of the Future, and facilitate deep-level learning and the development of complex skills in all areas. It will affect the **teaching profession**, as this this necessitates professional course design and appropriate **technological and pedagogical support** for teaching staff. At the

institutional level, educational support services should provide evidence-based design models and regularly enhance the maturity level of digital teaching and learning within the institution by a regular evaluation of practices based on new evidence provided.

An example can be found in the Leiden Learning & Innovation Centre (LLInC), which supports quality education at Leiden University. They offer training and coaching for teachers, and provide advice and tools to increase the impact and accessibility of education, and thus facilitate inclusive teaching practices. LLInC supports innovation and provides advice on educational assessment, with a team experienced in issues such as data responsibility, intellectual property and policy work.

3. Lifelong learning

Challenges for lifelong learning

Europe is facing significant transformations driven by digitalization, climate change, and innovations in various sectors, alongside geopolitical and economic disruptions reshaping our societies and economies. Considering these challenges, there is an urgent need for citizens to engage in continuing personal development through access to trustworthy information that fosters critical thinking, as well as continuing professional development to adapt to evolving careers. Therefore, the University of the Future must provide high-quality, scalable, and affordable opportunities for lifelong development.

University strategies

Many European higher education institutions currently lack the necessary strategies, structures, and programmes to support lifelong learning. To stimulate personal growth and resilience in an increasingly complex society, as well as to address the growing needs for innovation, growth, jobs, and competitiveness in Europe, new organizational and pedagogical paradigms are required.

Consequently, lifelong learning must become a core component of the future university's mission, rather than merely an add-on. Establishing new structures, such as extension schools or continuing education centres, is needed to create educational provisions that cater to the lives of active citizens.

A variety provisions for different target groups

These structures should support not only individuals who did not pursue/continue mainstream degree education for various reasons, but also those who enrol in degree programs for in-demand professions like teacher training, nursing, and information technology. By providing flexible and customized programmes, universities can offer high-quality education efficiently, allowing in-demand professionals to enter the workforce promptly while ensuring rigorous standards of preparation are maintained.

Furthermore, shorter learning pathways, such as micro-credentials and non-credited courses, need to be developed. A framework for micro-credentials is offered by the European Council Recommendation on a European approach to micro-credentials for lifelong learning and employability[3].

Digital provisions for quality, scalability and affordability

Digital provisions are particularly suitable for adult target groups due to their quality, flexibility, and scalability, which are essential to meet the diverse needs and life conditions of these groups. Also, open education initiatives, such as

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[3] Council of the European Union (2022), Recommendation on the European approach to micro-credentials for lifelong learning and employability,
https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-9237-2022-INIT/en/pdf
https://education.ec.europa.eu/education-levels/higher-education/micro-credentials

MOOCs and open educational resources, are important in providing easy access to courses that facilitate both personal development and continuing professional development.

Interfaces with the labour market

To enhance continuing professional development, universities need to establish an ecosystem that connects them with other stakeholders to design educational pathways for lifelong learners. Like knowledge transfer models used for innovation, we need interfaces for professional development that serve as bridges between educational institutions and the labour market. These interfaces will facilitate the interaction between labour market demands and educational provisions, enabling the articulation of specific needs and the development of tailored solutions for deploying talent within enterprises and sectors. Collaboration with cities and regions to establish regional skills partnerships will further strengthen workforce capabilities and adaptability[4].

4. Inclusion

Equity of opportunities

Equity of educational opportunities is a fundamental human right. The European Commission has identified a range of potential inclusion challenges in education, which encompass barriers within the educational system, social and economic barriers, cultural differences, geographical obstacles, disabilities, and health problems (European Commission, Erasmus+, 2023). These challenges can affect individual students or groups throughout their entire academic journey, from pre-access preparation to graduation. And later life.

Universities have a responsibility to offer education that meets the needs of as of now underrepresented, disadvantaged, and vulnerable student populations, ensuring that these individuals are not excluded at any stage of their educational journey and their future.

Developing an inclusive society

By expanding access to education for these groups, more students will be in touch with the university ecosystem, which is currently not the case for significant parts of society. This has the potential to enhance social cohesion and mutual understanding across diverse people in our societies, thereby reducing feelings of alienation. As the prevailing culture and language in society is often shaped by those with a university background and based on meritocracy, improving access to these groups will lead to stronger social connections, greater participation in democratic processes, and less exclusion. This impact is vital for the development of European democracies.

5. Student well-being

A safe place

The University of the Future is committed to facilitating free learning and critical thinking within a safe ecosystem that prioritizes human security and the well-being of both students and staff. The concept of a "safe place" is fundamental for enhancing student well-being, as a supportive and secure environment empowers students to engage in learning without fear of judgment or harm, irrespective of their personality or background. This environment fosters self-expression, critical thinking, and the exploration of ideas, allowing academic freedom to flourish. Such a haven also appeals to international students, encouraging them to pursue their studies in these nurturing and open settings.

However, recent developments have highlighted a tension between student safety and the principles of freedom of expression and academic freedom. In an effort to avoid political or financial repercussions, universities currently may adopt a reactive position to avoid controversy. This approach, as demonstrated in contexts such as the situation in Palestine, has resulted in a climate where some students feel unsafe, while others perceive threats to their freedom of expression and academic freedom.

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[4] Pact for Skills Regional Skills Partnerships leaflet - European Commission (europa.eu)

Choosing an active strategy to address these challenges, universities should facilitate open discourse by inviting speakers and organizing debates, creating forums for the expression of diverse opinions in a respectful and safe environment. By allocating time and space for discussions of varying viewpoints and clearly establishing boundaries for respectful academic debate, universities can foster safer environments without infringing on individual freedoms. Encouraging a diversity of perspectives through open dialogue prepares students to navigate the wide range of opinions present in society and creates a more welcoming atmosphere for those with differing opinions and perspectives due to their backgrounds.

In addition to creating a safe learning environment for students, the University of the Future must also ensure a safe working space for staff. This includes providing individualized career pathways, implementing key performance indicators (KPIs) that extend beyond bibliometrics, and rewarding engagement with society. The reward structure should value teaching, support educational innovation, and prioritize the mental health and well-being of staff, particularly for early career researchers, while also considering diverse intersections like gender or background.

Steps toward these objectives have already been initiated through global initiatives like the San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment (DORA), which aims to reduce the emphasis on journal-based metrics in evaluating research quality. Additionally, local initiatives, such as the 'Recognition and Rewards' program in the Netherlands, adopt a comprehensive approach that encompasses education, research, impact, and leadership.

Mental health

In addition to creating a safe learning space, the University of the Future is responsive to the psychological and mental health challenges faced by students, including anxiety, depression, and performance anxiety. It addresses these issues by providing an environment where students can seek help and support without fear of stigma. More importantly, the university actively creates an environment that works to prevents current and future mental health problems.

Communities of learning versus individualism

A healthy and safe educational environment is created through the establishment of communities of learning that emphasize the importance of peer support. Within these communities, students are recognized not merely as individuals responsible for their own success but as part of a collective that facilitates networking, friendship, learning and the sharing of transferable skills. This collaborative approach underscores the value of collective experiences in enhancing the educational journey and mental well-being, and maintaining student cohorts further supports their development.

Architectural design

The design of educational spaces also plays a critical role in promoting learning and community. By creating safe, inclusive, and inspiring environments, universities can foster creativity, collaboration, and overall well-being among students.

Reducing existential anxiety by grounding theory in practical experiences

Moreover, in recognizing the anxieties stemming from broader societal issues such as climate change, economic instability, and violence, the University of the Future seeks to address these concerns within the curriculum. By grounding theory in practical experiences and promoting internships and service learning, teachers can help students to structure and master these challenges, enhancing students' understanding, thereby alleviating existential anxiety.

Building self-confidence

By encouraging students to reflect on their learning experiences and outcomes, the University of the Future supports students in the development of self-confidence and resilience, which are a condition for overall well-being. This reflection will focus on what students have learned, the knowledge and skills they have developed, and how these

factors will influence their capabilities and potential both during their time at university and in their future careers. Building trust in their abilities is important for facing the complexities of life and work after graduation.

As demonstrated by UNA Europa students[5], universities can create opportunities to help students build self-confidence, particularly through workshops or sessions offered during their Bachelor's degree, ideally in the final year. A valuable exercise may involve students identifying and mapping their key academic and personal achievements and growth while reflecting on how these will impact future studies and career paths. Such exercise also allows students to connect the theoretical knowledge they have acquired to their future aspirations. Engaging in such activity can significantly reduce students' anxiety about uncertainties related to the relevance of their studies and their future.

6. Internationalisation

For the University of the Future, internationalization encompasses at least three key dimensions and their respective impacts: creating an international experience for students, preparing students for an innovative and competitive international labour market, and contributing to global development.

Enhancing learning pathways by academic collaboration and mobility

A primary objective of academic collaboration and mobility is to provide students an international academic or professional experience abroad that is aligned with the curriculum at their home university. Through exchange mobility agreements between European or international universities, students can enhance significantly the academic quality of their learning pathways and improve their intercultural skills and language proficiency. This is particularly evident in collaborative intensive seminars, networked or joint degree programmes, and micro-credential initiatives, where institutions combine or integrate outstanding, complementary components of their curricula at high academic standards. European University alliances aim to achieve a participation rate of 50% among students engaging in these mobility opportunities. However, certain groups remain under-represented in mobility flows due to financial and cultural barriers, which necessitates ongoing attention from university leaders and policymakers.

Developing talent for the internationalized labour market

By preparing students for the international labour market, Universities of the Future contribute to a highly skilled workforce capable of driving innovation and economic growth, enabling societies to remain competitive on a global scale. An international experience will enhance the capacity of students to function in an internationalized labour market and to support society in the "war for talent". Furthermore, European countries also rely on incoming international students to address labour market needs across various sectors and at all higher education qualification levels, ranging from nursing to specialized IT engineering. The absence of international students could potentially lead to a decline in our knowledge-based economies.

The University of the Future becomes international not only by attracting an international student population but also by an international staff. The inclusion of international staff is crucial for enhancing research and educational programmes, particularly in emerging and specialized fields. Attracting international scholars promotes knowledge exchange and facilitates cross-border partnerships, ultimately strengthening the university's impact on both local and global scales.

Developing ecosystems with the Global South

By fostering long-term and sustainable partnerships with institutions in the Global South, particularly in **neighbouring regions** such as Africa and countries in the Middle East, the University of the Future will actively contribute to addressing global challenges related to socio-economic disparity and development. It is essential for

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[5] Una Europa Student Congress 2024, "Dis-/Assemble: Reinventing the University", Freie Universität Berlin, 17-20 September 2024

these collaborative efforts to shift from a focus on solely student and staff mobility and the training of individual doctoral candidates to more comprehensive initiatives that emphasize innovative projects, institutional partnerships and capacity building. This approach will help decolonize science and education by empowering **universities in the Global South to become producers of knowledge and equal partners**, contributing unique topics and perspectives to research and educational initiatives.

Moreover, these collaborations should extend to **creating local and regional ecosystems** like in the economy and healthcare that engage a variety of stakeholders, including businesses, hospitals, healthcare systems and regions and cities. Ultimately, these efforts will facilitate the emergence of a middle class in these regions, fostering a positive cycle of local development, welfare and growth, while also helping to moderate migration flows.

The University of the Future must create **new perspectives on intercontinental partnerships and multi-stakeholder collaborations** with Africa, particularly in light of the projected population growth of up to 1.5 billion by 2050. This demographic shift will transform all existing relationships and dynamics between regions, making it essential for universities to engage proactively and strategically in these collaborations.

Enhancing internationalization by digital approaches

With the rise of digital teaching and learning approaches, including synchronous hybrid, blended, and online formats, new digital education methods have emerged. These innovative formats can accommodate both large and small groups of students. Making international course collaboration and mobility flexible is likely to be a groundbreaking solution to create mobility for all, especially for university alliances that aim for 50% and more mobility among their students. To challenges of mobility, the University of the Future will implement a diverse range of **inclusive mobility strategies** that enhance both the scale and affordability of mobility while ensuring international quality. In this context, university alliances are establishing a **virtual campus** to support digital approaches to internationalization.

7. Financial Accessibility

To create a meaningful impact as a university, it is important that students have a **sufficient level of financial stability** that enables them to pursue their studies full-time. The costs associated with higher education, including tuition fees and accommodation expenses, must remain affordable. However, both costs have been on the rise in recent years. This presents a significant challenge for both universities and governments.

It is crucial to maintain the perspective that **higher education is a public good** and not as a commodity, a value deeply rooted in European tradition, that has contributed to a highly educated population. This vision requires sufficient public funding of universities, and proactive policies to ensure the availability of an adequate supply of student housing. As student enrolment in European countries continues to rise—now exceeding 50% of the population—these challenges become increasingly pressing.

While students may benefit from earning compensation for services rendered at the university, such as acting as student buddies, this should not be their primary source of financial support. **Sustaining a financially stable environment** for all students is vital to succeed academically without being burdened by financial insecurity.

Part 2. Una Europa Future UniLab: Impact of European universities on societies at large

1. The Meaning of University Impact on Society

The influence of universities on society is profound, impacting various facets of the societal ecosystem, including policy, economy, culture, and individual development.

Policy: Advancing Science-Based Policies and Democracy

Universities play a crucial role in developing and promoting scientific thinking within public policy and democratic processes. By collaborating with EU institutions, national and regional governments, and civil society organizations, universities support science-based policies and uphold democratic values. The University of the Future plays an active role in providing science-based advice or criticism on policies, **claiming space for scientific knowledge in political discourse**.

Economy: Supporting Innovation in the Economy

Universities are vital engines for economic growth and innovation, grounded in scientific research. They work with public authorities and social partners, providing guidance on macro-level socio-economic policies.

Through initiatives like incubators, spin-offs and research collaborations with businesses, they drive technological advancements and economic competitiveness.

They foster continuing professional development to ensure the labour market remains equipped with most recent knowledge and skills.

Culture: Promoting Cultural Values

Universities advance cultural values, tolerance and inclusivity by collaborating with media, cultural institutions, civil society and religious organizations. They work to reduce societal polarization by promoting shared values and cultural understanding. Universities play also an important role in documenting and analysing culture, providing context to cultural changes, and shaping local cultures.

Individuals: Personal and Career Development

Universities, as centres of learning, contribute to the personal and professional development of individuals. By addressing individual learning needs, they support societal cohesion and help individuals achieve their professional goals. They enhance well-being and create an environment of trust, tolerance, and equal opportunities.

2. How to make Impact on Society?

The core of creating impact is promoting scientific thinking and democratizing knowledge in society, all in respect to core values.

Open access

Open access allows scientific research to be freely accessible to all, democratizing knowledge and enabling a wide range of audiences—including researchers, educators, policymakers, and the general public—to benefit from scientific findings. This accessibility enhances public engagement with research, empowering non-specialists to understand and utilize scientific knowledge. As a result, increased access **encourages public discourse** on critical

societal issues and fosters a more informed and engaged society, amplifying the overall impact of scientific research on social progress. In this way, open access reinforces the integration of the University of the Future within society.

However, for open access to truly fulfil its potential, it is essential to **reassess the current relationship between research publications and the publishing industry**, which is largely dominated by commercialization and often not sufficiently visible to non-specialists. Initiatives like the European Commission's "Open Research Europe" aim to improve the visibility of published articles at no charges for authors.

Open access publications cannot replace science communication, as they do not provide the necessary context and explanations that help the general public evaluate the quality and relevance of knowledge presented in scientific journal articles. To enhance the public's ability to engage with scientific research, it is important to provide targeted training in reading and comprehending scientific articles, especially for key communication actors in society This training will empower them to better utilize scientific sources and appreciate their implications.

In addition to open access publications, it is imperative for institutions to promote the widespread distribution of open educational resources (OER) by institutions or common platforms.

Science-Based Communication: closing the trust gap

The University of the Future is committed to **democratizing knowledge by promoting trustworthy, science-based information and actively combating misinformation and societal polarization**. In an era characterized by post-truth narratives, universities should establish themselves as reliable partners in society, effectively communicating scientific truths to enhance their societal impact. Ensuring that science-based communication is widely accessible to individuals and organizations is critical for maximizing this impact.

Recognizing that science communication is a specialized skill set that requires specific training and expertise, Leiden University has developed a Master's specialization in Science Communication and Society for students, along with a Summer School focused on Science Communication primarily for PhD candidates, to foster essential communication skills in this area.

Scientists who lack experience in science communication should receive support to effectively disseminate the knowledge generated through their research. Consequently, universities need to employ **dedicated professionals** who can articulate both new scientific discoveries and relevant scientific background information, thereby integrating cutting-edge knowledge into public and political discourse.

As beacons of truth, **universities should stimulate reflection and discussion on critical societal issues**. By embracing this responsibility, they strengthen an informed dialogue and promote a more effective public discourse.

Promoting Scientific Thinking: organizing continuing education and professional development at scale

Promoting scientific thinking goes beyond the simple dissemination of knowledge; it involves continuing education that focuses on the critical acquisition, analysis, and evaluation of information. Continuing professional development of alumni and other professionals provides science-based reference frameworks, empowering individuals to generate evidence-based outcomes and apply this knowledge in practical settings.

To achieve this, the University of the Future **should offer extensive continuing education and professional development across all disciplines**, ensuring alignment with European educational qualifications (EQF levels 5 to 8). Focus must be placed on quality, accessibility, and affordability by employing innovative and scalable digital teaching and learning methodologies, such as hybrid, blended, and online formats. It includes also open educational resources.

Educational approaches should be tailored to **accommodate the work and life contexts of adult learners** by prioritizing accessibility and flexibility.

Influencing Decision-Making: inspiring by scientific evidence

Universities play an important role in influencing and engaging in decision-making processes within public authorities, civil society organizations, and cultural institutions. By employing scientific methodologies, sharing insights and providing data, they **nurture and professionalize debates**, thereby enhancing the quality and maturity of decisions made. Universities contribute actively to this process by producing policy reports and position papers, as well as organizing events such as conferences, seminars, and workshops. These initiatives not only foster scientific thinking but also enhance the knowledge and skills of all stakeholders involved.

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Upholding EU and Academic Values: being lighthouses in society

The University of the Future is committed to upholding ethical standards while critically addressing societal issues and promoting **the essential ethical values enshrined in the Treaty of the European Union**, such as human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, and respect for human rights. These core values are strengthened by academic principles that emphasize academic freedom and institutional autonomy, allowing universities to effectively influence and shape societal direction. By embodying EU and academic values, universities act as beacons of trust within society, offering guidance in their societal roles (see also part 1).

The University of the Future should lead in **promoting ethics within society, critically questioning hierarchies and existing structures to foster emancipation.** This endeavour requires genuine independence, bringing the principles of university autonomy into practice as a free place for open discussion and exploration of diverse perspectives.

3. Collaboration with stakeholders to Implement Impact across Society

Achieving meaningful societal impact requires the University of the Future to work together across various social, economic, and cultural contexts in collaboration with official and non-governmental organisations:

Collaborating with Governments and national/regional Stakeholder Organizations

Collaboration with governmental and regional organizations enables universities to contribute to public policy making and national/regional development.

Collaborating with Economic Actors

Engaging with economic entities enables universities to stimulate the quality of products and processes, economic growth and competitiveness through research and innovation. It supports them to meet evolving demands. Collaboration with economic actors is also modernizing the labour market by continuously updating and enhancing knowledge and skills of both management and workforce.

Collaborating with Cultural Institutions

Working with cultural institutions helps universities promote culture and shared values, tolerance, and cultural understanding.

Collaborating with Civil Society

Engagement with civil society strengthens the social fabric, promoting participation and active citizenship, inclusivity, and equality.

In accordance with the UN Resolution, universities should maintain a focus on the most vulnerable members of society, to reduce inequality and promote the ideals of human security (to live a life free from wants, from fear, and to live a life in dignity[6].

4. Institutional Policies and Structures

The University of the Future needs specific institutional policies and structures to ensure that it can effectively impact society:

Science Communication

Structured institutional approaches to science communication are important. By science communication, universities actively engage with the public to make science more accessible. By using a range of media channels such as websites, social media, blogs, podcasts, and videos, universities can broadly disseminate scientific information and reach a wide variety of audiences. This approach enhances trust in scientific institutions and society at large by highlighting how science is relevant to addressing societal challenges.

Continuing education and professional development

The University of the Future will provide **high-quality, accessible, flexible, and affordable continuing education and professional development (CEPD) programmes** at scale that address the increasing demand for complex knowledge and skills in the labour market[7]. These initiatives must be aligned with labour market trends and include the establishment of interface services that connect universities with industry partners and local and regional ecosystems to bridge skill gaps, while also fostering innovative educational formats such as micro-credentials, MOOCs, and open educational resources to meet diverse learner needs.

To effectively **respond to the challenges posed by rapid societal transformations**, universities must prioritize lifelong learning as a core aspect of their mission, **developing new structures like extension schools or continuing education centres**, and creating tailored educational pathways for various target groups. By establishing robust interface services with external stakeholders, universities can enhance workforce capabilities, ensuring that citizens are equipped to navigate evolving career pathways (see also Part 1).

Digital approaches are essential for scalable, flexible and affordable continuing education delivery.

Tech transfer

Technology transfer offices realise impact as **interfaces between universities and companies**, facilitating the use of R&D-expertise and looking for innovative solutions to address corporate challenges. They support collaborations between university departments and businesses laid down in agreements. Tech offices also provide support to researchers in the initiation and expansion of spin-off enterprises and offer strategies for protecting intellectual property, including through patenting. They actively seek industrial partners interested in bringing a technology to market.

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[6] https://www.un.org/humansecurity/what-is-human-security/

[7] As of 2023, an average of 43% of the EU population aged 25 to 34 years had attained already tertiary education (ISCED levels 5-8) and were expected to join the labour market (AES, 2024), although there were notable disparities among different countries. Micro-credentials for adult learners are an objective of EU and national policies.

Expert consultancy and studies

Universities create impact by providing **consultancy services and conducting studies for governments, regional and city authorities, civil society organizations, and institutions within the social, economic, and cultural sectors.** This includes offering guidance on current issues and undertaking policy-oriented, often multidisciplinary, research projects.

In certain domains, they form dedicated university institutes in partnership with these authorities or organizations to conduct continuous research and provide consultancy services.

Part 3. The Role of Una Europa

Una Europa, as a university alliance, can significantly impact on European society through the contributions of its individual partner universities, their collaborative efforts, and actions at the European level.

1. Impact through individual partner universities

Each partner institution has a rich history and a respected position in the academic world of its respective country, characterized by unique identities, profiles, cultures, teaching styles, and programmes. Collectively, these universities aim to embody the ideals of the University of the Future outlined in this document, with a focus on achieving long-term societal impact. They actively engage with local and regional communities while collaborating with stakeholders at national levels, all while upholding core European values.

2. Impact through collaboration among partners within Una Europa

Through UNA Europa, universities are working together to enhance the quality of education by fostering academic collaboration and mobility. This provides students with international academic experiences that positively influence their future contributions to society. The collaborative efforts culminate in joint (European) degrees and are further enriched by service learning and internships with stakeholder organizations. Additionally, universities are pursuing impactful collaborations in continuing professional development and developing a framework for (joint) micro-credentials. To increase scalability, flexibility, and affordability in education and mobility, innovative digital solutions for both degree and continuing education programs are developed. This entails new approaches to international course and curriculum design, as well as ensuring interoperability between digital university systems.

3. Collaborations on institutional strategies to raise impact

Enhancing the institutional impact of UNA Europa universities, as well as their cross-institutional collaborations, necessitates a focus on advancing the strategic development of each university within different contexts. This will significantly increase their potential for collaboration. As a starting point, benchmarking exercises to enhance the strategic development and raising the potential for collaboration of each institution are required.

Benchmarking the balance between institutional autonomy and governmental frameworks

Una Europa universities can **benchmark the balance between institutional autonomy and governmental frameworks** in their respective countries, especially related to critical factors that influence their capacity to make an impact through education, research, innovation, and society at large. These critical factors relate to national strategic priorities, funding schemes, curriculum requirements, accreditation processes, student access, fees and housing conditions, academic career development and conditions for the organization of continuing education and professional development. It includes as well various external stakeholder requirements.

Institutional benchmarking within an Una Europa framework

Una Europa universities can **benchmark relevant institutional visions and strategies** aimed at impacting students and society and enabling teachers and staff to realize them. Exchange and comparison of good practices in this regard can lead to **a more effective leadership.**

Furthermore, they should **benchmark technology infrastructure for teaching and learning**, paying particular attention to emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence and extended reality. Organizing **joint continuing professional development of ICT and education staff** can further support new developments in educational technology.

Moreover, **organizing subject-related communities of teaching staff** would be very rewarding and effective, resulting into a sense of belonging to the Una Europa community. This can form a strong basis for **bottom-up**

initiatives for the development of new joint curricula and courses and shared educational resources. Synergies between educational support services would facilitate these joint developments.

Una Europa universities can also collaborate on the development of methodologies for conducting regular **institutional evaluations, which would enhance the maturity of decision-making** regarding the implementation of institutional strategies. This includes the institutional evaluation of collaborations within Una Europa at the institutional level.

Una Europa universities should also benchmark their **strategies, structures, frameworks, and activities related to continuing education and professional development**. They collaborate on the development and delivery of lifelong learning, including micro-credentials, and the development of **extension schools or centres of continuing education** and interfaces between the university and the labour market.

4. European-level impact

As an alliance, UNA Europa can achieve a more substantial and profound impact by intensifying cooperation with European institutions and civil society stakeholders. A cohesive European-level strategy that encompasses partner universities within the alliance could effectively address critical European challenges through science-based approaches that align with core values, such as climate change, migration and asylum, the rule of law, economic disparities, geopolitical challenges, and the rise of populism and nationalism.

5. Including a global perspective

For raising long term impact in a global perspective, UNA Europa and its partners should extend activities to the Global South by involving universities from neighbouring regions in collaborative educational initiatives, as well as in research and innovation. This inclusion should focus on establishing local and regional ecosystems across various fields, enhancing the alliance's impact on relationships between Europe and Africa and the Middle East fostering mutually beneficial development, welfare and growth.