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2020 május 31. (vasárnap) 14:51

EUROPE

EU budget proposals ‘not good enough’ say universities

Brendan O’Malley 30 May 2020 Share European universities say the European Commission’s proposals for its next seven-year budget “fall short of expectations” and “short of society’s needs”.

The European Commission on Wednesday proposed a new seven-year budget and an emergency stimulus package to aid recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, together totalling €1.85 trillion (US$2 trillion).

The €750 billion (US$833 billion) emergency stimulus dubbed ‘Next Generation EU’ – with two-thirds of it to be given as grants and the rest as loans – is earmarked to help revive ailing economies hit hard by the current health crisis.

Within the total package, the commission has proposed a €94.4 billion budget for research and innovation in the Horizon Europe programme, the successor to Horizon 2020, which it argues is a €13.5 billion increase. According to the commission, the programme will be “reinforced to fund vital research in health, resilience and the green and digital transitions”.

The European Green Deal, the plan proposed before the pandemic to achieve climate neutrality across the European Union by 2050, will form the backbone of the EU’s recovery strategy. It will include renewable energy projects, especially wind, solar and kick-starting a clean hydrogen economy in Europe.

There will also be a bid to create a stronger presence in strategic sectors, including artificial intelligence, cybersecurity, supercomputing and cloud computing.

Building a real data economy supported by the development of a digital education agenda promoting digital skills for all EU citizens will also play an important part in the recovery.

European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said: “The recovery plan turns the immense challenge we face into an opportunity, not only by supporting the recovery but also by investing in our future: the European Green Deal and digitalisation will boost jobs and growth, the resilience of our societies and the health of our environment. This is Europe’s moment. Our willingness to act must live up to the challenges we are all facing. With Next Generation EU we are providing an ambitious answer.”

Economy Commissioner Paolo Gentiloni described Next Generation EU as a “European turning point”.

Hopes not met

However, a statement by the European University Association (EUA) voices disappointment that hopes nourished by the academic community over the past few months that it had “become clear to policy-makers just how fundamental adequate investment in research, innovation and education is to societal and economic recovery”, had not been met.

The EUA said the need for excellent research, strong innovation ecosystems and inclusive and sustainable higher education has never been greater as unprecedented economic recession looms over Europe, and the European Commission and many governments across Europe had “certainly acknowledged this point and promoted a science-based recovery”.

But while the announcement on 27 May recognised the need to invest in these areas to support society and the economy and the commission did propose increasing both the Horizon Europe and Erasmus+ programmes, which are core instruments for universities to contribute to the effort, “the increases, nevertheless, fall short of expectations and more importantly, fall short of society’s needs,” the EUA said.

It backed the European Parliament in its bid to invest €120 billion into the Horizon Europe programme to start addressing the known shortcomings of the programme and the greater needs in a context of the green transition.

Its disappointment is echoed by the League of European Research Universities (LERU), which said: “The higher education budget is a very long way from the €160 billion LERU called for over the past years and is also still quite far from the €120 billion asked for by the European Parliament.”

The EUA says the proposal for Erasmus+ is €3.4 billion higher than proposed in February, “but stagnates below the European Commission’s original plans and far below the European Parliament’s proposal. With great ambitions added to the new programme, including the European Universities Initiative, the reinforcement of mobility, and enhanced social inclusion, this increase however is not enough.”

LERU said the Erasmus+ proposal, at €27.89 billion, is short of the €30 billion proposed by the European Commission in May 2018.

The EUA said the financial structure proposed on Wednesday is unlike any previous seven-year budget, given the addition of a large, temporary recovery fund combining grant and loan mechanisms.

“This includes significant support to various parts of the economy. Both research and education are crucial elements in this context. What has been essential in combatting the pandemic is knowledge and skills, the ability to analyse and act, connect and collaborate, relate and reorganise society.

“Universities have been a major contributor on all fronts and are looking to continue serving society by supporting long-term recovery. This includes strong engagement of the sector in the green and digital transitions.”

The EUA said the commission’s proposal recognises that stronger investment in these areas is of strategic importance and will boost the EU’s resilience.

“The EUA therefore calls on member states to be ambitious and support long-term recovery

through a higher commitment to research, innovation and education.”

‘Not good enough’

LERU said as far as the higher education budget is concerned, “the same old story continues”. It is “good, but not good enough. The same goes for the Erasmus+ budget.”

“If the past 10 weeks have proven anything, it is that research and innovation are one of the essential keys for solving our global problems and that investment in education is vastly needed. It all starts with an appropriate budget.”

The Guild of European Research-Intensive Universities (The Guild) urged the European Commission, the European Council and the European Parliament to increase their commitment to research, education and innovation in the Multiannual Financial Framework, and ensure a timely start for 2021.

It underlined that the aspiration of the Next Generation EU recovery instrument to support research, innovation and education must be evidenced in the descriptions of the programmes that it covers.

It said: “Our inability to overcome the pandemic quickly has shown that we have significantly underinvested in fundamental, frontier-led science. Continuing this trend would be a major mistake. Our inability to confront future challenges will have dramatic human, social and economic costs.

“For this reason, the Guild strongly welcomes the urgency expressed by President Emmanuel Macron and Chancellor Angela Merkel, that the upcoming investments in European recovery from the crisis have to prioritise research and innovation.”

The commission’s funding proposals have to be agreed by the European Parliament and the European Council. Follow University World News on Facebook