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Commissioner for Innovation, Research,
Culture, Education and Youth
Mariya Gabriel

European Commission
Rue de la Loi 200
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Transformation Agenda and EU policies for universities

29 April 2021

Dear Commissioner,

Universities perceive their European cooperation as a great enrichment for their missions of research, education, innovation, and culture. Universities regard themselves as institutions that benefit immensely from openness to the world, an international perspective and diversity.

We highly appreciate EU initiatives to strengthen this cooperation in the higher education sector including European University Networks. In addition to removing legal and administrative obstacles that complicate or hinder the development of cross-border university activities and structures, universities can benefit from a supportive framework to maximise the opportunities of digital education and a more diverse student body.

However, we regret that the new EU policy initiative for universities has so far been labelled "Transformation Agenda". We are all the happier that there are signals that a final name is still being considered. In this context we would like to explain our concerns about the current name, as this may be helpful in the process of finding a better one.

The term "agenda" usually describes a political top-down approach. It does not sufficiently reflect the autonomy and diversity of European universities. Change and enhancement of quality as permanent processes in the university sector need to be developed jointly and on an equal footing by the European Commission, the responsible ministries, and the universities. In practical terms, the Commission has

thankfully taken this approach of cooperation. It would be highly appreciated if the name of the policies could also reflect it.

Moreover, many universities in the EU are highly successful institutions delivering great performances in research, education, innovation, and culture. They are in a constant contact with and service to society. The term "transformation" suggests that they need to be changed in their very core. This insinuation does not do the university sector justice. Even worse, it might harm its reputation on the international stage and therefore its competitiveness. Will excellent scientists and international mobile students feel attracted to universities that are, according to the European Commission, requiring a 'transformation agenda'?

We are looking forward to a future political framework that will further enhance the European cooperation of universities, promotes new tools such as digital learning or microcredits and inspires an exchange of best practices in Europe. We would, however, appreciate if the European Commission could denominate the EU university policies in a way that is less "self-centred" and instead highlight the transformative power of the universities in shaping the European Research Area and the European Education Area. A term widely accepted within the university system would ensure a high degree of identification from the university perspective and a stronger impact for the whole project.

The upcoming consultation period offers a chance for the European Commission to reflect together with us on an inspiring name for the process. Your consideration of this matter would be highly appreciated.

With kind regards,

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President
German Rectors Conference
(HRK)

Prof. dr Luc Sels
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