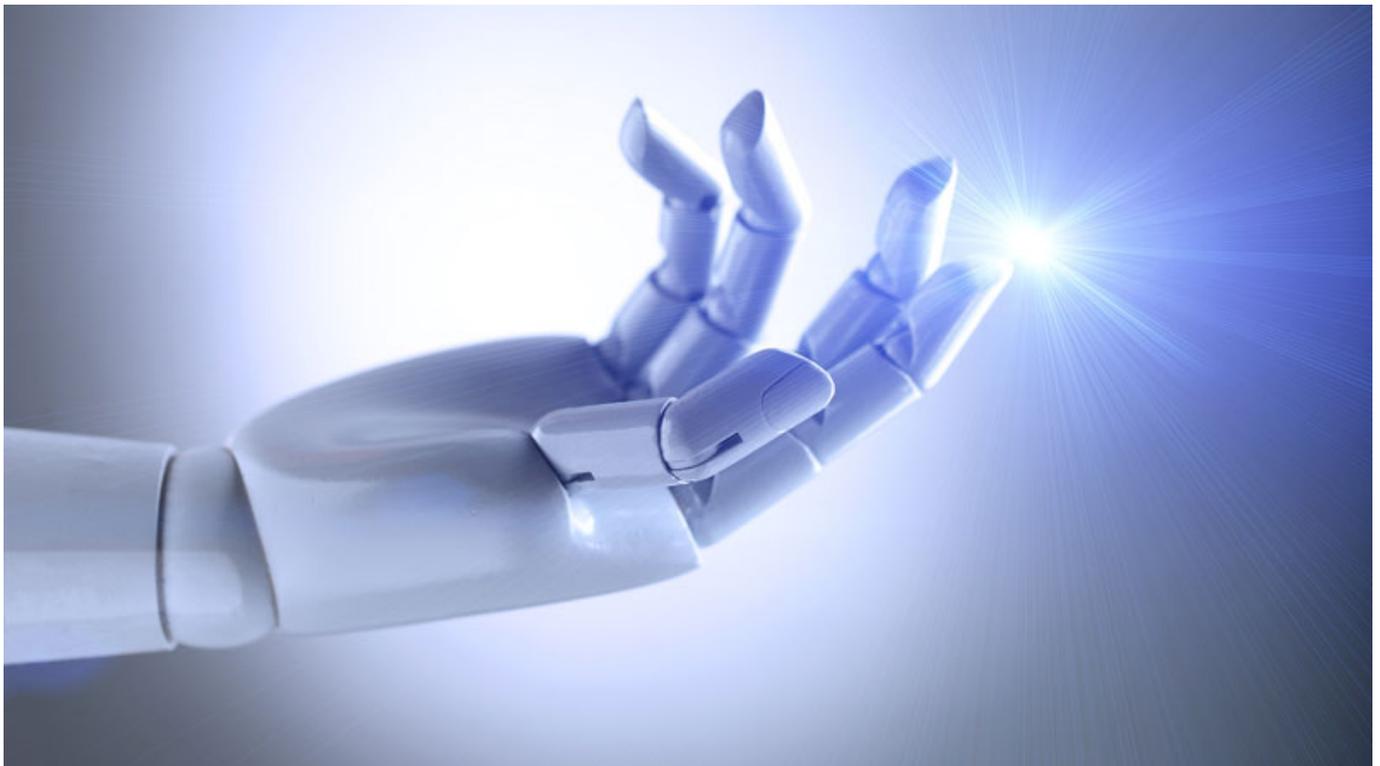


## **A European industrial strategy based on cooperation and curiosity**

Written by Rolf Tarrach on 7 March 2019 in Opinion Plus  
Opinion Plus

A stronger EU industrial policy is in the cards, including more investments in innovation, writes Rolf Tarrach.



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Technological and social innovation are central to move towards sustainable development, key to economic growth, and increasingly important for Europe's sovereignty on the global scene.

Europe has great potential to achieve all this, but it must support innovation ecosystems, giving space for curiosity and enabling cooperation between citizens, industry, universities and the public sector.

This year alone, we have seen 18 EU countries, the Friends of Industry, asking for [new political impetus for an industrial strategy](#) [1], and a [report from the European Parliament](#) [2] on industrial strategy and artificial intelligence.

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More recently, there has been a [common Franco-German manifesto](#) [8] for an industrial strategy with “massive investments” in innovation.

Innovation is common to all these declarations, not least due to the growing importance of artificial intelligence across our societies.

If all agree to invest, we must begin to think where and how this is done best.

[The European University Association](#) [9] (EUA) has just presented a [report on the role of universities in Europe's innovation ecosystems](#) [10], based on more than 170 interviews in nine countries with university staff, students, policy makers, funders and industry representatives.

“When planning future investments, Europe should support these spaces and empower the main constituents of the ecosystems, not least the universities, where the concrete links between education, research and innovation are forged”

In many of the case studies, innovation was key in overcoming the financial crisis and making the systems more resilient.

There are many success stories in which traditional research-intensive companies went into crisis and new growth came from a system of start-ups and other companies engaged in open innovation.

The characteristics of the new systems feature knowledge and ideas being shared within the research and business community.

Patents and contract research are less important, and spaces in universities, science parks, or around research infrastructure are hubs where a multitude of companies, students, researchers and other citizens form a community of innovation - an “innovation ecosystem.”

Technologies are increasingly transversal: materials like graphene, sensor technologies and artificial intelligence are all applicable to a wide range of areas.

Moreover, the big challenges of climate, health or mobility crystallise as common reference points.

In this environment, regions specialise in solving these challenges, creating the space where

researchers and students meet with businesses to develop solutions together.

“It is through curiosity that we will make the giant leaps forward necessary for Europe to live up to ambitions and give impetus to innovation”

When planning future investments, Europe should support these spaces and empower the main constituents of the ecosystems, not least the universities, where the concrete links between education, research and innovation are forged.

Curiosity is another key ingredient.

There is wide agreement among the interviewees in the report that a successful innovation ecosystem needs to have space for creating disruptive ideas.

Large companies and universities, for example, make partnerships for ten years, not to solve a concrete problem of application, but to look together for the next big idea.

However, this curiosity-driven research needs sufficient and sustained core funding.

It is through curiosity that we will make the giant leaps forward necessary for Europe to live up to ambitions and give impetus to innovation.

This includes the curiosity of researchers, but also of students who want to create a start-up, the curiosity of teachers who want to further interdisciplinary learning, and the curiosity of citizens to find solutions to societal challenges.

Pushing universities too hard for the next patent or the next short-term university-business contract might create a small result in the present, but it will not provide the time needed to discover the next great idea.

When a new EU Parliament and a new Commission discuss how to further European innovation, they would do well to take a good look at Europe’s existing successful innovation ecosystems and how they have used cooperation and curiosity to combine education, research and innovation.

## **About the author**

Rolf Tarrach is President of the European University Association (EUA)

You can find more information on the EUA at: [www.eua.eu](http://www.eua.eu) [11]

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