Researchers & academics

Higher education institutions train, prepare and reskill highly qualified researchers, entrepreneurs and innovators who are increasingly in demand across digital economies. In order to effectively educate the talents of the European digital industry and enterprises, universities and research institutions must behave entrepreneurially and adopt an innovative and creative mind-set in every aspect of their daily work. The ability of these institutions to prove entrepreneurial mettle depends upon the individuals engaged in creating a bold digital strategy and building organisational capacity to ensure its implementation.

Bringing digital technologies on the agenda

Digital technologies are transforming everything on their path and higher education institutes (HEIs) are not being spared. In order to maintain their prominent position in the regional ecosystem, HEIs have to **set out their own digital strategy**, with clear objectives and key performance indicators (KPIs) to monitor the advances made on a regular basis.

They have to **clarify the approach to follow to strengthen their digital competences.** For instance, they could seek support and advice from local tech champions. They could also involve external stakeholders in their daily activities (e.g. support from local entrepreneurs to students, positions within research units and centres).They also need to **ensure that knowledge exchange and collaboration on digital activities is a high priority at senior level**.

Furthermore, they have a key role to play in **planning and creating the digital future of their region**. They should participate in joint activities aiming to design and implement the local and/or regional digital strategy. They can also be proactive in the creation of a digital ecosystem around the university and get involved in industry-academia collaborations.

Being at the forefront of new digital technologies

Researchers have the ability to advance digital technologies as no one else. It is therefore critical that they conduct fundamental and applied research on digital technologies and their impact on the environment, economy and society as whole.

Forming the new elite

There is no doubt that education plays a considerable role in developing entrepreneurial activity. It is therefore now recognised that **mobilising students for entrepreneurial careers and enhancing their entrepreneurial skills** are important tasks for HEIs. HEIs have to develop training programmes that provide students from undergraduate to post-doctoral levels with relevant entrepreneurship skills and knowledge.

Staff members in different faculties should also be **acknowledged and rewarded for their entrepreneurial efforts**. This will help **retain and attract digital talents** who are needed to bring creative ideas to life. In order to fully unleash the creativity potential of digital talents, faculties and research units should be empowered to take full ownership of new digital technologies, infrastructure or centres they would develop.

Acting as a data catalyst

HEIs are used to playing the **role of facilitator** in many projects, task forces or discussion groups where businesses and other players are involved. As such, they are endowed with the right competences to **take the lead in establishing open data platforms**. Thanks to their third-party position, they can more easily **encourage businesses but also local governments and the community to engage in partnerships to share their data**.

Thanks to their technical expertise across a variety of domains, HEIs have the ability to propose **new solutions to share and analyse data in a way that is trusted and secure**. They are best able to develop and test new technologies.

Big data as an answer to local challenges

If made available, big data offers huge opportunities for businesses but also for other stakeholders. HEIs should take advantage of **open data to conduct applied research in order to solve local challenges**.

Setting up incubators to boost creativity and entrepreneurship

Individual capacities, such as creativity and persuasion, are often considered to be the main drivers of success of start-ups and young businesses. Yet, providing the necessary start-up support infrastructure is also essential for the creation of new, successful firms.

As university graduates have enormous potential for innovation and economic development, the services traditionally offered by HEIs are being challenged. Providing support for business start-ups is a new task for HEIs.

HEIs should for example seek to host **student start-up incubators or facilitate the access of students to external incubators which offer services that are line with students' needs.**

They can also offer **training programmes to support the acquisition of soft skills, as well as access to physical digital infrastructures**.

Finally, HEIs should aim to **develop an overall digital infrastructure that would maximise utility**. For example, HEIs can improve access and cross-domain usage of distributed data collections by aligning the IT systems of the incubators with the IT systems of different laboratories.