CESAER

The strong and united voice of universities of science and technology in Europe

Exploring new frontiers in science & technology

Work Plan from 2026 to 2027



Adopted by General Assembly
on 20 January 2026

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Letter from President

It is my honour, on behalf of the Board of Directors, to present Work Plan 2026–2027. It builds on extensive consultations with our Members, discussions at our General Assembly in Brno in October 2025, and the collective insights of our Board of Directors, task forces and Secretariat. This marks the first implementation phase of our Strategy 2030, translating our shared vision into concrete action across advocacy, peer learning, and leadership.

The next two years will bring both opportunity and challenge for universities of science and technology across Europe. The pace of change is accelerating—driven by technological advances, global challenges, and a shifting geopolitical landscape demanding openness, resilience, and sovereignty. At the same time, our universities face mounting pressures from demographic shifts, financial constraints, and questions of trust and relevance.

In this context, CESAER's role as the strong and united voice of universities of science and technology has never been more vital. Our association provides a trusted platform where leaders, academics, and professionals come together to exchange experience, learn from one another, and influence European policy to advance both excellence and societal relevance.

This work plan aligns our efforts with key European priorities, including the design of the next EU long-term budget 2028-2034 and key EU funding programmes. Through our task forces, we will help shape the successors to Horizon Europe and Erasmus, and the European Competitiveness Fund, the evolution of the European Research Area, and the strengthening of the European Education Area. We will also demonstrate leadership in areas crucial to Europe's future—sustainability and competitiveness, openness and security, excellence and inclusion.

The work plan focuses on three overarching themes:

- Advancing excellence in science, innovation, and education, reinforcing our Members' role in Europe's ecosystems.
- Contributing to sustainability and competitiveness, positioning our Members at the heart of Europe's transitions and transformations.
- Ensuring security, diversity, and resilience, upholding academic freedom, autonomy, and responsible governance.

Our task forces and workgroup are the main engines for implementation, embodying the collaborative spirit of CESAER, and guided by our professional Secretariat.

Thank you for your trust and commitment. I look forward to exploring new frontiers in science and technology together—and to continuing to advocate with clarity, inspire with integrity, and lead with purpose.

Orla Feely

President of CESAER

President of University College Dublin

Mission and constitutional framework

The strategy and work plan are grounded in the enduring strength of our mission, aims and values, as enshrined in our Articles of Association. These form the foundation of Strategy 2030 and underpin all implementation efforts.

Our identity and mission

"Rooted in advanced engineering education and research, CESAER is an international association of leading specialised and comprehensive universities with a strong science and technology profile that advocate, learn from each other and inspire debates. Our Members champion excellence in higher education, training, research and innovation, contribute to knowledge societies for a sustainable future and deliver significant scientific, economic, social and societal impact."

To realise this mission, we pursue mutually reinforcing aims:

1. Advocate Members' interests by aiding policymakers and funders in shaping European strategies, policies, and programmes for research, education, innovation, and university leadership;
2. Learn from each other by sharing and spreading intelligence, knowledge, and best practices;
3. Safeguard sustainable funding by shaping competitive and non-competitive streams from diverse sources;
4. Lead debate on key issues in science and technology in knowledge societies;
5. Amplify the strengths of our Members and association in Europe and globally;
6. Deliver strategic foresight by acting as a think tank and catalyst for internal reflection among Members.

These aims are grounded in our values: including research integrity, academic freedom, institutional autonomy, democratic citizenship, evidence-based policymaking, and the free circulation of knowledge. They are informed by key European and global frameworks, including the European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity, the Magna Charta Universitatum, and the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

Core themes

The following core themes distil the strategic direction of Strategy 2030 into focus areas for implementation during 2026–2027. They provide a coherent framework for aligning activities across our task forces, ensuring relevance to European developments, responsiveness to institutional pressures, and consistency with our strategic objectives.

European political priorities

The work plan aligns with evolving EU priorities, particularly those outlined in the Competitiveness Compass (2025). Our Members are uniquely positioned to contribute to the following three strategic goals at EU level:

- Closing the innovation gap through advanced technologies: Our Members drive frontier research and develop transformative technologies and educate talent, underpinning Europe's long-term competitiveness.
- Joint roadmap for decarbonisation and competitiveness: Achieving a climate-neutral and robust economy requires investment in science, energy transition, and talent development: areas where our Members lead and are key contributors. Important broader dimensions to consider are energy robustness and autonomy.
- Technological sovereignty and security: Universities of science and technology are central to enhancing Europe's strategic autonomy, such as through contributions in critical raw materials, resilient infrastructures, and education of talent for dual-use technologies and security-related domains.

This work plan supports engagement with the next EU long-term budget (2028–2034), the European Research Area (ERA), the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), and the European Education Area (EEA), as well as the successors to Horizon Europe (FP10) and Erasmus+, and other key EU funding programmes such as the emerging European Competitiveness Fund.

Pressures on universities of science and technology

In line with Strategy 2030, we acknowledge the complex pressures our Members are facing:

- Financial: Static or declining budgets, coupled with increased directionality, threaten university autonomy and long-term planning.
- Societal: Rising expectations for relevance, impact, and inclusive, flexible learning pathways.
- Political: Geopolitical tensions and regulatory complexity risk undermining openness and collaboration.
- Technological: AI, cybersecurity, and digitalisation require accelerated adaptation.
- Security: Resilience, infrastructure protection, and dual-use governance are increasingly critical responsibilities.

CESAER core themes for 2026–2027

To implement Strategy 2030, we will focus on three overarching themes during 2026–2027:

Advancing scientific excellence, and innovation and education leadership

Foster research and education excellence, technology transfer, and innovation ecosystems led by universities.

Contributing to sustainability and competitiveness through science and technology

Contribute to Europe's sustainability and competitiveness by informing European policies, funding programmes and strategies in research, education and innovation.

Ensuring security, diversity, and resilience in a global context

Uphold academic freedom, university autonomy and responsible dual-use governance; support technological sovereignty and institutional preparedness.

Task forces, topics and events as instruments for influence and peer-learning

Our task forces, cross-cutting mechanisms, and major events are the principal instruments for translating our strategic objectives into action. They provide the platforms through which Members engage, generate foresight, share best practice, shape European agendas, and demonstrate the leadership of universities of science and technology.

Task forces and workgroup: The main implementing engines

Each task force and the workgroup aligns with one or more of the strategic themes and is empowered to shape and deliver specific actions. Below is a high-level strategic summary for each, complemented by a detailed terms of reference document. Where mandates intersect, task forces will communicate and collaborate closely, with the Secretariat working with the relevant co-chairs to facilitate coordination, ensure coherence, avoid duplication, and maximise collective impact across overlapping areas of activity.

Task Force European Higher Education 2026-2027

This task force addresses the following main themes, contributing to the implementation of the work plan:

- Address key European policy areas in higher education from a science and technology perspective, including European Degree (label), alliances, mobility and automatic recognition and micro-credentials.
- Foster inclusive, sustainable and future-ready engineering education across Europe, and support skills development in areas such as AI and industrial doctorates.
- Strengthen the role of universities of science and technology by advancing high-quality, flexible learning that respond to societal needs and emerging technologies.

Justyna Lubośna (Rector's Representative for International Educational Programs at Gdańsk University of Technology) and Petri Suomala (Vice President for Education at Aalto University) were appointed by the Board of Directors on 10 December 2025 to co-chair this task force.
More details are provided in a dedicated terms of reference.

Task Force Innovation 2026-2027

This task force addresses the following main themes, contributing to the implementation of the work plan:

- Highlight the role of our Members in advancing competitiveness, prosperity, resilience, strategic autonomy and sustainability through their innovation activities.
- Promote entrepreneurship, knowledge valorisation, and the scale-up of spin-outs and deep tech ventures.
- Support regional innovation ecosystems and strengthen the contribution of universities to Europe's innovation and competitiveness policy agenda.

Tim Bedford (Associate Principal Research & Knowledge Exchange at University of Strathclyde) and Lisa Ericsson (Head of KTH Innovation at KTH Royal Institute of Technology) were appointed by the Board of Directors on 10 December 2025 to co-chair this task force.

More details are provided in a dedicated terms of reference.

Task Force Institutional Analytics 2026-2027

This task force addresses the following main themes, contributing to the implementation of the work plan:

- Contribute to shaping the European Higher Education Sector Observatory.
- Monitor and guide developments in rankings and sector-wide indicators.
- Peer learning on institutional research and the use of AI and new data sources in evidence-informed university strategies.

Johan Blaus (Director for Strategic Partnerships at KTH Royal Institute of Technology) and Peter Elspass (Head of President's Staff Department of University Development & Controlling at Leibniz University Hannover) were appointed by the Board of Directors on 10 December 2025 to co-chair this task force.

More details are provided in a dedicated terms of reference.

Task Force Openness of Science & Technology 2026-2027

This task force addresses the following main themes, contributing to the implementation of the work plan:

- Advancing open science principles and practices.
- Safeguarding research security in research and innovation including through the lenses of research integrity, open science and sensitive technologies.
- Strengthening Europe's digital sovereignty and safeguarding institutional autonomy and academic freedom while promoting responsible international collaboration.

Simone Rehm (Vice Rector for Information Technology at University of Stuttgart) and Irna van der Molen (Senior Policy Officer Knowledge Security at University of Twente) were appointed by the Board of Directors on 10 December 2025 to co-chair this task force.

More details are provided in a dedicated terms of reference.

Task Force European Funding and Policies 2026-2027

This task force addresses the following main themes, contributing to the implementation of the work plan:

- Influence Horizon Europe, Framework Programme 10, Erasmus+, European Competitiveness Fund, and other EU funding instruments when useful.
- Monitor and shape the future of European funding strategies.
- Support the advancement of European Research Area and European (Higher) Education Area.

Christian Gerhardts (Head of European Project Center at TU Dresden) and Wendy Sonneveld (Senior Policy Advisor European Affairs at Ghent University) were appointed by the Board of Directors on 10 December 2025 to co-chair this task force.

More details are provided in a dedicated terms of reference.

Task Force Talent, Careers and Staff Development 2026-2027

This task force addresses the following main themes, contributing to the implementation of the work plan:

- Develop, launch and evaluate a dedicated leadership development programme, hosted by the University of Strathclyde.
- Support Members in developing inclusive, future-oriented university careers across academic, research, and professional staff.
- Provide a space for exchange on COARA implementation and EDI integration.

Paul Murray (Reader at University of Strathclyde) was appointed by the Board of Directors on 10 December 2025 to co-chair this task force to lead on the leadership development programme hosted by the University of Strathclyde. The nomination of an additional co-chair for appointment by the Board is currently being explored by the President and Secretary General.

More details are provided in a dedicated terms of reference.

Workgroup Dual-Use, Defence and Space 2026-2027

The Board of Directors recognises both the growing importance of these areas for Europe and for our Members, as well as the significant complexities and sensitivities they entail. Against this background, the Board intends to establish a workgroup to support the association in identifying an appropriate and effective way forward.

The Board of Directors on 10 December 2025 appointed Peter Ertl (Vice Rector for Research, Innovation and International Affairs at TU Wien) to chair this workgroup, potentially together with a co-chair, and mandated him, with the support of the Presidency and the Secretariat, to liaise as needed with Members and partners to elaborate dedicated terms of reference for adoption by the Board at its meeting in March 2026. These terms of reference will define the envisioned membership of the workgroup and specify its activities and deliverables across the following areas:

- Facilitate peer learning and foresight on responsible dual-use governance, readiness, university strategies in dual-use, defence and space domains.
- Monitor and analyse European policies and funding on dual-use, defence- and space-related research, education and innovation.
- Explore collaboration in space research, education and innovation, including through engagement with European Space Agency and other relevant actors.

Cross-cutting mechanisms, emerging priorities and Envoys

To remain agile and responsive, our association combines broad-based task forces with smaller and more flexible mechanisms. Task forces serve as flagships that seek to engage the full membership, while workgroups, short-term actions, and Envoys provide focused input, rapid responses, or exploratory work on emerging or sensitive topics.

These focused mechanisms normally depend on the commitment of our Directors or leaders from Member universities, who dedicate their time and resources to advance shared priorities. Previous examples include our Envoy for Science & Technology Infrastructures or our Envoys to the Presidency of the Council of the EU, most recently our Envoy to the Danish Presidency. The Board of Directors may launch such initiatives or appoint envoys, to pursue specific objectives or represent the association in key external dialogues. Nominations for appointment of Envoys are submitted by the President and Secretary General.

Examples of suitable topics may include:

- Institutional leadership and governance responses to artificial intelligence;
- Geopolitical foresight and international collaboration;
- Support for academic communities in conflict, including engagement with initiatives such as Scholars at Risk (SAR), the Council for At-Risk Academics (CARA), and the Mediterranean Universities Union (UNIMED);
- Upcoming Presidencies of the Council of the EU.

Decisions to initiate new activities will take into account their urgency, strategic relevance, and resource implications, ensuring that CESAER remains proactive, focused, and guided by the needs of its Members.

Comparison of task forces and workgroups with Work Plan 2024-2025

For ease of reference, the table below compares the task forces and workgroups under Work Plan 2024–2025 with those envisioned for 2026–2027.

While all task forces receive new mandates for the biennium, some represent a continuation and renewal of existing groups while others have completed their work and are not seeking renewal.

Work Plan 2024-2025	Work Plan 2026-2027
Task Force Benchmark	Task Force Institutional Analytics
Task Force Human Resources	Task Force Talent, Careers and Staff Development
Task Force Innovation	Task Force Innovation
Task Force Learning & Teaching	Task Force European Higher Education
Task Force Openness of Science & Technology	Task Force Openness of Science & Technology
Task Force Sustainability	Will not continue
Task Force Sustainable Funding	Task Force European Funding and Policies
	Workgroup Dual-Use, Defence and Space (new)

Table 1: Comparison of task forces and workgroups under Work Plan 2024-2025 and Work Plan 2026-2027

The overall structure is largely stable, ensuring continuity in key areas such as innovation, openness, sustainable funding, and institutional analytics. At the same time, there are notable changes: the conclusion of the Task Force Sustainability; the launch of a new workgroup; and the evolution of the task forces on Benchmark, Human Resources, and Learning & Teaching into new groups with adjusted mandates.

Major events

The association's flagship events are the CESAER Annual Meetings (CAM), held every October and hosted by a Member university following an open call. Each CAM serves as a high-level platform to showcase Member leadership, connect with European stakeholders, and consolidate our collective agenda. The Board of Directors, the host universities, and the Secretariat will ensure that CAM 2026 and CAM 2027 are strategically aligned with the priorities of Work Plan 2026-2027.

In addition to these anchor points, the biennium will feature a Brussels-based conference in spring 2027. Steered by the Board of Directors and organised with contributions from the task forces and wider membership, this event will be developed to complement CAM 2026 and CAM 2027 to highlight the critical role and contributions of universities of science and technology in shaping Europe's future.

By convening policymakers, funders, industry, and civil society alongside our Members, the conference in spring 2027 will:

- provide foresight and thought leadership on the European agenda,
- strengthen our influence on European policy debates and funding programmes, and
- reinforce position of our Members and association as trusted, constructive, and proactive partners in navigating strategic issues at European level.

Together, these major events will act as milestones for advancing Strategy 2030, showcasing the collective strengths of our Members, and enhancing the visibility, influence, and credibility of CESAER at the European level.

Member affairs

Our Members are at the heart of everything we do. This section outlines how we will engage with, support, and grow our membership community to ensure mutual benefit and alignment with our strategic aims.

New Members

Admissions will prioritise balance and strategic fit along our constitutional framework. We aim for stable growth towards 60 Members, with a focus on strong science and technology profiles and broad geographical representation.

Strengthening our Members through a stronger association

The central objective of CESAER is to serve and strengthen our Members. Everything we do—as an association, through our Secretariat, and via our task forces—serves this overarching aim.

A stronger CESAER is not an end in itself, but a means to increase the value we deliver to our Members. By reinforcing our internal capacity, connectivity, and responsiveness, we enhance each Member's ability to navigate complex challenges, shape key agendas, and lead transformation across science, technology, and society.

During the biennium, we will review our 2022 Member Engagement Strategy after the adoption of Strategy 2030 in October 2025, and a planned review of our Communication and Outreach Strategy as elaborated under section 6.3 below.

To support the advancement of our Member engagement, we will build on current initiatives and launch new ones to:

- Enhance task force effectiveness and impact through stronger links to executive leadership at Member institutions.
- Deliver targeted communication for leaders at our Members, such as a biannual 'President's briefing' aimed at Rectors, Presidents, and equivalents.
- Invest in communication, digital infrastructure, and user experience to enable more seamless and meaningful engagement and exchange.
- Pilot new digital formats for peer learning and intelligence sharing, such as online interactive briefings before or after major developments.
- Support representatives in connecting peer learning with institutional strategies and priorities.
- Improve the visibility and clarity of opportunities for Members to shape, contribute to, and benefit from our collective efforts.

These concrete actions and deliverables underpin the virtuous cycle described in section 7: greater Member engagement leads to greater collective benefit, individually, institutionally, and across the association.

Organisational enablers

Strategy alignment

The work plan operationalises Strategy 2030. Task force structures and thematic priorities are grounded in our strategic vision.

Secretariat support

The Secretariat will continue to support all task forces and the workgroup with a dedicated advisor, ensuring coherence and continuity where appropriate.

Communication and outreach

The 2021 Communication and Outreach Strategy will be reviewed during the biennium, alongside cybersecurity upgrades and enhanced IT user experience. We will explore dedicated indicators of success (e.g. engagement and visibility).

Monitoring and evaluation

Progress on the implementation of the work plan will be monitored through regular reporting and feedback mechanisms, most notably via our Activities Reports, which are presented to and discussed with the General Assembly at each ordinary annual meeting.

Conclusion

The Work Plan 2026–2027 marks the launch of Strategy 2030, positioning CESAER to lead strategically and collaboratively through a period of profound transformation. By mobilising our collective strengths and aligning our activities, we equip our association and Members to shape the future of science, technology, and society in Europe and beyond through research, education and innovation.

At the heart of Work Plan 2026–2027 lies a clear commitment: to strengthen our Members. All our activities—as an association, through our task forces, and via our Secretariat—are designed to serve this overarching aim.

The strength of CESAER stems from the dynamic partnership between the active engagement of our Members and the professional stewardship of the Secretariat. This partnership enables a virtuous cycle where deeper engagement yields greater benefits—individually, institutionally, and collectively.

A stronger CESAER is the means to this end. By investing in our shared capacities, we amplify Member impact, enable collective foresight, and secure a leading role for universities of science and technology in navigating and shaping a rapidly changing world.

CESAER

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