The role of universities in the European Union's ambitions for AI

Response to the European Commission's call for evidence on a European strategy for AI in science

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The use of artificial intelligence (AI) for research has rapidly grown in recent years. Indeed, the technology has significant potential to increase our understanding of the world and create knowledge-based solutions. Therefore, Europe needs a solid base of infrastructure, data and skills to fully benefit from the possibilities of AI in research. For this reason, it is very welcome that the European Commission is focusing on research as a priority for its AI policies. The following points respond to the European Commission's public consultation for a strategy for AI in science.

ENABLE EQUITABLE ACCESS THROUGH A DISTRIBUTED SYSTEM

The European Commission has a strong focus on building infrastructure through AI factories (or gigafactories) and supporting this through larger policies such as the Cloud and AI Development Act. This makes good sense. However, researchers and their partners within innovation ecosystems should have equitable access to AI infrastructure, which requires a distributed approach whereby research-related activities are spread among all AI factories.

Different disciplines have very different needs in terms of their use of large-scale infrastructures, and they each collaborate with different actors. For these reasons, a distributed approach with transparent modes of access, for example through competitive, European-wide calls for projects, would be a sensible choice. This would create connections between AI factories, universities, innovators and other stakeholders within Europe's diverse innovation ecosystems.

It is positive that the Commission underlines the need to make this infrastructure environmentally sustainable; concrete initiatives to achieve this would be very welcome.

BASE SCHEMES ON PUBLIC FUNDING AND SERVE THE PUBLIC INTEREST

The European Commission has high expectations for private funding in the InvestAI initiative. This reflects an inherent tension between the dominance of funding from private actors and the need to ensure that infrastructure is also used for public, non-commercial interests. While the need for private investment is undeniable, it is important that research-related activities are financed through core public funding. This approach does not exclude private investment and joint undertakings, but it avoids systems becoming overly dependent on private actors and the monopolistic power of vendors.

For public funding, it is not sufficient to pool or draw on existing resources in various European funding programmes. Given the importance of AI for the future of research in general, enough additional public funding needs to be available in a way that is equitably accessible to researchers to ensure that commercial interests are balanced with public interest and blue-sky research. There must be simple and transparent procedures to ensure that resources are allocated both to private initiatives as well as to research that expands human knowledge for all.

LET THE ACADEMIC COMMUNITY LEAD

Approaches and needs for large-scale infrastructure vary substantially across disciplines, and the academic community is the only place where these needs can be defined.

In their governance, and in particular when it comes to attributing access to the AI factories, the independent voice of researchers must be a defining element, for example through a scientific council or similar body. One of the tasks of such a body would be to ensure that researchers from all disciplines and their partners from other sectors can gain access based on the excellence of their proposals, including for projects that develop new solutions and methods for AI in science – also in cooperation with private actors where that is appropriate.

Particular attention must also be paid to differences in the uses of AI between science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) disciplines and the arts and humanities, as well as creating opportunities for interdisciplinary projects.

MAKE EUROPEAN VALUES AND SOVEREIGNTY AN INTEGRATED PART OF THE STRATEGY

The spirit of the EU AI Act, with safeguards for uses of AI that have a direct impact on the life of individuals, should be incorporated in the AI Factories together with the principles laid out in the [European Declaration on Digital Rights and Principles](). Mechanisms for oversight are needed to ensure that these principles are upheld.

The purpose of such safeguards should not be to limit developments nor to deter ambitious but risky projects. Rather, they should ensure that use of AI that entails risk is based on trustworthy systems with high degrees of integrity and ethical oversight. It is critical that the experience of the academic community informs our understanding of risk and the validation (or otherwise) of AI outputs.

European sovereignty is an important element in this context. Using AI for research and developing European AI should not only attempt to catch up with other global powers, it must aim at developing the new frontiers of AI, for example pioneering agentic AI for research and innovation. The sustainability of the business model for the infrastructure should be addressed at an early stage. This business model should guarantee that funding from both private and public sources is focused on making Europe an autonomous, leading player in the field.

Europe's uniquely collaborative research system is a strength. Using cooperative approaches creates opportunities to leverage AI, for example through large datasets and many different users. Cooperation should be an integral part of the EU strategy for AI in science.

PAY ATTENTION TO DATA AND OPEN SCIENCE

The Strategy for AI in Science must go hand in hand with the Data Union Strategy. Just as large-scale infrastructure for AI must safeguard the public interest, data policies must ensure that commercial interests do not lock in data behind costly paywalls.

These safeguards should respond to growing concerns about the limited reusability of Open Access content. Indeed, many publishers restrict or complicate text and data mining, which undermines the full potential of Open Access, especially as the ability to train AI systems using research outputs becomes increasingly

important. There should also be attention to uneven implementation of the Copyright Directive and its impact on text and data mining for the development of foundation models.

This will entail public investments in European data spaces that ensure a business model where publicly generated data stays publicly available. It is also important to note that data usage can be held back by overly zealous interpretation of privacy regulation.

MAKE SURE THAT INITIATIVES PROVIDE ADDED VALUE FOR EUROPE

A common distributed model of infrastructure and common data spaces will create significant added value. Similarly, a common European framework, ensuring access for researchers, would promote public trust in the scientific community to do what they do best: explore opportunities to acquire new knowledge and skills.

Likewise, the academic community is central in discussions about ethics and integrity and determining where the AI can bring benefit to European societies. Any European discussions regarding AI for science should acknowledge the challenge of identifying initiatives that provide value through common action and have the capacity to work at the necessary scale.