

# Comets, not cold figures of finance, will ignite debate on Europe

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In the debate over EU membership universities need to remind us of the ideal value of transnational knowledge, says Anna Notaro



What role should universities play in the debate over Britain's membership of the European Union? Should they remain neutral? Or should higher education bodies boldly extol the virtues of remaining part of the European project?

In [a post](#) on Ferdinand von Prondzynski's A University Blog, Anna Notaro, of Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art and Design, University of Dundee, cites work published in November last year by researchers from University College London as a sign of the gentle pushback in higher education against the increasingly anti-EU rhetoric of right-wing media.

The study found that EU migrants made a net contribution to the UK economy of £20 billion from 2001 to 2011, and was widely cited by left-of-centre news organisations.

In May 2014, university leaders, including the president of Universities UK, wrote to *The Times* [pointing out](#) that higher education institutions contribute £73 billion to the economy, and benefit from the £1.2 billion given annually by the EU in research funding.

But such cold financial arguments fail to inspire Dr Notaro.

In her post she accuses institutions, cowed by financial pressures and international competition, of taking the "balance sheet approach alone" when it comes to making the case for Britain's continued membership of the EU.

Dr Notaro points out that this money-based argument for remaining part of the EU is not limited to the higher education sector. Business professionals and right-of-centre politicians also regularly justify Britain's continued membership of the organisation in terms related to trade and free markets.

For Dr Notaro, co-module leader in critical and contextual studies, a more romantic approach is needed.

“What is required is a reminder of the ideal value of transnational knowledge, such as the excellent work carried out at CERN [the European Organisation for Nuclear Research], the recent landing of a European spacecraft on a comet, and the framework that allows thousands of students on the Erasmus programme to acquire memories and experiences which last a lifetime,” she writes.

“Universities cannot expect to capture the public's imagination by listing crude figures alone; the economic evidence is not sufficient, they should be tapping into the more spiritual, idealistic aspects which lie behind any human endeavour. They should articulate a collective vision which puts a premium on collaboration and solidarity.”

So as the EU faces something of an identity crisis as we head into 2015, with populists on the Left and Right, from Syriza in Greece, to Front National in France, gaining attention with anti-Brussels rhetoric, Dr Notaro says it's time to connect with what it really means to be part of the European project, and universities are in a perfect place to lead this argument.

“We are confronted with...a resurgence of nationalist sentiments and emotions (see Marine Le Pen's defence of the nation state in [this recent interview](#), or Ukip's 'Little England' pronouncements),” she writes.

“This is a battle of ideas and it is incumbent upon universities to expose past delusions as well as the pitfalls of new ideological siren songs.”