THE ROLE OF ACADEMIA
IN THE EU AND BEYOND

Opening of the Belgian Semester at JRC Ispra – 9 January 2024
TREMENDOUS LOCAL AND GLOBAL CHALLENGES

- (Economic) recovery after Covid-19
- War (Ukraine, Israel-Hamas, …)
- Changing geopolitical order
- Energy/supply crisis
- Impact on inequality and exclusion
- Climate change
- …
Universities ought to…

• create jobs and boost economic growth
• assume social responsibility
• contribute to sustainability, and to diversity and inclusion
• keep knowledge safe and control its export
• …
MAGNA CHARTA UNIVERSITATUM (MCU)

• MCU 1988
  • Institutional autonomy
  • Academic freedom
  • Intertwining of education and research
• MCU 2020
  • Reaffirmation of fundamental values
  • Attention to new local and global responsibilities
RAPIDLY EMERGING KEY TECHNOLOGIES

• Exponential growth of scientific data
• Transformations in key technologies (AI, advanced materials, quantum technology, nanotech & life science technologies) outpacing political and societal developments
• Universities and researchers lacking rules and procedures
EVOLVING ROLE OF UNIVERSITIES

• Tremendous local and global challenges
• Changing geopolitical order
• More complex expectation patterns
• Rapidly emerging key technologies

• Assume responsibility
• Push the frontier
• Break down barriers

GHENT UNIVERSITY
As the actor which combines research, innovation and higher education, universities have a particular societal responsibility (e.g., regarding key technologies). Ethics and values come from within (Magna Charta Universitatum). Imperative to actively live our values. Start with our own institutional contexts.
GHENT UNIVERSITY
- Top 100 university
- Since 1817
- 11 faculties

BELGIUM

SOUTH KOREA
GHENT UNIVERSITY GLOBAL CAMPUS
The 1st European university in South Korea.

+200 programmes
50,000 students
15,000 employees

73 English-taught master's programmes
2,000 Ghent University students abroad
7,350 International students at Ghent University

DARE TO THINK
Our credo: critical and independent minds.

PLURALISM & PARTICIPATION
Open to everyone irrespective of ideological, political, cultural or social background.

SUSTAINABILITY
For a future that is ecologically, socially and economically sustainable, within a local global context.
Ghent University, in Belgium, embraces new approach to faculty evaluation less focused on quantitative metrics

Submitted by Elizabeth Redden on January 23, 2019 - 3:00am

It was an unusual press release, to say the least, framed more as a call to arms than a communiqué about a new personnel policy.

"Ghent University is deliberately choosing to step out of the rat race between individuals, departments and universities. We no longer wish to participate in the ranking of people," said the press release, announcing the Ghent's new policy for evaluating faculty performance, including for tenure.

Universities should be working for the greater good

Friendly competition can push us all to do better. But when the competitiveness that fuels excellence and prestige becomes based in the logic of the market, universities lose sight of their true purpose, writes Kathleen Fitzpatrick.

But if we look around, we might note that this model of success is beginning to fall apart. Our pursuit of hierarchy is resulting not in the greater glory of the professoriate but in greater contingency for all. Tenure is being undermined across the US by the diminution of everyone's basic academic freedom to teach and research as they see fit. If we recognised that the floor of what we'll accept for others among us gradually becomes the baseline for what we all will be offered and replaced insidious distinction with solidarity, we might demand that teaching and service requirements be distributed more equitably, and that all positions provide appropriate research support and a living salary.

We might decide – as Ghent University did last December – not to "participate in the ranking of people". This would create an environment in which talent of all varieties can flourish, instead of being assessed according to bureaucratic metrics that not only depersonalize and disenfranchise but that too often stifled the real innovation that we hope to foster. Critics of such transformations in assessment practices – nearly always those who have benefited from existing modes of measurement – argue that a change like this would represent an inevitable lowering of standards. They seem convinced that, in walking away from the ostensibly objective metrics we have deployed for determining "excellence", we are giving up on excellence entirely.
Belgian university introduces universal basic research funding

Over 1,000 professors will get €30,000 a year to spend as they please as a remedy to the low success rates of national and international competitions

July 20, 2023

Ben Upton

Twitter: @benwupton

A Belgian university is to offer a flat research grant to all its academics from next year, in what its rector said was a response to low success rates for competitive alternatives.

Once Ghent University’s scheme is fully up and running by 2027, full- and part-time researchers will be able to get at least €30,000 (£25,700) annually – enough that two could club together and fund a doctoral grant, the university said.
PUSH THE FRONTIER

- Disruption in balance between investigator-driven frontier research (ERC grants) towards more politically-driven approaches
- Perception persists that, in times of emergency, frontier research is a ‘luxury’
- Our most pressing challenges today are pressing precisely because they do not yield to today’s understanding and tools
- Support for frontier research at all levels is therefore vital
BREAK DOWN BARRIERS

• Open global cooperation is vital for academics and their universities
• In EU context, it will be key to safeguard and promote continued excellent collaboration in research, education and innovation
• Prevent formation of new, and remove existing, barriers to free circulation of knowledge and its bearers
LIAISING WITH EU PRESIDENCIES

Rik Van de Walle appointed Envoy to the Belgian Presidency of the Council of the EU

News

Our Board has appointed Rik van de Walle (Rector of Ghent University) as our association’s Envoy to the Belgian Presidency of the Council of the EU until June 2024.
ESTABLISH THE ERA AND EEA

• Shaping the European Research Area (ERA) is a treaty obligation since the 2007 Lisbon Treaty (“the Union shall have the objective of strengthening its scientific and technological bases by achieving a European research area in which researchers, scientific knowledge and technology circulate freely”)

Example: reform of research careers

• Reinforce the ERA through also establishing a European Education Area (EEA)

Example: European University alliances linking education and research/innovation

Reform is overdue

Researchers’ employment conditions must be improved to meet Europe’s goals

Bert Van de Walle is president of the Ceaser group of science and technology universities and rector of Ghent University

Being a researcher is unlike almost any other profession. At its best, it is a creative, inspiring and satisfying pursuit. Many researchers are passionate about their subject and find meaning and motivation in working with students and colleagues. They should do this has been driven largely by assessment and reward structures that put undue focus on narrow, simple-to-measure indicators and criteria. Change must come from within: from inspiring leadership combined with bottom-up.

A crucial part of this is ensuring sustainable funding. In a recent position paper on using the EU budget to build recovery and resilience following the pandemic, Ceaser calls on EU institutions, member states and associated countries to commit to lasting careers. At the European level, we could include the development of a framework that stimulates diversity in researchers’ career paths by, for example, creating legal conditions that allow all universities to deploy tenure track and similar models.

“Let’s shift to a culture built around quality, risk-taking and trust, replacing the focus on individual competitiveness with open, collaborative and team-based approaches.”