

The future of the university

Reflections on academic freedom, education and
innovative research

With contributions by Ashish Arora, Eric Heinze, Manon Kluijtmans, Vasiliki Kosta, Silvia Lenaerts and Sari Lindblom

Edited by Karen Maex, Helder De Schutter, Jan Eggermont, Koen Lemmens, Bart Pattyn and Reinhilde Veugelers

LEUVEN INSTITUTE FOR ADVANCED STUDY

The Leuven Institute for Advanced Study (LIAS) brings together scientific insights on major societal challenges based on interdisciplinary consultation between leading international researchers. This exchange aims to break through and transcend traditional disciplinary thinking and lead to broader insights, enabling LIAS to engage in dialogue with society in a clear and inspiring way.

Projects for which international researchers have already been invited to Leuven are:

1. Social aspects of dementia (2018)
2. Democracy and civil society (2019)
3. Social aspects of climate change (2022)
4. Reporting and artificial intelligence (2022)
5. Towards a life-proof residential landscape in Flanders (2023)
6. Principles for a balanced pension reform (2023)
7. Water. Scarcity and flooding (2024)
8. Migration (2024)
9. A sustainable European food system (2025)

COLOFON

D/2026/14.403/2 – ISBN 9789083556024

Karen Maex, Helder De Schutter, Jan Eggermont, Koen Lemmens, Bart Pattyn and Reinhilde Veugelers (eds.), 'The future of the university. Reflections on academic freedom, education and innovative research'. Leuven: Leuven Institute for Advanced Study, 2026; doi: 10.5281/zenodo.18803372

INTRODUCTION

The celebration of 600 years of KU Leuven is an opportunity for the Leuven Institute for Advanced Study (LIAS) to focus the international and interdisciplinary reflection on the future of the university. What role does the university have to play today in a rapidly changing society, and what will that role look like in the near future? How can the university best prepare for that role, and what choices does that entail today? In December 2025, LIAS therefore invited various international fellows to reflect on these questions in a series of expert seminars and public lectures. The central themes were ‘academic freedom and activism’, ‘the future of academic education’ and ‘the role of university research in technological and social innovation’. Three topics, and for each of them two internationally renowned researchers came to Leuven.

The first theme, ‘Academic freedom and activism’, evokes strong emotions. Not only because the free exchange of ideas within academia itself is sometimes under pressure and not all debates pass the censorship of the academic community itself, but also because politically motivated censorship from outside is increasingly being imposed on academics worldwide. However, the free and unhindered search for truth remains crucial for a university, both for academic education worthy of the name and for truly innovative research. Eric Heinze (Queen Mary University of London) and Vasiliki Kosta (Leiden University) discussed this with experts from Leuven. Eric Heinze argued that universities may have ethical reasons to restrict free speech on their own campuses, but that this does not benefit the actual intellectual debate. In his view, it is better to apply the existing legal restrictions on free speech in full. Vasiliki Kosta discussed a latent restriction of freedom of research that stems from the organization of research at universities. Due to scarce research resources and the focus on output and economic opportunities, we risk neglecting some research questions from the outset. It would be better for universities to be more aware of these limitations and to earmark part of their research funds for truly free research funding.

For the second topic, Sari Lindblom (Rector, Helsinki University) and Manon Kluijtmans (former Vice Rector Education Policy, Utrecht University) came to Leuven. They discussed what makes academic education stand out and how it differs from professional training. In general, university students are expected to demonstrate critical reflection and abstract thinking. This means that they do not accept insights on authority alone, but learn to independently assess the relevance of those insights. Students must critically question the assumptions on which various propositions, customs, and conventions are

based and be able to test them against general frames of reference. Students learn this primarily when they conduct independent research, consult historical sources, interpret texts, or set up experiments. However, it also requires a broad education, so that students know what is at stake in their field and in other domains. A critical-reflective university education therefore creates a mindset that transcends the skills required for a professional assignment and contributes to the social 'power of change' in modern societies.

Manon Kluijtmans presented the way in which the three core objectives of academic education are being realized in Utrecht: knowledge, socialization, and personal development. This involves working with 'open science' objectives, which break with the traditional education system and prioritize group work, participatory, and transformative education. Sari Lindblom then zoomed out and described the higher education landscape in Finland, which has a well-functioning complementary system. She advocates for universities that are as broad as possible, so that researchers, transcending disciplinary boundaries, can offer solutions to the problems of an increasingly complex world.

The final topic focuses on the contribution of universities to economic growth, particularly in terms of the technological and social innovations we expect from universities. Scientific breakthroughs create new economic and social value and help tackle pressing social challenges, such as climate change. Although this value creation is multidimensional and goes beyond mere commercial value, most policy attention is still focused on the potential of universities as a source of economic growth. The growth of the 'university sector' should therefore go hand in hand with overall economic growth. However, researchers such as Ashish Arora (Duke University) do not find this correlation. Even with the wave of innovation in artificial intelligence, productivity growth remains weak, especially in Europe. Does this mean that we need to re-examine the contribution of universities to economic growth? In a discussion with former Managing Director Koenraad Debackere and Jo Bury (VIB), Arora outlined how, in the post-war period, companies with their laboratories bore more responsibility for scientific breakthroughs than universities. That golden age of corporate laboratories, however, ended in the 1970s and 1980s, precisely when university laboratories grew in size and impact. Depending on the sector, we must be aware today that corporate research, such as that carried out by tech giants, cannot be overtaken by universities, and it may be unreasonable to expect such innovation from universities. However, through services such as LRD, we must ensure that the ideas that are still being generated in university laboratories become truly 'investable ideas'. Only then will capital worldwide find its way to such innovations.

In a second meeting on this theme, Silvia Lenaerts (Rector Magnificus, Eindhoven University of Technology) spoke about the importance of the ecosystem surrounding a university. She discussed this with Dominic De Groote (Innovation Platforms, KU Leuven) and Isabelle Huys (Vice Rector Research Policy, KU Leuven). In her contribution, Silvia Lenaerts spoke about the good cooperation in the 'Brainport' region between the Technical University, the business community, and the (local) government. The awareness that the cohesion of a network and the cooperation between different players is ultimately based on a network of people who know each other and know where to find each other, means that the university also closely aligns its policy with the researchers themselves. Researchers are consciously guided in their careers to make sure that they, in addition to teaching and research, also have time for cooperation within and outside the university. In addition to human collaboration, the university is also physically part of the network and makes some of its facilities available to partners in the region.

After their stay in Leuven, all six fellows reflected in a short text on these themes, expressing their wishes for the future of a broad university such as KU Leuven. In this collection, you can read what they wish for Leuven in the near and distant future.

Karen Maex

Helder De Schutter

Jan Eggermont

Koen Lemmens

Bart Pattyn

Reinhilde Veugelers

CONTENT

Introduction	<i>p. 3</i>
1. Academic Freedom, the Autonomy of Science and the Commercialisation of Academia in the University Crisis Era	<i>p. 7</i>
<i>Vasiliki Kosta</i>	
2. Free speech in the University: The Crisis of ‘No-Platforming’	<i>p. 11</i>
<i>Eric Heinze</i>	
3. What is Important for a Comprehensive University such as KU Leuven?	<i>p. 16</i>
<i>Sari Lindblom</i>	
4. The Future of Academic Education: Learning for a Changing Society	<i>p. 18</i>
<i>Manon Kluijtmans</i>	
5. Innovation Policy Options for Universities in a more Innovative Europe	<i>p. 20</i>
<i>Silvia Lenaerts</i>	
6. What I Wish for KU Leuven: A Sanctuary for Free-Ranging Inquiry	<i>p. 25</i>
<i>Ashish Arora</i>	
Contributors	<i>p. 30</i>

1. ACADEMIC FREEDOM, THE AUTONOMY OF SCIENCE AND THE COMMERCIALISATION OF ACADEMIA IN THE UNIVERSITY CRISIS ERA

Vasiliki Kosta, Leiden University

Universities are facing several pivotal challenges today. Some of these appeared in more recent times, others are much older developments. The picture varies considerably across countries and regions of Europe and the world and the factors are many. Several important developments¹ that are impacting academic freedom are worth briefly highlighting below (though without aspirations to present exhaustive lists² or exhaustive accounts here) before turning to the phenomenon of the commercialisation of academia.

First, democratic backsliding, the rise of illiberal and populist politics and political polarisation in Europe and the world. It is these developments' impact on universities and the scientific system more broadly that have brought mainstream attention to the topic of academic freedom in recent years. In the EU the first judgment of the ECJ on academic freedom was delivered in 2020 in *Commission v Hungary (Lex CEU)*,³ the wider context being democratic backsliding in Hungary. More recently unprecedented attacks on universities and academic freedom in the US, have upended the global scientific system.⁴ The kind of academic freedom challenges arising in these contexts are obvious. They include the hampering of the functioning and autonomy of (liberal) universities and the repression of certain strands of research and thinking as well as their dissemination, on ideological grounds, through political interferences at different levels and by different, including financial, means.

¹ For an overview and evolutionary account of challenges see P. ALTBACH, 'How universities came to be and why they are in trouble now', *Nature* 645 (2024), pp. 849 – 851.

² For an overview of academic freedom challenges in the EU Member States see P. MAASSEN, J. JUNGBLUT, D. MARTINSEN, V. ØVREBØ, 'Analysis of the de facto state of academic freedom in the EU – Country Overview' (Academic Freedom Monitor 2024), available at: [EPRS STU\(2025\)765775_EN.pdf](https://eprs.stu(2025)765775_en.pdf) (last visited 13 February 2026).

³ Case C-66/18, *European Commission v. Hungary*, EU:C:2020:792. For an analysis see V. KOSTA and D. PIQANI, 'Where trade and academic freedom meet: *Commission v. Hungary (Lex CEU)*', *Common Market Law Review* 59, nr. 3 (2022), pp. 813-852.

⁴ See e.g. F. FERNANDEZ and N. HUTCHENS, 'Restrictions on US academic freedom affect science everywhere', *Nature Human Behaviour* 9 (2025), pp. 1303–1304, <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-025-02248-9>.

Second, as the geopolitical landscape is shifting, science is increasingly being seen ‘through the lens of security’,⁵ with increased screening of international collaborations and their funding sources and evaluating their dual-use potential, or the vetting of international students and researchers.⁶ And while these measures are in certain contexts being justified as also aiming to protect scientific research, their restrictive nature can pose at the same time an interference with academic and scientific freedom.⁷

Third, rapid technological changes raise questions about how to secure the autonomy of science in the digital age,⁸ and fast advancements in the field of AI means that ‘teaching and learning culture [and one should add ‘research culture’] could shift in ways that we can’t predict yet.’⁹ AI has been characterised as a ‘paradoxical force within academia’.¹⁰ On the one hand it is said to have ‘markedly enhanced the efficiency, accessibility, and quality of academic endeavours’,¹¹ including the transformation of research methodologies.¹² On the other hand, there are many concerns. For example, ‘that AI-enabled surveillance could stifle free speech and academic discourse... [or that] ...AI’s propensity to perpetuate biases could influence academic decision-making processes like admission and funding’,¹³ or the ‘ethical debates related to plagiarism and the rigor of academic work’¹⁴ held as large language models become ever more sophisticated and ‘pose profound challenges to the foundational principles of academic integrity.’¹⁵

These challenges are appearing in many places in addition to the phenomena of the massified university and the ‘commercialisation of academia’. Massification is an old development and concerns the transformation of the university from small elite establishment to its mass expansion with dramatically

⁵ R. RUOHONEN, ‘On the Securitization of Science’, *Ethics, Medicine and Public Health* 34 (2026) 101237, p. 1.

⁶ J. RUOHONEN, *ibidem*, and R. KUNZ, ‘As open as necessary?: Research security, academic freedom and the geopolitics of science’, *Verfassungsblog*, 15 October 2025, doi: [10.59704/9650f9342871caa3](https://doi.org/10.59704/9650f9342871caa3) appearing in V. KOSTA and M. MÜLLER-ELMAU (eds.), *Mapping Article 13: Academic and Scientific Freedom under the EU Charter* (Verfassungsblog Symposium), available at: <https://verfassungsblog.de/category/debates/academic-freedom-and-the-charter/>

⁷ J. RUOHONEN, *ibidem*; R. KUNZ, *ibidem*.

⁸ See R. KUNZ, ‘Tackling Threats to Academic Freedom Beyond the State: The Potential of Societal Constitutionalism in Protecting the Autonomy of Science in the Digital Era’, *Indiana Journal of Global Legal Studies* 30 (2023), nr. 2, p. 265.

⁹ P. ALTBACH, ‘How universities came to be and why they are in trouble now’, *Nature* 645 (2024), pp. 849 – 851.

¹⁰ N. JOHNSON, T. L. JOHNSON & D. MCCURDY, ‘Artificial Intelligence, Academic Freedom, and the Evolving Debate over Forgery and Truth in the Twenty-First Century’, *AAUP Journal of Academic Freedom* 15 (2024), nr. 1, p. 3.

¹¹ *Ibidem*.

¹² *Ibidem*.

¹³ *Ibidem*.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 3.

rising student populations especially after World War II,¹⁶ along with the expansion of costly research. The practical implications of massification have included structural and organisational challenges for universities¹⁷ while governments are faced with ‘sever’ financial burdens¹⁸ to maintain this expanded model of public higher education and research.¹⁹ Different choices have been made as to who bears the burdens, in a context where the system has also been increasingly internationalised; some of these have proven unsustainable. The gradual transformation of universities has unveiled, among others, an ongoing, but perhaps in recent times amplified, tension²⁰ between an understanding of the university as a place of disinterested pursuance of science or ‘truth’, along with the humanistic ideal of education, on the one hand, and one that sees universities as serving the needs of the ‘technologically organised industrial [now post-industrial] society’,²¹ the ‘knowledge-society’ or in some conceptualisations, the ‘knowledge-based economy’.²²

‘Commercialisation’ of academia has emerged in this context over time in many places, although in different shapes, forms and degrees. It can be broadly conceptualised as including three elements:²³ first, universities are or behave like actors on a market, engaging in for-profit activities themselves or in competition, at institutional or faculty level, for securing external money (e.g. through external grants).²⁴ Second, universities are organised according to corporate management principles or ‘New

¹⁶ P. Altbach reports a rise from 6 million university enrolments globally in 1950 to 265 million in 2023, in IDEM, ‘How universities came to be and why they are in trouble now’, *Nature* 645 (2024), p. 850.

¹⁷ The German Constitutional Court spoke in the 1979 Hochschul-Urteil case, BVerfG 35, 79, of a ‘structural and organisational crisis’ in Germany, at para. 122.

¹⁸ P. ALTBACH, *ibidem*, p. 850.

¹⁹ With respect to the EU see e.g. the 2022 Communication from the Commission on a European Strategy for Universities, at p. 11, available at [communication-european-strategy-for-universities-graphic-version.pdf](#) which notes significant signs of underfunding; see also the EUA Report 2025, E.B. PRUVOT, T. ESTERMANN, N. POPKHARONA, ‘Financial Stable Universities – State of play and strategies for future resilience’, April 2025. It should also be noted that there are large variations among EU Member States as regards funding, see P. MAASSEN, J. JUNGBLUT, D. MARTINSEN, V. ØVREBØ, ‘Analysis of the de facto state of academic freedom in the EU – Country Overview’ (Academic Freedom Monitor 2024), p. II.

²⁰ This tension has been noted by the German Constitutional Court in one of its landmark judgments on scientific freedom (‘Wissenschaftsfreiheit’) already in the late 1970s, BVerfG 35, 79, *Hochschul-Urteil*, para. 121.

²¹ *Hochschul-Urteil*, *ibidem*, para. 122.

²² E.g. Presidency Conclusions of the Lisbon European Council 23 and 24 March 2000, available at: https://www.europa.eu/summits/lis1_en.htm#b

²³ See the definition put forward in my research proposal V. KOSTA, ‘The EU fundamental right to freedom of the arts and sciences: exploring the limits on the commercialisation of academia (AFITE, 2020). Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3656689>. The subsequent text is reliant, in part also in its wording, on this research proposal and on my blog-post V. KOSTA, ‘The commercialisation challenge to academic freedom: a matter for EU law’, available at: <https://www.europeanlawblog.eu/pub/the-commercialisation-challenge-to-academic-freedom-a-matter-for-eu-law/release/1>

²⁴ S. SLAUGHTER & L. LESLIE, ‘Expanding and Elaborating the Concept of Academic Capitalism’, *Organization* 8 (2001), nr. 2, pp. 154 – 161.

Public Management'.²⁵ What gets introduced in practice is in essence 'cost-efficiency', the sparing of resources and performance-based budgeting. This, in turn, leads to increased reporting; paradoxically 'red tape' increases in the name of efficiency and the introduction of measurable (largely quantitative) performance indicators. Third, commercialisation entails a functional understanding of the academic system. Namely, that it should serve politico-economic interests²⁶ and follow the rationality of those other systems of society rather than its own rationality.²⁷

Commercialisation touches the core of what it means to provide and receive university education and to conduct research and may have a direct impact on science itself, the autonomy of the scientific system and its members. For example, when research agendas are being primarily set by external funding schemes and not by the free choices of the researchers (but this is not to say that external funding schemes are per se problematic); when changed university structures (more centralised, hierarchical etc.) undermine principles of self-governance, collegiality and collective decision-making; or when defining the university's role as serving economic policy hampers the disinterested pursuance of 'truth' or 'scientifically secured knowledge'. Commercialisation has been identified as a potential threat to academic (or scientific) freedom in German legal scholarly debates for at least as early as the 2000s.²⁸ According to German constitutional thought, not only potential interferences with the academic and scientific freedom of individual rights-holders need to be considered here next to the institutional autonomy of the university, but also 'the functionality of the institution of "free science" as such'.²⁹ This debate is highly relevant also for the EU and its activities, especially as new initiatives are being put forward with the aim to renew the European Research Area (with an upcoming ERA Act) which is tied to the competitiveness agenda.³⁰ EU law and policy needs to comply with the freedom of the sciences standard enshrined in Art. 13 of the EU Charter, which can call into question a purely functional view of science, i.e. one that is in its essence in service of political and economic ends.³¹

As universities are looking to the future under these circumstances, there is a clear need for further interdisciplinary research: to map and assess current and potential future challenges and how they

²⁵ U. MAGER, 'Die Universität im Zeichen von Ökonomisierung und Internationalisierung', *Veröffentlichungen der Vereinigung der Deutschen Staatsrechtler* 65, pp. 274-315, at p. 277 *et seq.*

²⁶ U. MAGER, *ibidem*.

²⁷ D. GRIMM, *Wissenschaftsfreiheit vor neuen Grenzen?* (Göttinger Universitätsrede), Wallstein Verlag, 2006.

²⁸ D. GRIMM, *ibidem*.

²⁹ *Hochschul Urteil*, BVerfG, 35, 79, p. 145, translation by V. Kosta. In the original: 'die Funktionsfähigkeit der Institution „freie Wissenschaft“ als solche'.

³⁰ See Commission Communication, 'A Competitiveness Compass for the EU', COM (2025) 30 final, 29 January 2025.

³¹ For a more detailed elaboration of the EU dimension see V. KOSTA, *supra* note 23.

intersect, to contemplate on the theory of the university of the future, and to better understand current legal standards on academic and scientific freedom (also across legal orders) in terms of its philosophical justifications, in terms of how the law relates to these challenges, and in terms of how academic and scientific freedom is theorised or can be further theorised as a fundamental right.

2. FREE SPEECH IN THE UNIVERSITY: THE CRISIS OF ‘NO-PLATFORMING’³²

Eric Heinze, Queen Mary University of London

INTRODUCTION

In 2019, the British criminologist Jo Phoenix was scheduled to deliver a lecture entitled ‘Trans rights, Imprisonment and the Criminal Justice System’, but the event was cancelled after a campus-wide campaign labelled her as transphobic.³³ In 2024, Elie Barnavi, a former Israeli ambassador to France and advocate of a Palestinian state, was invited to the Free University of Brussels to speak on this topic. Hundreds of Pro-Palestinian students pushed for a boycott of the event, labelling Israel a ‘fascist, supremacist, and apartheid state’.³⁴ The following year, the UN Special Rapporteur on the Occupied Palestinian Territories, Francesca Albanese, invited to speak at the Free University of Berlin, had her event moved online after accusations that some of her anti-Israel claims promoted antisemitic stereotypes.³⁵ Shortly thereafter, Florence Bergeaud-Blackler, a prominent critic of the Muslim Brotherhood,

³² The author very warmly thanks all colleagues at the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven where some of these ideas were presented at a series of events about the Future of the University celebrating KUL’s 600 year anniversary, 10 – 20 December 2025. All weblinks cited herein are verified as of 20 January 2026.

³³ ‘University of Essex apologises to professor over trans-rights cancellation’, *BBC*, 19 May 2021, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-essex-57170095>.

³⁴ Elena Louazon, ‘A Bruxelles, des étudiants propalestiniens s’opposent à la tenue d’un débat avec Elie Barnavi’, *Le Monde*, 10 May 2024, https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2024/05/10/a-bruxelles-des-etudiants-propalestiniens-s-oppo-sent-a-la-tenue-d-un-debat-avec-elie-banavi_6232498_3210.html; Jean-Pierre Stroobants, ‘A Bruxelles, la conférence avec Elie Barnavi s’est tenue, émaillée de quelques incidents’, *Le Monde*, 4 June 2024, https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2024/06/04/a-bruxelles-la-conference-avec-elie-barnavi-s-est-tenue-emailee-de-quelques-incidents_6237205_3210.html.

³⁵ Frederik Eikmanns, ‘Ein Vortrag der UN-Berichterstatterin für Palästina wurde erneut verlegt’, *taz*, 18 Feb 2025, <https://taz.de/UN-Sonderberichterstatterin-in-Berlin/!6070652/>.

was invited to speak at the University of Lille, which subsequently cancelled the event after student protests branded her as a ‘racist’ and ‘fascist’.³⁶

FROM PROTEST TO COERCION: THE EXAMPLE OF ‘NO-PLATFORMING’

These controversies raise questions about the role of universities, the meaning of academic freedom, and the legitimate limits of institutional authority.³⁷ Within robust democracies, viewpoint-selective exclusion of speakers remains incompatible with academic freedom when it targets lawful expression.³⁸ Certainly, racist, sexist, heteronormative, and other purveyors of hateful or false ideas must be candidly condemned, but when staff or student groups invite such speakers to campus, universities must avoid allowing one group to coercively silence another, irrespective of the legitimate moral impulses with which such campaigns may be conducted.³⁹

Universities must distinguish clearly between *moral condemnation* and *institutional censorship*. Admittedly, universities are moral communities and staff and students may rightly label certain ideas offensive, harmful, or profoundly wrong. Open dissent, protest, and critique are not only permissible but essential to academic life. What universities must not tolerate is the move from condemnation to coercion through recourse to institutional authority to cancel events, disinvite speakers, or otherwise suppress lawful speech because of disagreement with a speaker’s worldview, however repugnant that worldview may indeed be.

Higher education institutions in robust democracies necessarily operate under a strong presumption in favour of free speech. Admittedly, universities have never been spaces of unbridled speech, but they have historically functioned as sites where controversial, unsettling, and dangerous ideas are examined rather than excluded. By contrast, a form of campaign now known as ‘No-Platforming’ is not simply another form of criticism. This term has come to be used to signify attempts to enlist the

³⁶ Emma Ferrand, ‘«L’université de Lille cède devant ces méthodes de terreur»’, *Figaro*, 27 mars 2025, <https://www.lefigaro.fr/actualite-france/l-universite-de-lille-cede-devant-ces-methodes-de-terreur-la-colere-de-florence-bergeaud-blackler-apres-l-annulation-de-sa-conference-20250226>.

³⁷ Eric HEINZE and Tom HERREBERG, ‘The Case against No-Platforming: Campus Speech and Academic Freedom’, in Eric HEINZE, Natalie ALKIVIADOU, Tom HERREBERG, Sejal PARMAR, and Ioanna TOURKOKHORITI, eds., *Oxford Handbook on Hate Speech*, 2026.

³⁸ Eric HEINZE, ‘Ten arguments for – and against – No-Platforming’, *Free Speech Debate*, 1 March 2016; <https://freespeechdebate.com/en/discuss/ten-arguments-for-and-against-no-platforming/>.

³⁹ Eric HEINZE, ‘UC Berkeley, Donald Trump and the muddled ethics of no-platforming’, *The Raw Story*, 14 February 2017; <https://www.rawstory.com/2017/02/uc-berkeley-donald-trump-and-the-muddled-ethics-of-no-platforming/>.

coercive authority of the institution to prevent speech from occurring at all, ultimately backed by disciplinary mechanisms or campus security. This distinguishes it categorically from peaceful protest or counter-speech. What is salient about the incidents cited above – and many more could be named – was that they were generally extra-curricular, involving only voluntary participation without any participant being compelled to attend as a condition for module assessment or for fulfilling any university requirement.

No-Platforming takes several forms. Some are overt, such as campaigns to cancel scheduled talks or disinvite speakers. Others are indirect and less visible, including internal funding denials, opaque vetting procedures, or administrative reliance on security rationales where no concrete threat exists. Such practices often generate a climate of anticipatory self-censorship, particularly among early- and mid-career academics who may fear reputational damage or professional consequences. This ambient effect is as significant as formal cancellations, since it shapes what kinds of events are proposed in the first place.

THREE MODELS OF CAMPUS SPEECH REGULATION

To assess how universities respond to controversial speech, it is worth considering three basic options.⁴⁰ The first can be called the *legalist* option. Under this model, campus speech codes should simply incorporate the same legal standards that apply in society at large. Speech that is lawful off campus is presumed lawful on campus, and speech that is unlawful off campus may be prohibited on campus. If speech standards are to change, that debate belongs in the political sphere, not in *ad hoc* university governance.

The second option, which can be called *libertarian*, would permit more speech on campus than the law allows, even at the cost of civil disobedience. This option is largely theoretical and institutionally unrealistic, given that administrators would rarely if ever be willing to run the legal and reputational risks involved.

The third approach can be called *communitarian*, and is implicitly embraced by No-Platforming campaigns. It seeks to permit less speech than the law allows, on the ground that universities embody shared values such as dignity, inclusion, and respect, and should therefore exclude speakers whose views violate those values even for speech that does not fall afoul of the existing law. The problem

⁴⁰ Eric HEINZE, 'No-platforming and safe spaces: Should universities censor more (or less) speech than the law requires?', *Croatian Political Science Review* 55 (2018), nr. 4, pp. 79-108.

with this communitarian model is that it rests on a fiction of institutional moral unity. In practice, universities are composed of multiple factions with divergent ethical and political commitments, alongside residual groups that do not take any clear position.⁴¹

When administrators cancel events in the name of ‘institutional values’, they are not expressing a neutral moral consensus but siding with one faction against another. Appeals to the university’s ethical identity merely obscure this fact. Yet concepts such as inclusion, diversity, excellence, or social responsibility are inherently open-ended and contestable. They can be – and routinely are – invoked by opposing sides in the same controversy. For example, in recent campus disputes over Israel-Palestine⁴² or gender identity,⁴³ each side claims to defend the university’s deepest values. No unified campus ‘We’ can emerge from this kind of ethical standoff without recourse to coercion.

NEUTRAL AND OBJECTIVE CRITERIA FOR CENSORING CAMPUS SPEECH?

Faced with the instability of ethical justifications, some defenders of No-Platforming turn to what might be called a ‘Teaching and Research Model’ of academia. On this view, universities exist for purposes of teaching and research in ways that necessarily involve content-based exclusion. Since not all ideas meet academic standards,⁴⁴ universities are justified in excluding ideas that fail to satisfy accepted methodological or epistemic criteria.⁴⁵

It is true indeed that academia presupposes such quality control,⁴⁶ but it does not follow that ideas can be excluded solely on viewpoint-selective grounds, given that academic standards are plural, fragmented, and context-dependent. What counts as appropriate methodology varies across disciplines and over time. Moreover, in most academic contexts, quality control operates through voluntary par-

⁴¹ Eric HEINZE, ‘England’s new free speech law comes into force – what it means for universities’, *The Conversation*, 31 July 2025; <https://theconversation.com/englands-new-free-speech-law-comes-into-force-what-it-means-for-universities-262080>.

⁴² Eric HEINZE, ‘Israel, no-platforming – and why there’s no such thing as “narrow exceptions” to campus free speech’, *Yahoo.news*, 30 April 2017; <https://uk.news.yahoo.com/israel-no-platforming-why-no-085844618.html>.

⁴³ Eric HEINZE, ‘Sussex’s fine underlines the folly of censoring rival arguments’, *Times Higher Ed*, 28 March 2025; www.timeshighereducation.com/opinion/sussexs-fine-underlines-folly-censoring-rival-arguments.

⁴⁴ Neil LEVY, ‘No-Platforming and Higher-Order Evidence, or Anti-Anti-No-Platforming’, *Journal of the American Philosophical Association* 5 (2019), nr. 4, pp. 487-602.

⁴⁵ Robert M. SIMPSON & Aria SRINIVASAN, ‘No-Platforming,’ in: J. LACKEY (Ed.), *Academic Freedom*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018, pp. 186, 195.

⁴⁶ Sarah CONLY, ‘Campus Speech Should Not Be Free,’ *Journal of Free Speech Law*, 2022, pp. 299 – 322.

ticipation and peer judgment, not through coercive silencing. For example, a journal may reject a submission, but it cannot prevent other journals from publishing it. A department may decline to invite a speaker, but that does not entitle it to block a student society from doing so.

A key weakness of this 'Teaching and Research Model' is that it confuses pragmatic constraints with principled exclusions. Much of what is excluded from curricula owes more to time and scheduling limitations than to any inherently unfitness for academic debate. As constraints loosen, the range of acceptable materials expands. This undermines the claim that there are fixed, neutral criteria that can be applied to determine which ideas may be heard on campus.

The problem becomes acute when curricular standards are extended to extra-curricular contexts. Debates, guest lectures, and student-organized events are not equivalent to classroom teaching or peer-reviewed research. They do not determine grades, credentials, or scholarly outputs. Poor-quality extra-curricular events do not undermine academic integrity any more than a badly played football match undermines a physics degree.

No-platformers argue that hosting controversial speakers runs the risk of conferring legitimacy on morally outrageous views.⁴⁷ While universities may well possess symbolic authority, there is little if any empirical support for the claim that audiences or the public treat campus appearances as endorsements. To the contrary, controversial speakers tend to attract scrutiny, criticism, and media framing that emphasizes contestation rather than validation. Moreover, ironically, attempts to suppress such speakers often backfire by amplifying their visibility (a phenomenon commonly described as 'the Streisand effect').⁴⁸

The real stakes of No-Platforming are political rather than methodological. Calls to exclude speakers are almost always directed at politically contentious figures, not at harmless charlatans. This suggests that disputes should be addressed candidly as political disagreements and not disguised as applications of supposedly neutral and objective academic standards. For a university committed to intellectual integrity, candour about the nature of disagreement is preferable to procedural opacity.

⁴⁷ Robert M. SIMPSON, 'The Relation between Academic Freedom and Free Speech,' *Ethics*, 2020, pp. 267-319.

⁴⁸ Sue Curry JANSEN and Brian MARTIN, 'The Streisand Effect and Censorship Backfire', *International Journal of Communication* 9 (2015), pp. 656–671.

The alternative to No-Platforming? Campus speech controls should consist of structural regulation rather than viewpoint-selective censorship.⁴⁹ Instead of censorship, universities should focus on designing conditions under which controversial speech can be openly and critically examined. This includes transparency in event organization, accessibility to the broader campus community, formats that allow questioning and rebuttal, and robust protection for lawful protest that does not obstruct others' rights. Instead of retreating from controversy universities must learn to manage it democratically to produce academically respectable criticism and dialogue. Shielding students from controversy risks intellectual infantilisation and undermines the very capacities higher education seeks to cultivate.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Treat the legality of expression as the baseline standard for campus speech instead of seeking to carve out the university as a sphere of alternative speech practices.
- Protect protest, dissent, and moral condemnation while rejecting coercive, viewpoint-selective exclusion.
- Avoid extending curricular quality-control standards to extra-curricular events in a censorial manner.
- Rely on structural regulation—transparency, access, and critical engagement—rather than speaker bans.
- Address controversial speech as a matter of open political and ethical disagreement, not as a failure of academic method.

3. WHAT IS IMPORTANT FOR A COMPREHENSIVE UNIVERSITY SUCH AS KU LEUVEN?

Sari Lindblom, Helsinki University

In the latest version of the Universities Act in Finland (2016) the mission of the universities is expressed in the following way:

⁴⁹ Eric HEINZE, *Hate Speech and Democratic Citizenship*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016, pp. 175-179.

‘The mission of the universities is to promote independent academic research as well as academic and artistic education, to provide research-based higher education and to educate students to serve their country and humanity at large. In carrying out their mission, the universities shall promote lifelong learning, interact with the surrounding society and promote the social impact of university research findings and artistic activities.’

This mission in my opinion captures very well the core duties of universities. Comprehensive universities, such as KU Leuven and the University of Helsinki, are in the best position to fulfil the mission of the universities as it is defined in the Finnish Universities Act.

Fulfilling the mission to serve our countries, humanity and even the whole planet, universities need to be able to make use and apply research knowledge to solve tricky global problems. None of the problems of today and of the future can be solved ‘inside’ one discipline only. Solving global problems require team work and collaboration of scholars representing different disciplines.

During recent years, budget cuts from governments have made some universities to prioritise and narrow down their disciplinary spectrum. In addition, in today’s political climate, some politicians have even demanded that universities should move resources from ‘unwanted’ research areas to the more ‘accepted’ ones. This unfortunately may hinder universities to help society to develop and solve arising problems, as it is difficult or even impossible to predict what could the next global problems be. Furthermore, it is very difficult to be proactive because in today’s turbulent geopolitical situation global crises overlap and differ in nature. Future crises may vary from an energy crisis to a pandemic from an unknown source; from earth catastrophes to new health problems; from increase of illiteracy to a drastic decrease in birthrate; from wars to conflicts between different religions; and from mental-health problems to work-related exhaustion in societies changing at a fast pace.

Being a comprehensive university adds to the possibilities to interdisciplinary collaboration among colleagues representing different disciplines. Collaboration can open ways to steer research to new directions and to apply research methods of one discipline in novel contexts.

Students studying in comprehensive universities benefit from various options to combine minor studies with their selected majors and in this way create their individual academic profiles. Having a possibility to interact with students representing a variety of disciplines enhances the quality of students’ expertise as this adds to students’ understanding of other disciplines than one’s own. After graduation

students are expected to work in multidisciplinary teams and to be able to explain their own disciplinary knowledge to people representing other disciplines.

For the reasons described above it is pivotal to remain as comprehensive as possible in an ever-changing society.

4. THE FUTURE OF ACADEMIC EDUCATION: LEARNING FOR A CHANGING SOCIETY

Manon Kluijtmans, Utrecht University

Society is changing rapidly, and these shifts place new expectations on universities. Global challenges such as climate change, geopolitical conflict, health crises, technological disruption and widening social inequalities are transforming the world into which graduates will emerge. In this landscape, universities can no longer afford to operate as distant, inward-looking institutions. The traditional image of the academy as an ivory tower is increasingly incompatible with the interconnected and uncertain realities students must learn to navigate. If universities are to serve society responsibly, their educational mission must evolve just as profoundly as their research practices.

Education is the most powerful way in which universities shape society. While research attracts attention for its innovation and direct contributions to policy and practice, it is education that has the deepest and most enduring effect. Graduates carry their knowledge, values and ways of thinking into every domain of society. They become the professionals, leaders, citizens and decision-makers whose judgments influence what the future will look like. Recognising this means understanding that the question of what education should be is inseparable from the question of what kind of society we hope to create.

The future of academic education cannot be reduced to knowledge transfer. Alongside building a strong disciplinary foundation, education must foster open-mindedness, critical thinking and the ability to collaborate across boundaries and act responsibly in the face of complexity. The university of tomorrow should cultivate reflective, adaptable individuals capable of lifelong learning. The true value of higher education lies in supporting students to understand who they are, what they stand for and

how they can contribute meaningfully to society. This formative dimension of education—encompassing subjectification and socialization alongside qualification—is essential, requiring identity, purpose and agency to be nurtured together with disciplinary knowledge.

To achieve this, education must be anchored more firmly in the real world. Socially engaged, interdisciplinary and practice-based learning experiences are no longer peripheral innovations; they are the conditions under which academic learning becomes relevant and transformative. When students work with communities, organisations or public institutions, they learn to deal with ambiguity, negotiate diverse perspectives and recognise the societal implications of their knowledge. They experience firsthand how academic thinking can help address real problems and confront the ethical questions that inevitably accompany such engagement. These experiences prepare them not only for employment but also for citizenship and leadership in a complex society.

In this future vision, the role of lecturers also expands. Teaching becomes an act of intellectual partnership rather than one-directional instruction. Lecturers must be willing to articulate what is essential in their field, question its assumptions and guide students in constructing new knowledge rather than simply reproducing existing insights. They become facilitators of inquiry, critical companions and role models for reflective practice. This collaborative approach benefits lecturers as well. Designing meaningful learning experiences prompts them to examine how their expertise relates to societal issues and how their discipline can contribute to broader conversations.

Education for the future must also prepare students to live with uncertainty. Emerging technologies, changing labour markets, sociopolitical instability, and global interdependence mean that students will face situations for which no stable rules or ready-made answers exist. Instead of shielding learners from uncertainty, universities must teach them how to navigate it. A curriculum that encourages experimentation, tolerates mistakes and invites intellectual risk-taking helps develop resilience and flexibility. Students should develop the ability to unlearn and relearn as circumstances change. This adaptability becomes a defining feature of their academic identity.

New generations grow up under conditions very different from those of their teachers, and their expectations, strengths and vulnerabilities reflect broader social developments. Universities should therefore work in close partnership with students in shaping education. Rather than passive recipients, students are essential partners whose insights and experiences help ensure that education responds meaningfully to contemporary realities. A collaborative, co-creative approach sustains a learning community that is both supportive and forward-looking.

All these dimensions – engagement, reflection, adaptability and co-creation – come together in a vision of future education that is open, transformative, empowering, flexible and collaborative. But these words signify more than abstract ideals. ‘Openness’ means welcoming diversity of perspectives, lowering barriers to participation and embedding education in society. ‘Transformation’ means helping students develop new ways of seeing the world and their place within it. ‘Empowerment’ refers to supporting student ownership, active learning and formative assessment that guides growth rather than merely certifying achievement. ‘Flexibility’ reflects the need for personalised learning paths and lifelong development. ‘Collaboration’ denotes the creation of learning communities in which lecturers, students, alumni and societal partners learn with and from one another.

The effects of education extend well beyond graduation, influencing how individuals act, lead and shape the communities they belong to. For this reason, universities have a responsibility to design education that prepares students not only for today’s challenges but for tomorrow’s uncertainties as well. A future-oriented university is characterised not by the height of its walls but by the strength of its connections—to society, to knowledge and to the continuous development of its learners.⁵⁰

5. INNOVATION POLICY OPTIONS FOR UNIVERSITIES IN A MORE INNOVATIVE EUROPE

Silvia Lenaerts, Eindhoven University of Technology

European universities occupy a pivotal position in contemporary innovation systems. The universities must transform both how they engage their environment and how they organize academic careers internally to fulfil this role effectively. To succeed, they must not only become system-oriented actors

⁵⁰ References: P. ASHWIN, *Transforming University Education: A Manifesto*. Bloomsbury (2020); G.J.J. BIESTA, ‘Risking Ourselves in Education: Qualification, Socialization, and Subjectification Revisited’, *Educational Theory* 70 (2020), nr. 1, pp. 89-104 (<https://doi.org/10.1111/edth.12411>); S. DE KNECHT, M. VAN DER MEER, L. BRINKMAN, M. KLUJTMANS & F. MIEDEMA, *Reshaping the Academic Self: Connecting Education & Open Science*. Zenodo, 2021 <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.5345573>; H. KUMMELING, M. KLUJTMANS, F. MIEDEMA, *The university in transition*. Book Publishers of Trial and Error (2024) <https://doi.org/10.36850/af2b-4024>; M. YOUNG, & J. MULLER, ‘On the Powers of Powerful Knowledge’. *Review of Education* 1 (2013), nr. 3, pp. 229–50 <https://doi.org/10.1002/rev3.3017>.

in multi-level innovation ecosystems, but also make deliberate choices about focus and excellence, concentrating resources where they can achieve and sustain world-class performance.

CORE ARGUMENT FOR INNOVATION POLICY: DUAL TRANSFORMATION WITH FOCUS

The universities face a dual transformation. Externally, they need strategic positioning in national and regional innovation systems and effective engagement with European funding landscapes such as Horizon Europe, the European Innovation Council (EIC), and European Institute of Innovation and Technology (EIT). Internally, they must reform recognition, reward, and career structures so that education, research, valorisation, and leadership are treated as mutually reinforcing contributions rather than competing priorities. Within this dual transformation, universities should articulate a focused institutional profile, identifying a limited number of scientific and technological domains where they can realistically achieve international excellence and concentrating investment in talent, infrastructure, and partnerships in those areas. This combination of system orientation with clear focus and excellence enables universities to mobilize knowledge and talent for sustainable socio-economic development, particularly in the context of green and digital transitions and technological sovereignty debates.

NATIONAL INNOVATION, POLITICS, AND STRATEGIC FOCUS

Innovation performance is shaped by deliberate political choices, institutional arrangements, and long-term investment in human capital, infrastructure, and industrial capabilities, rather than market forces alone. High-performing innovation systems rest on complementary pillars such as education systems, research organizations, industrial structures, financial systems, and governance mechanisms that jointly support technological leadership. Universities' autonomy, funding, and incentives are embedded within these national politics of innovation, implying that institutional strategies must be designed in coordination with ministries, funding agencies, firms, and civil society. Within this political economy, strategic focus and excellence become critical: universities strengthen their position when they align national and regional priorities with clearly defined domains of scientific and technological strength, using these as anchors for major public-private coalitions and mission-oriented initiatives.

UNIVERSITIES AS FOCUSED INNOVATION HUBS

Innovation ecosystems conceptualize innovation as a distributed process in which universities, firms, governments, and other actors co-create value through interdependent activities. Universities contribute fundamental research, advanced education, entrepreneurial support, and problem-oriented work on societal challenges while connecting global scientific networks to regional ‘buzz’. European universities are evolving from closed knowledge houses into open innovation hubs that manage knowledge flows across organizational boundaries and align research with business models and societal missions. Work on open innovation emphasizes universities as hubs that combine strong internal research capabilities with active inflows and outflows of knowledge, orchestrating co-creation among firms, public authorities, and societal stakeholders. Strategic focus enhances this role: ecosystems such as *Brainport* show how a technology-oriented university, by concentrating on high-tech systems, materials, energy, health, and advanced manufacturing, can anchor a regional model that tightly couples excellent mono-, multi- and interdisciplinary research with industrial strengths.

ENTREPRENEURIAL INFRASTRUCTURE AND EXCELLENT NICHES

Dedicated entrepreneurship centres demonstrate how universities can institutionalize support for technology-intensive firm creation at scale. *UnternehmerTUM* at the Technical University of Munich illustrates this by supporting more than 70 new tech-based companies annually through integrated programmes spanning ideation, business model development, prototyping, incubation, acceleration, and access to venture capital. Such centres work best when embedded in clearly chosen domains of excellence, where the university’s research strengths, entrepreneurial education, and regional industry profiles reinforce each other. In these niches, universities can offer unique combinations of talent, infrastructure, and networks, thereby enhancing their international reputation and their attractiveness as partners in European and global innovation projects.

EUROPEAN FUNDING AND STRATEGY-DRIVEN PARTICIPATION

The European research and innovation architecture for 2021–2027, centred on Horizon Europe and complemented by the European Defence Fund, Digital Europe Programme, and sectoral partnerships, offers a multifaceted but fragmented opportunity space. Instruments across the research-innovation-entrepreneurship continuum, including the European Innovation Council and the European Institute

of Innovation and Technology, support projects in fields such as climate, health, and digital technologies. To benefit, universities need professional capacities in proposal development, project management, alliance building, and portfolio management, ensuring that European projects reinforce their focused institutional strategy. Strategy-driven participation means selecting programmes and partnerships that strengthen existing or targeted areas of excellence, rather than dispersing effort across too many domains. This approach enhances scientific excellence, socio-economic value creation, talent development, and regional valorisation while consolidating the university's profile as a leading actor in specific mission areas.

CAREERS, ASSESSMENT, AND EXCELLENCE

Traditional academic career models reward publication-centred research and classroom teaching while undervaluing innovation ecosystem engagement, entrepreneurship, policy work, and institutional leadership. This narrow focus creates misalignment between universities' strategic innovation ambitions and the incentives experienced by individual academics, limiting participation in open innovation and ecosystem roles. Reform movements such as CoARA (Coalition for Advancing Research Assessment) promote broader conceptions of academic merit, emphasizing qualitative peer review, recognition of diverse contributions, and reduced reliance on journal metrics and rankings. Emerging career frameworks integrate research, education, valorisation, and leadership, allowing differentiated profiles across team members and career stages, supported by tools such as narrative CVs and structured fact sheets. For focused excellence, career and assessment systems should explicitly value contributions that deepen strengths in priority domains – such as leading frontier research, building world-class facilities, or coordinating major collaborative projects – while also crediting roles that connect these domains to industry, policy, and society.

GOVERNANCE, FREEDOM, AND BRIDGING ROLES

Reforms must respect academic freedom and institutional autonomy while clarifying accountability and supporting innovation-oriented governance. Research on academic freedom in Europe highlights the need for legal and institutional safeguards that allow universities to pursue societal engagement and external partnerships without compromising core academic values. At the same time, work on professional identity and 'dual professionals' underlines the importance of broker roles that link academia and practice communities. Universities can enhance innovation engagement by supporting

these bridging roles through tailored career paths, professional development, and recognition, particularly in the university's focused areas of excellence where such brokers can have the greatest impact.

INNOVATION POLICY DIRECTIONS FOR FOCUSED, SYSTEM-ORIENTED UNIVERSITIES

Several policy directions follow from integrating the politics-of-innovation perspective, ecosystem thinking, European funding, career reform, and the imperative of focus and excellence.

- Institutional vision and focus: Universities should develop a clear vision that links excellence in science and engineering with socio-economic value creation, talent development, and strategic partnerships at regional, national, and European levels, while identifying and prioritizing domains where they aim to be truly world-class.
- Internal governance and incentives: Recognition and reward systems must value diverse roles in education, research, valorisation, leadership, and ecosystem bridging, with appreciation for contributions that strengthen the university's focused areas of excellence.
- Ecosystem orchestration around strengths: Universities should act as orchestrators within regional innovation ecosystems, using their key domains of excellence as focal points for convening partners, aligning research agendas with shared missions, and creating pathways from fundamental research through commercialization to societal implementation.
- Investment in talent and infrastructure: Sustained investment in human capital, research infrastructure, entrepreneurial support, and open-innovation spaces should be aligned with focused strategic choices, building critical mass and distinctive capabilities in selected fields.
- Multi-level coordination: Effective innovation policy demands coordination across governmental levels, sectors, and institutions; universities benefit when national innovation policy, regional ecosystem strategies, European funding engagement, and internal reforms are aligned around their chosen domains of excellence and system-oriented roles.

In sum, European universities must simultaneously navigate and shape multi-level innovation systems, reform careers and assessment, and make clear strategic choices about where to focus and excel. Institutions that align open innovation strategies, focused excellence, and reformed academic careers can function as strategic, system-oriented actors that advance scientific knowledge while contributing meaningfully to societal and economic challenges in Europe.

6. WHAT I WISH FOR KU LEUVEN: A SANCTUARY FOR FREE-RANGING INQUIRY

Ashish Arora, Duke University

As KU Leuven marks its 600th anniversary, we find ourselves in a piquant situation. Its global reputation is high; its research is world-class. The university has successfully attracted students and researchers from across the world, and its scholars rank among the most successful in securing external research funding. Yet this exemplary record has not insulated KU Leuven from the growing pressures that universities everywhere now face. Challenges to university autonomy are mounting, often framed in calls for greater ‘relevance’, and these calls pull universities simultaneously – and sometimes contradictorily – in multiple directions.

The question posed by this project of the Leuven Institute for Advanced Study – whether the core functions of the university are still guaranteed when academic freedom is constrained by governments or prevailing moralities – is therefore not hypothetical. It describes our present condition.

My wish for the research future of KU Leuven is grounded in cautious optimism rather than unrealistic idealism. I hope that KU Leuven will remain a centre of research excellence – a sanctuary for free-ranging inquiry – at a time when many universities are increasingly drawn into serving narrower, more parochial interests.

By free-ranging inquiry, I mean research that is not prematurely constrained by disciplinary boundaries, short-term performance metrics, or narrowly specified applications. It is inquiry guided instead by scholarly rigor and professional judgment, allowing questions to be pursued to their full depth over appropriate time horizons.

In this sense, KU Leuven should continue to be a place where, as Rabindranath Tagore famously wrote, ‘tireless striving stretches its arms towards perfection’. Achieving this will require not only the defense of institutional autonomy, but also a serious engagement with the legitimate expectations that society holds of its universities.

AUTONOMY, UTILITY, AND INTELLECTUAL DIVERSITY

Interdisciplinary research, when it succeeds, typically does so in pursuit of a shared objective. In that respect, interdisciplinarity is unavoidably utilitarian: it responds to problems that cannot be adequately addressed from within a single disciplinary tradition. Yet utilitarianism, properly understood, need not stand in opposition to academic autonomy or intellectual freedom.

Intellectual diversity, coupled with free-ranging inquiry and the training of the next generation of researchers, is how university research produces durable societal value. A research system that privileges only predictable outcomes, standardized metrics, or immediate applicability ultimately undermines its own purposes. Academic freedom is therefore not a luxury or indulgence; it is a necessary condition for sustaining the diversity of perspectives and approaches on which meaningful innovation depends.

KU Leuven's challenge – and its opportunity – is to articulate a research culture in which utility and autonomy are not treated as competing demands, but as mutually reinforcing principles. For universities to be useful to society beyond educating future citizens and workers, they must be allowed to explore, to question, and to stretch in the pursuit of truth. Intellectual diversity is essential for this task, and a substantial degree of university autonomy is, in turn, required to sustain that diversity. Put simply, universities serve society best not when they are tightly steered toward predefined outcomes, but when they retain the freedom to pursue multiple, sometimes competing, intellectual paths.

STRUCTURAL INTERDISCIPLINARITY

KU Leuven is already endowed with world-class research assets. These range from the Leuven Brain Institute, the Leuven Cancer Institute (LKI), SIM², and Leuven.AI, to its close association with IMEC (Interuniversity Microelectronics Centre) and VIB (Flanders Institute for Biotechnology). The latter operate at the interface between university research and industry and are often described as external 'innovation engines'. While this framing has been extraordinarily successful in terms of global reputation and valorisation, it also reflects a narrow understanding of how knowledge circulates within the university.

Yet these institutes offer more than technological excellence alone. They present an opportunity to anchor genuinely transformative, integrated scholarship across KU Leuven. One can imagine a near

future in which economists, management scholars, lawyers, sociologists, and philosophers are structurally embedded within deep-tech environments such as IMEC and VIB – contributing to their missions while learning, at close range, how scientific, technological, economic, and social systems interact.

Such arrangements would allow KU Leuven to become a global leader not only in technological innovation, but also in the science of innovation itself: the study of spin-off ecologies, governance regimes, global value chains, and strategic dependencies as they emerge, rather than as retrospective case studies. Structural interdisciplinarity of this kind moves beyond symbolic collaboration. It creates the institutional conditions in which free-ranging inquiry can flourish without sacrificing rigor or relevance.

POLITICAL PRESSURES AND THE ROLE OF THE UNIVERSITY

Universities today are increasingly viewed by governments as auxiliary instruments of industrial and innovation policy, particularly as states seek to balance economic prosperity with growing concerns about sovereignty and security. To this end, policymakers have deployed performance-based funding mechanisms, targeted industrial research funds, and mission-oriented projects. These instruments are not intrinsically harmful – provided they respect the comparative advantage of universities.

Universities are at their best when they build long-term intellectual capacity rather than deliver narrowly defined solutions. There are, of course, important exceptions. Befitting their monastic origins, universities conduct fundamental biomedical research, translate it into therapies, care for patients, and train medical professionals. Yet across disciplines, their distinctive contribution lies in creating new knowledge and educating future researchers and professionals. Excessive steering that constrains free-ranging inquiry risks undermining both the scientific mission of the university and its broader societal contribution.

A related pressure arises under the banner of ‘knowledge security’. Recent mandates increasingly ask universities to act as geopolitical gatekeepers, scrutinizing international collaborations and researchers on the basis of national or strategic risk. While security concerns cannot be ignored, my wish for KU Leuven is that it remains an open port for global scholarship. Even as other universities are compelled to retreat, KU Leuven – supported by national and regional governments – can position itself as a haven for world-class, internationally open research.

COMPETITION

Competition among universities can be healthy. Institutions compete for research funding, for talented students, and for outstanding teachers and researchers. Yet competition can also degenerate into a race to the bottom unless institutional leaders possess the long-term vision – and the resolve – to resist it. The growing tendency to tie research funding to quantifiable measures of scholarly impact has created strong incentives for researchers to favour safer, more incremental projects over work whose significance may only become clear over time.

My wish is that KU Leuven stands firm against these pressures – or, at the very least, has the institutional courage to create curiosity shields: protected blocks of funding explicitly exempt from short-term impact metrics. Such shields are not designed to encourage irresponsibility. They exist to preserve the conditions for free-ranging inquiry, in which scholarly value is allowed to mature through sustained investigation and critical debate. By so doing, I believe that KU Leuven can prevail over competitors who succumb to the short-term pressures.

LIAS AS THE INSTITUTIONAL ANTIDOTE

In this respect, the Leuven Institute for Advanced Study should be seen not as an exception, but as a model. LIAS preserves three conditions that are increasingly rare, yet essential for advancing knowledge:

- *Time*, because meaningful ideas often require durations that no evaluation cycle can accommodate.
- *Debate*, because intellectual legitimacy emerges from sustained confrontation between different ways of knowing.
- *Shelter*, because academic freedom requires spaces in which prevailing moralities, political agendas, and impact imperatives are temporarily held at bay.

CONCLUSION: A COMMITMENT TO FREE-RANGING INQUIRY AND INTELLECTUAL DIVERSITY

My ultimate wish for KU Leuven is that it treats its 600th anniversary not merely as a celebration of past achievement, but as a renewed commitment to being a sanctuary where inquiry is granted the

intellectual space to mature and to range across disciplines. In an age increasingly shaped by standardized evaluation and instrumental notions of relevance, the university must remain a place where questions can be pursued to their full depth before their value is assessed.

This is not a retreat from accountability, but a more demanding form of it. By defending the conditions under which diverse and free-ranging research can develop with intellectual seriousness and integrity, KU Leuven will continue to serve society in its most enduring role: expanding the boundaries of knowledge and educating future researchers and citizens capable of judgment, reflection, and responsible leadership in an increasingly complex world.

CONTRIBUTORS

ASHISH ARORA is the Senior Associate Dean for Strategy and Rex D. Adams Professor of Business Administration at the Fuqua School of Business at Duke University.

ERIC HEINZE is Professor of Law and Humanities at Queen Mary University of London.

MANON KLUJTMANS is dean of University College Utrecht and professor at the University Medical Center Utrecht, where she holds the chair in 'Education to Connect Science and Professional Practice'. Previously, she was Vice Rector for Education, chair of the Higher Education Research focus area, and scientific director and founder of the Centre for Academic Teaching & Learning.

VASILIKI KOSTA is Associate Professor at the Europa Institute - Leiden Law School, Leiden University. She is principal investigator and project lead of the research project 'The EU Fundamental Right to "Freedom of the Arts and Sciences": Exploring the Limits on the Commercialisation of Academia' (funded by a Vidi grant of the Dutch Research Council NWO).

SILVIA LENAERTS is Rector Magnificus of Eindhoven University of Technology.

SARI LINDBLOM is Rector the University of Helsinki.