

# Passion for knowledge. Commitment to people.

*This year, KU Leuven proudly celebrates its 600th anniversary. Over the past six centuries, our university has evolved into a globally renowned institution, known for its excellence in education and cutting-edge research across all scientific domains. As a university community, we have every reason to be proud. This success is a shared achievement, built by us and the many generations who came before us. What makes this accomplishment even more remarkable is that we continue to perform at the highest level without relying on strict admission criteria, high tuition fees, or other exclusionary selection mechanisms. That, too, is something to be proud of.*

*KU Leuven is doing very well – and that's the perspective from which I approach my candidacy for rector. We are a strong university with a proud tradition and a bright future. But no institution is perfect. There are still both major and minor challenges where we can do even better – and should. In this programme, I outline the areas where I believe improvement is needed, and I present concrete solutions to address them. Let me begin by highlighting a few key points.*

*First and foremost, there is the workload – a challenge that affects everyone at our university. That is why I say clearly and without hesitation: "Yes, I want to make our university even better - to foster a more humane and caring working environment and to strengthen our essential role as a beacon of knowledge. But not at any cost, and certainly not at the expense of our people's work-life balance". Striving for that final percentage, that marginal gain - let's leave that to professional athletes. Sometimes, we need to be able to say: "Given the circumstances, this is good enough. Let's take a break". It will come as no surprise, then, that the key points of my programme reflect exactly that way of thinking.*

*The reform of the academic year, coupled with shifting the resit exams, is designed to introduce a true rest period in the summer. This benefits everyone: students can fully disconnect, administrative staff can better spread out their workload and avoid peak pressure, and academic staff can take real breaks and carve out time for research. Beyond well-being, reorganising the academic calendar also brings clear educational benefits: the focus shifts away from summative evaluation toward genuine learning. Students and lecturers gain more space for in-depth content, placing the learning process where it belongs: at the heart of education.*

*At the same time, I want to reinforce the foundations of academic research. With basic funding, I aim to give researchers the time, trust, and opportunity to do what they do best – pursue knowledge – without being forced into a constant and often frustrating race for grants and funding applications.*

*When it comes to university governance itself, my aim is clear: administrative simplification. Fewer meetings. Fewer forms. Less regulatory pressure. But this streamlining must go hand in hand with genuine, well-understood autonomy for our faculties - the beating heart of KU Leuven. They deserve full trust. That same principle of autonomy and subsidiarity extends to departments and to our campuses beyond Leuven. We are one university - KU Leuven, and we will govern it together.*

*A university is more than a training institute or a research centre. It is a place where thinking, debate, and Bildung - personal and intellectual development - are central. It is also a beacon of reason and science within society. This year's rectoral elections take place in a worrying geopolitical context. As Vice Rector for International Policy, I have seen first-hand the importance of strong international cooperation. But I have also witnessed a worrying trend: universities abroad are increasingly facing government interference that threatens academic freedom. As rector, I will continue to firmly defend our community - staff, researchers, and students - against such undue political pressure. I will also stand up to populist attacks from broader society. KU Leuven must remain a stronghold of free inquiry and independent thought.*

*I am aware that the coming years will not be easy. With ongoing government cutbacks, the pressure to economise will be high. In a climate of growing polarisation, even universities - including ours - may become the target of hate campaigns. We must engage in open, accessible, and calm dialogue with politics and with society - always in the interest of the university, and thus in the interest of us all.*

*That is what passion for knowledge and commitment to people mean to me. That is what I want to stand for. And I hope to do so, together with you.*

*Peter Lievens, 24 April 2025*

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## 1. Quality education for all

*Education is the heart of the university, a place where knowledge is shared, shaped, and renewed. We therefore strive for a learning environment that not only guarantees quality but also cares for the well-being of students and lecturers, and creates space for creativity in thinking and doing. Education is not a by-product of research, but a fully-fledged academic activity that fuels intellectual curiosity, sharpens critical thinking, and shapes individuals. A future-oriented university thus considers not only what is taught, but also how and at what pace. That is why we are rethinking the academic calendar, introducing structural breathing space in the summer, and reconfiguring assessment periods to help prevent workload peaks.*

*We want a culture of evaluation in which formative feedback and diversity in assessment methods are the standard, with attention to motivation, learning objectives, and feasibility. Digital innovation plays a supporting role: we want to use AI-powered learning platforms and blended learning wherever they truly add value in terms of flexibility, inclusion, or engagement, not simply because they are trendy.*

*Finally, we ensure warm and accessible support for students with specific needs, whether it relates to academic guidance, mental well-being, neurodivergence, or a temporary crisis. Educational equity is not an abstract ambition, but a shared responsibility.*

*Before outlining the specific action points, we want to highlight essential preconditions. These are the foundations we aim to put in place to build a university where students, support staff, and lecturers will all have the space to grow. Educational policy will be developed collaboratively, with the involvement of those it affects. Lecturers will be supported in designing and improving their courses, and that support will be rooted in a model of genuine cooperation.*

*Thanks to these efforts, we hope to successfully implement four key action points: reforming the academic calendar, critically reflecting on the assessment methods, making more intensive use of digital tools, and providing stronger support for students with specific needs.*

### 1.1 Policy development, support and cooperation in education

#### ● **Policy development in consultation**

Education policy decisions must be supported by all sections of the university. That is why we want a balanced composition of all working groups that prepare new policy with representation of faculty staff, lecturers, assistants and students. It is crucial, however, to limit the number of working groups to what is strictly necessary. When working groups are created, they must have a clear goal, a clear mandate, and a *lean, efficient way of operating*. *WE must avoid the risk of turning them into endless talking shops*. Focused collaboration, not bureaucracy, should drive our progress. Supported participation is essential for the legitimacy and effectiveness of education policy. Shared governance enhances the quality of decision-making because diverse perspectives are brought into all phases of policy-making. Regular intervision moments with all faculties allow early feedback to

be gathered before final decisions are made. This kind of iterative participation and shared decision-making strengthens both the feasibility of decisions and support towards them. When colleagues and students feel genuinely heard, their involvement in policy implementation increases, which is essential for successful educational innovation. Participation also fosters a sense of ownership, which in turn makes reforms more sustainable and more widely accepted.

### ● ***Growth through cooperation***

To reduce administrative pressure and better align support with programme needs, we aim to strengthen cooperation between university-wide and faculty teaching services. Coordinated cooperation between central support services and local teams leads to higher efficiency, reduced redundancy and more effective support for educational innovation. Educational innovation often requires interdisciplinary cooperation, technical expertise, as well as knowledge of the local context. This is done through integrated thematic teams, joint advisory sessions and shared support pathways. This approach directly benefits teachers by providing coherent and tailored advice on digital tools, educational design and quality assurance. By avoiding fragmentation and redundancy, we aim to increase efficiency and satisfaction among teachers. At the same time, administrative processes such as lesson planning, assessment management and curriculum development also become more transparent and manageable.

### ● ***Educational development with the right support***

We want to strengthen the role of KU Leuven Learning Lab and faculty support staff in guiding educational innovation. Less generic “good practice”, more guidance on concrete questions, that is the starting point.

Every two years, every lecturer will be offered the opportunity to redesign aspects of their own teaching assignment with the help of a teaching assistant from the Education Department in collaboration with faculty support services. In consultation with programme managers the lecturer can determine where the focus lies. This offer is entirely voluntary-lecturers who do not wish to make use of it can simply opt out without any consequence.

We are also reintroducing calls for education innovation projects. To avoid workload, we will work with a nimble two-step evaluation, with a low-threshold pitch round followed by further elaboration for selected ideas. The importance of accessible, small-scale interventions and structural support is evidenced by several studies showing that successful innovation does not only come from technology, but mainly from human capital and institutional support ([Krijgsman et al. 2022](#)). Indeed, bottom-up innovation is fostered by space for experimentation and teacher ownership. We will provide resources- such as project officer for 18 months, job students, and other support for bottom-up projects instead of the current university-wide projects. This allows ideas to be realised more quickly, with the maximum impact. From the outset, each project should consider how its innovation will persist after it is finished- for example, by embedding it in a training component or by structurally allocating time within the team.





## 1.2 Reform of the academic calendar

### ● *Summer period free of teaching and exams*

We want to structurally anchor a summer period of at least six weeks without teaching or exams in the academic calendar. Periods free of classes and exams contribute to a better distribution of workload and supports students' well-being. It offers students the opportunity to reflect on their academic journey, consider reorientation, catch up on coursework, pursue internships, gain international experience, - or simply take a break from academic pressure and engage socially, for instance. Such breaks increase students' motivation and provide structural space for personal development.

For educational administration, a clear break between academic years enables better planning of administrative tasks and helps avoid peak periods. At the same time, this period gives lecturers the opportunity to thoroughly prepare lessons, take holidays, engage in professional development, or focus on research. This reorganisation will involve adjustments and optimisations to assessment processes, exam periods, student project deadlines, and deliberations. Through this reform, we create breathing space at all levels of the university. Thus, the summer break is not merely a moment of rest, it also creates time for critical reflection on teaching practices and their structural improvement.

### ● *Bringing resit exams forward and restructuring semesters*

We aim to schedule resits closer to the first exam opportunity, both for the first and second semesters. This avoids students having to wait months to improve their results. Moreover, a shorter interval between consecutive exams will enhance the continuity of learning and prevent performance decline due to long interruptions. This approach reinforces the widely supported concept – also affirmed by the Education Council – that a resit is truly a second chance, not a new



opportunity. It is evident that resits can improve academic success, provided they are well-planned and properly supported. There must be sufficient preparation time between the first and second attempt and resits should not overlap with other learning activities. A balanced exam schedule is essential to prevent student fatigue, which can significantly impact performance.

### ● ***Coordinated deadlines within the academic calendar***

Currently, peak moments often occur during the semester when assignments from various course units coincide. This leads to overload for both students and lecturers, with negative effects on learning quality, motivation, and feedback. Uncoordinated planning and overlapping deadlines are a major source of increased stress, decreased performance, and lower student satisfaction.

That's why we want to promote the harmonisation of deadlines across the university, so that assignments are distributed in alignment with the overall academic calendar. Faculty education committees will be supported with guidelines and digital tools to visualise the distribution of assignments. This applies to both bachelor's and master's programmes. For advanced programmes with complex curricula, this presents a particular challenge. We will ensure central monitoring and encourage programmes to hold joint planning sessions to create their annual schedules.

Through these reforms, we aim to achieve a more balanced and supportive educational rhythm throughout the academic year. The concrete redesign of the academic calendar must be developed collaboratively and involve all stakeholders, policy-makers, faculties, administrative services, and students, while taking discipline-specific needs into account.

## **1.3 Evaluation to support learning**

### ● ***Learning-oriented feedback***

Although continuous assessment can help spread out learning efforts, its current use in many programmes often results in constant testing pressure on students. This is particularly the case when continuous assessment is used summatively (i.e., contributing to the final grade), which can put academic success under strain. To address this, we aim to develop guidelines and support systems to promote balanced evaluation strategies that emphasise learning-oriented feedback used formatively (i.e., not counting toward the final grade).

Formative feedback moments help students monitor their progress and give them the opportunity to identify mistakes and make necessary adjustments. Digital tools, such as interactive learning materials and AI-driven systems, enable immediate and personalised feedback, even for large groups. That is why we encourage the use of digital feedback on exercises and the use of feedback rubrics in both group and individual assignments. We also emphasise feedback literacy: students must learn how to interpret feedback, reflect on it, and actively use it to improve their learning process. We therefore see feedback as a process, not as a final product. By structurally incorporating formative feedback moments, we prevent students from working merely “for the points” and strengthen their self-regulation skills ([Carles & Boud 2018](#); [Coppens et al. 2024](#)).

In practical terms, this means we encourage programmes to use summative assessments during the semester selectively and to rely more often on formative evaluation. In this approach, feedback - including quantitative feedback from practice exams - plays a central role, and students are given the space to make mistakes and learn from them. Lecturers will receive support from educational experts, both from the central Education Service and from faculty-based support staff, who will share examples of feasible, motivating, and goal-oriented evaluation practices. This creates more room for deep learning and meaningful interaction between student and teacher. We aim for a culture of assessment where learning goals take the lead, and evaluation methods are aligned with the complexity of the subject matter and the phase of the programme. The result is a more effective and less stressful learning trajectory.

- ***Variety in assessment methods***

Tailored to the learning goals and student profiles, we aim to introduce greater diversity in assessment methods, such as portfolios, peer assessments, case studies, and integrated assignments that assess a combination of learning outcomes and competencies. Students differ in how they think and learn. Future-oriented assessment forms, such as digital presentations, interactive simulations, or practice-based scenarios, will also take on a more prominent role. These methods support deep learning and the realistic application of knowledge in real-life contexts. In this way, students have the opportunity to demonstrate skills, knowledge, and attitudes in various settings, individually or in groups. Innovative assessment forms based on new technologies (AI-assisted, XR, etc.) will increasingly be adopted.

## **1.4 Digital innovation in education**

- ***Integrating AI into the learning process***

The rise of generative AI and other intelligent systems offers enormous potential for personalised learning. We will use AI to provide students with more individualised support, for example through digital tutors, adaptive learning platforms, and automated progress analyses. This approach aligns with international trends where AI is used to personalise learning paths and enhance educational efficiency. Students can study at their own pace, receiving targeted suggestions for remediation or further exploration. AI systems, such as adaptive learning technologies, have proven effective in identifying learning needs and offering tailored support. For lecturers, this also means support in detecting learning needs and monitoring large groups of students. The structural embedding and application of learning analytics using AI makes it possible to analyse learning patterns and intervene in a personalised way. We will provide guidance in selecting and using reliable and transparent AI tools, while safeguarding pedagogical and ethical boundaries. AI is not meant to replace human interaction, but rather to serve as a reinforcing tool in the learning process, with the aim of achieving sustainable educational transformation.

### ● ***On-campus education and judicious use of hybrid learning strategies***

Although the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated that fully online education can also yield good results, many lecturers and students still prefer on-campus education. Genuine contact between lecturer and student is essential for achieving learning outcomes. Moreover, the importance of social interaction between students during class sessions cannot be overstated. That's why we remain committed to organising in-person contact moments.

On the other hand, education becomes more flexible and accessible when physical lectures are supplemented with digital components. Blended learning, the combination of online and on-campus education, allows students to learn at their own pace, while creating opportunities for interactive and in-depth learning moments on campus. That's why we want to structurally anchor the judicious use of blended learning and hybrid formats in our educational offering. Think of interactive e-modules, recorded lectures, real-time collaborative spaces, and online practicals. This approach enhances educational accessibility, especially for students with caregiving responsibilities, international mobility, or part-time jobs. To this end, lecturers will be supported in redesigning their teaching with digital tools, with attention to feasibility and pedagogical added value. In this way, we build a learning culture that enables place- and time-independent learning, without overburdening teaching teams, and contribute to high-quality and inclusive education in the digital age.

## **1.5 Support for students with special needs**

### ● ***Inclusive learning environment for a diverse student population***

Students may have specific needs due to their life stage, for example, the transition from secondary to higher education, or due to personal circumstances, such as being an international student, a neurodivergent student, or a student from a diverse background. Our society is increasingly diverse: in ethnic-cultural backgrounds (approx. 30% with a migration background; Statbel, 2022), economic positions (approx. 18% living in poverty or risk of poverty), gender identities and sexual orientations (approx. 10% LGBTQIA+), religious beliefs (approx. 6% Muslim), political convictions (approx. 20% far-right), and more. A warm, inclusive university must ensure that the learning environment is made as accessible as possible for all these students.

We are optimising the range of support measures, aiming to provide students with optimal support while keeping additional administrative and logistical burdens to a minimum. Digital tools can be highly valuable in this regard, such as student tracking systems or instruments for exam accommodations and exam scheduling. We will adopt a dual-track policy: inclusive where possible (via universal design principles, more diversity sensitivity benefits everyone), and target group-specific where necessary. More inclusive teaching can be achieved, for example, by ensuring predictability in lecture structure, including scheduled breaks, paying attention to sensory environments, or using active teaching strategies. A clearly structured Toledo course page with accessible materials and clearly defined roles in group assignments also increases inclusiveness.

More inclusive exams use standardised templates, provide inclusive exam durations, and offer dedicated preparation opportunities for oral exams.

Within this vision, KU Leuven libraries play a key role. They are much more than study spaces - they are inclusive environments for both learning and living. Students find access to study materials and digital resources, but also quiet zones, group workspaces, reading corners, and well-being-oriented areas. In doing so, libraries offer support tailored to diverse study styles and actively contribute to both academic success and psychological well-being.

### ● ***Targeted support and collaboration***

In addition to broad inclusion, we also focus on specific support where needed. An integrated and coordinated approach, in which faculties, Stuvo (student services), MarCom, the International Office, and central policy work together, strengthens both academic success and mental well-being for students with specific needs.

Cooperation between faculties can be of great added value, for example in the development of specific study materials for orienting students who seek remediation. An integrated, coordinated approach promotes both academic achievement and psychological well-being for students with specific needs. In this way, we ensure equal opportunities while enhancing both well-being and academic success.

## 2. Research with impact

*Research is the engine of academic imagination. It turns the unthinkable into conceivable and the unknown into accessible. That is why we are building a research environment where quality, collaboration, and societal relevance are not seen as opposites, but as mutually reinforcing. Strong disciplinary work remains the foundation: without firm roots, there can be no fruitful cross-pollination. From that basis, we want to encourage high-quality, creative forms of interdisciplinary collaboration that enable both scientific breakthroughs and the courage to address societal challenges. In doing so, we aim to maximise both scientific and societal impact.*

*With a well-considered model of basic funding and strategic investments in research infrastructure, we give researchers the space to take risks, build long-term projects, and allow research to develop at its own pace. We strengthen team science through shared infrastructure, interfaculty networks, and joint research spaces, not only physically, but intellectually as well.*

*In addition, we are committed to an open and forward-looking research culture that embraces a wide range of practices: from AI-supported analysis to open science, from citizen science to international co-creation. Research requires not only time but also breathing room and support. By aligning the rhythm of research more closely with the academic calendar, investing in support for external project applications, science communication, policy engagement, and structurally reinforcing engagement-driven research, we create space for what ultimately matters most: deep reflection, scientific imagination, and meaningful societal impact.*

### 2.1 Disciplinary foundations and growth of interdisciplinarity

- ***Strong disciplines as a foundation for interdisciplinarity***

Interdisciplinary research flourishes best when rooted in robust disciplinary foundations. KU Leuven will continue to promote the development of core expertise in all scientific fields. Strong disciplines offer the methodological depth, terminological precision, and analytical sharpness needed to enable productive collaboration across disciplinary boundaries. We aim for a balanced allocation of resources, ensuring that smaller disciplines also have sufficient room to deepen their unique expertise. This is essential, as interdisciplinarity without a solid disciplinary basis often leads to superficial integration and reduced scientific impact. Disciplinary excellence and interdisciplinarity are not opposites, but mutually reinforcing pillars of scientific progress.

- ***Balance between basic and targeted research***

We support a healthy balance between research that generates fundamental knowledge and research with clear societal applications. Basic research drives future breakthroughs and provides the theoretical framework and technological foundation upon which innovation is built. At the same time, applied research often generates immediate impact, especially when conducted in collaboration with societal actors. We also support initiatives that bridge both forms of research,

such as valorisation platforms, translational infrastructure, and living labs where researchers collaborate with businesses, governments, or citizens. This requires a well-balanced flow of funding, internally through the Special Research Fund and externally through Flemish, Belgian, European, and other funding sources. Financial autonomy and academic freedom are essential prerequisites for excellent research.

### ● ***Strengthening collaborative research***

We want to structurally support collaboration within and across disciplines by encouraging and valuing various forms of team research. Team science encompasses not only multidisciplinary collaboration, but also disciplinary research teams in which professors, (early-career) researchers, instrument specialists, and other support staff work closely around shared research themes. Team science enhances the quality and impact of research through complementarity and collective expertise. Collaborative environments with clear roles and good communication (e.g., regarding authorship) also reduce the risk of integrity issues ([Aubert Bonn, De Vries & Pinxten 2022](#)).

Through targeted calls, matchmaking events, and central coordination, we aim to foster the formation of research teams with complementary roles. Support extends beyond funding: we build networks, create digital collaboration platforms, and pool expertise to better support interfaculty projects. KU Leuven Institutes are ideally suited to take the lead in this. Training and support in team dynamics are also essential to making collaboration sustainable and effective. Strong examples of collaborative research, in all its forms, will be actively highlighted to encourage uptake across the research community. By valuing team science, we build an inclusive and forward-looking research practice. Pooling resources from basic funding offers excellent opportunities to initiate or consolidate collaborations that teams find most meaningful or productive.



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## 2.2 Research grants and funding

### ● *Balanced basic funding for research*

We aim for a gradual but clear transition to a basic funding system for ZAP (Independent Academic Staff) members. This model acknowledges that in the current competitive allocation of resources, the role of luck in securing a project is too large, particularly because many excellent applications are submitted while available funding remains limited. The high quality of applications and applicants is further evidenced by the relatively high success rates of external project proposals. KU Leuven's long history of project funding through the Research Council provides a wealth of data on the average cost of projects across disciplines and the typical profile of successful applicants. These data are extremely valuable for developing robust criteria for basic funding and ensuring its optimal use.

Basic funding has several advantages: it (i) encourages the strategic use of resources through collaboration among researchers; (ii) creates space for better and more thoughtful external project applications; (iii) allows us to maintain specific calls (e.g., for international collaboration or infrastructure); and (iv) reduces the pressure of constant competition, without compromising quality.

We will implement a system in which researchers submit a short project proposal that undergoes minimal screening. For more senior researchers, this is combined with a thorough, discipline-specific review of their past research performance. Qualitative elements will also count, such as mentoring and/or societal impact. This approach ensures a level of quality control without adhering to the current competitive logic. It allows the Research Coordination Office and the Research Council to shift toward more substantive work and provide better support to researchers, for instance, in applying for external projects, outreach, and science communication.

By choosing a system of substantial basic funding for research-active ZAP members, we aim to create a stable, predictable, and transparent funding structure that enables long-term research planning and encourages scientific risk-taking without being perpetually dependent on competitive calls. Structural basic funding contributes to academic autonomy and ensures continuity of solid and fruitful research lines, even when external funding temporarily lapses. Researchers retain full autonomy over the direction of their research agendas, an essential condition for scientific progress. At the same time, we acknowledge that research costs can vary significantly between disciplines. Therefore, we will allow for a degree of differentiation, recognising the higher structural costs of research in more financially demanding fields, without compromising the research freedom or undervaluing contributions from less capital-intensive disciplines.

Not all Special Research Fund resources will be allocated to basic funding, so that calls for infrastructure, institutional support, and internationalisation projects can be maintained. We will also continue to invest in initiatives that promote research impact, such as valorisation platforms, interfaculty collaborations, and support for international project proposals. In this way, we combine stability with openness to external opportunities, without forcing all researchers into a competitive framework. This approach aligns with the international call for a renewed appreciation of curiosity-driven research as a motor of scientific and societal breakthroughs.



### ● ***Alignment with the academic calendar***

Calls for funding and deadlines for internal grants will be better aligned with the academic year. We aim to avoid proposal deadlines during exam periods, semester starts, or other teaching peak times. This scheduling adjustment promotes a more realistic working rhythm for academic staff and helps prevent the overlap of teaching and research duties. Deadlines that fall just before or during intensive academic periods lead to increased stress and procrastination, negatively impacting both the quality of submissions and researchers' well-being. Therefore, we will introduce an updated annual calendar for research support, with deadlines announced well in advance and synchronised with the academic cycle. Research coordinators and department chairs will be actively involved in this planning. Additionally, we will engage with Flemish funding bodies such as FWO and VLAIO to adopt similar practices. This alignment will improve the feasibility of funding applications, enhance the quality of submitted proposals, and contribute to a fairer distribution of workload within research teams.

## **2.3 Research support and infrastructure**

### ● ***Investing in research infrastructure and shared use***

We are committed to modernising, centralising, and promoting the shared use of research infrastructure. This includes not only physical equipment, but also supporting IT infrastructure, data storage, and digital services. We will develop a central platform that provides transparent information on the use, availability, and reservation of scientific equipment. With real-time reservation systems and usage statistics, facilities can be used more efficiently, and access can be optimised for all researchers. Infrastructure will be shared based on clear agreements regarding access, usage, and cost-sharing, leading to substantial efficiency gains.

Collaborations with strategic partners such as UZ Leuven, UPC, VIB, and the university colleges within the KU Leuven Association require clear governance structures and contractual agreements concerning ownership, maintenance, and fair financial contributions. KU Leuven guarantees that researchers, regardless of faculty or institution, have equal access to state-of-the-art facilities. This promotes not only cost-effectiveness but also cooperation within and beyond the university, including with industry and international partners.

### ● ***Promoting an open and sustainable research culture***

We are explicitly committed to fostering an open and sustainable scientific practice. Open science, guided by the FAIR principles, is increasingly recognised as essential for transparency, reusability, and societal impact. We actively promote the sharing of data, methodologies, preprints, and publications via open access channels, thereby also encouraging data reuse. To reduce administrative burden, we will provide intuitive data repositories, automatic linking with ORCID, and clear legal frameworks for data sharing and licensing. We will invest in support via open science coaches. A combination of support, recognition, and cultural change is essential to embedding openness in academic practice.

At the same time, we promote research integrity in a broader sense, going beyond openness alone. We will introduce a peer mentoring system on research integrity, where experienced researchers engage in dialogue with junior colleagues about real-world dilemmas, for example, regarding authorship, data selection, or collaboration with external partners. We will encourage researchers to explicitly articulate key decisions and uncertainties in project proposals, for instance through integrity paragraphs or ethical logbooks. We will also continue to invest in responsible leadership by training supervisors to foster safe research environments in which mistakes can be discussed without repercussions.

- ***Greater focus on outreach***

We encourage researchers to share their findings beyond academia, through science communication, policy engagement, citizen science, or collaboration with civil society organisations. Open science also means being open to society. We will therefore strengthen support for outreach, training in public communication, and strategic networks with the media and societal partners. This approach not only increases the impact of our research but also strengthens public trust in science and fosters a culture rooted in sustainability, transparency, and collaboration.

- ***An interfaculty centre***

We propose the establishment of an interfaculty centre that unites three core themes: science communication, inter- and multidisciplinary collaboration, and research integrity. Each of these areas will be supported by a BOF-ZAP mandate, one from each science group. These BOF-ZAP professors are not only academic experts but also serve as active bridges to the broader university community. They will take a leading role in strengthening structural initiatives, mentoring early-career researchers, and shaping innovative policies.

In science communication, this may involve developing formats for public dialogue, supporting researchers in their public engagement, collaborating with museums and media, policy participation, and engagement-driven research (co-creation, participatory research, citizen science, etc.).

This structure offers an excellent opportunity to combine existing strengths. The centre can integrate closely with Metaforum, which has extensive experience in organising reflection and interfaculty exchange, and with LIAS (Leuven Institute for Advanced Study), which provides expertise and infrastructure for long-term thematic deepening. By involving BOF-ZAP professors in these working groups, we create a sustainable interaction between academic policy, public communication, and interdisciplinary collaboration. The Vesalius Museum could also play a meaningful role here, as a place where science, heritage, and the public come together. In the most recent BOF-ZAP round, a mandate was foreseen for the development and expansion of the Vesalius Museum. The centre should grow into an anchor point within the university, where multidisciplinary research, integrity, communication, and societal responsibility reinforce each other.

- ***Systematically applying AI in research***

There is growing international consensus that AI not only boosts efficiency but can also enhance inclusivity by lowering barriers to scientific writing or data analysis. We are developing an AI policy

tailored to researchers, bringing together ethical principles, sustainability, practical guidelines, and technical support. By using AI intelligently, we can improve the efficiency and quality of research, reduce administrative burdens, and enhance our international competitiveness as a leading research university.

We want to give researchers access to generative AI and other smart tools that accelerate and improve scientific work, from programming support and statistical analysis to literature reviews and academic writing. We will negotiate institutional licenses with providers such as OpenAI to provide researchers with safe and ethical access to powerful AI platforms. These tools will be integrated into KU Leuven's digital environments, with specific attention to privacy, data security, and intellectual property. The ecological impact of AI use also requires careful monitoring. We will provide training, guidelines, and ethical frameworks on the use of AI. Transparency about AI use, proper citation, and critical reflection on AI output are essential to safeguarding academic integrity.

### 3. Social engagement

*We want to be a university that not only innovates, but also inspires. In a world facing complex transitions - technological, environmental, and social- we consciously embrace our role as a societal partner. Innovations in artificial intelligence, digital education support, and sustainable development will both challenge and strengthen us in the years to come. We will use these advancements as a lever to deepen civic engagement and provide structural responses to the needs of today and tomorrow.*

*Our university is rooted in society and actively collaborates with policymakers, schools, companies, healthcare institutions, civil society organisations, and cultural actors. Our alumni and their associations are also indispensable bridge-builders. Through community projects, knowledge sharing, and public engagement, we aim to position KU Leuven as a university that places its academic excellence at the service of social progress.*

*In doing so, we are building a KU Leuven that expands its impact: by embedding new forms of teaching, research, and collaboration within a broad societal mission founded on inclusion, solidarity, and sustainability.*

#### 3.1 A wider role for KU Leuven Engage

The new rectoral service KU Leuven Engage brings together efforts related to diversity policy, sustainability policy, and service learning. This is an important development in recent years and will enhance the effectiveness of these policy domains. This consolidation also creates opportunities to consider societal engagement at KU Leuven in a broader way. Many KU Leuven staff members feel deeply connected to the university as a socially engaged employer and as an actor in active solidarity for a sustainable and inclusive society.

We want to recognise this "engagement" by offering staff the opportunity, during working hours, to participate in socially relevant activities, for example, by allowing them to do two days of volunteer work per year that aligns with the university's social engagement mission. The feasibility of such an initiative will need to be examined, including through consultation with supervisors. We also want to support initiatives that aim to connect teaching, research, and engagement. At present, there are still many barriers to overcome in engagement-driven research and education, including legal and HR-related issues when integrating experts by experience into teaching and research contexts.

For many years, KU Leuven has awarded prizes for valuable research and excellent teaching. In the same spirit, we would like to introduce an annual award for societal engagement, with the possibility of highlighting different themes each year that are related to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The KU Leuven alumni network also offers opportunities to further connect the university and society around key social issues and to increase the impact of KU Leuven Engage, for example, by spotlighting inspiring alumni who are committed to inclusion, diversity, sustainability, climate change, global citizenship, and more.

And why not appoint, in a future policy team, a Vice Rector for Engage, someone who integrates responsibilities for inclusion and sustainability with a focus on the SDGs? Someone who actively connects the many engaged staff and student networks with external partners to increase impact in an increasingly challenging world.

## **3.2 Diversity, inclusion and social justice**

### **● *A soft landing for all students***

KU Leuven ensures a welcoming start for all students from the very first point of contact. This is currently achieved through the organisation of inclusive induction days during which (international) students not only receive practical information about classes, study materials, and administrative processes, but can also participate in workshops tailored to their needs, such as academic skills, campus orientation, and introductions to fellow students, mentors, and support staff. This approach not only promotes social integration but also strengthens self-confidence and academic engagement during the transition to higher education.

We want to evaluate whether this introduction is sufficiently adapted to different target groups: first-generation students, neurodivergent students, students with a migration background, students whose home language is not Dutch, students with disabilities, and international students. We aim to further develop the reception approach based on the principle of "value affirmation".

Moreover, we currently organise many separate processes for different target groups, for example in the context of educational and exam accommodations. This requires significant effort from lecturers, ombudspersons, and study counsellors. By implementing universal design, combined with targeted group policies where needed, we enhance inclusion and promote higher-quality

education for all, resulting in reduced workload for those responsible for facilitating education and exams.

In collaboration with student associations, we will further develop peer mentoring as an effective tool for social integration, navigating cultural differences, and building academic resilience. We will ensure that students have sufficient or additional time available during the academic year to participate in small-group sessions and peer support initiatives within their programmes, facilitated by teaching assistants and mentors. These individuals serve as approachable contacts for subject-related questions, study planning, and psychosocial well-being.

### ● ***Diversity-competent teaching teams***

A growing body of scientific evidence from both within and outside Belgium highlights the key role the individual lecturers play in creating inclusive learning environments and promoting socially just higher education. Recent studies have demonstrated that students feel more at home when lecturers exhibit diversity-responsive attitudes and use inclusive teaching methods. These students also achieve higher average scores and better academic progress, as objectively reflected in their results. These improved outcomes are not limited to first-generation students, neurodivergent students, or students with a migration background, but are also observed among white middle-class students. In short, all students benefit from a “window to the world”, a (safer) lecture hall where critical reflection and personal growth are encouraged, and where content is delivered through a broader and more diverse array of didactic methods. Diversity responsiveness improves the quality of education.

That’s why we are developing structurally embedded professional development programmes for lecturers focused on inclusive teaching and diversity competence. Integration of various programmes (e.g., on migration, first-generation students, neurodiversity, gender, and worldview) will be a priority. We are investing in one-year reflective learning trajectories spread across several sessions. During these trajectories, lecturers apply what they learn to their own teaching practices, with attention to language use, assessment formats, interaction patterns, and curriculum design. These trajectories will be led by KU Leuven Engage, in collaboration with the Education Policy Service, providing coaching, good practices, and technical support. Following evaluation of the current pilot phase, which focuses on first-year bachelor courses, we plan to expand the trajectories to include other aspects of diversity and to embed them into the standard professional development offer.

Each faculty will integrate inclusive teaching into its curriculum plans and facilitate these professionalisation trajectories, organise peer learning, and follow up on reflection sessions. KU Leuven will create a central database of inspiring practices and encourage team exchanges via faculty-level education meetings. We will also explore the development of a validated certification system for inclusive teaching as part of the educational portfolio.

### ● ***Inclusive and diversity-competent curricula***

A future-proof curriculum reflects the diversity of society and prepares students to take on social responsibility in a complex, multicultural world. We are committed to supporting programmes in

rethinking their curricula by actively incorporating inclusion, representation, and social justice. Programmes that wish to do so will receive guidance on foundational curriculum questions: whose voices and perspectives are included, how knowledge is framed within power dynamics and historically embedded structures, and what skills and attitudes are required for responsible professional practice in a diverse society.

We promote innovative approaches such as Service Learning, where students address social issues in collaboration with external stakeholders, and interdisciplinary projects that explore themes like diversity, justice, safety, stability, and governmental failure. We also support the revision of syllabi and textbooks: lecturers will be helped to diversify and critically contextualise course content. This support will be embedded within faculty education committees, where practical tools, templates, and evaluation criteria will be made available. We also encourage student participation in curriculum design and evaluation, in line with the principle of co-creation and valuing experiential expertise.

### **3.3 Sustainability as a structural mission of the university**

#### **● *KU Leuven at the forefront of sustainability***

We are committed to making the entire operation and infrastructure of the university more sustainable. KU Leuven aims to remain at the forefront of sustainable transition in the academic world, and is therefore investing in an integrated sustainability plan focused on climate neutrality, circular economy, and biodiversity conservation and restoration. This plan builds on the roadmap for climate neutrality that was developed in collaboration with various segments of the university. As a guiding framework, we adopt international systems such as the Sustainability Tracking, Assessment & Rating System (STARS), which allows universities to systematically measure, adjust, and benchmark their sustainability performance against international standards.

Sustainability is a particularly important theme for a university that wants to be future-proof. Sustainability extends beyond ecological concerns, requiring social responsibility and good governance (ESG – Environmental, Social, and Governance). ESG brings together environment, human resources, social aspects, and organisational governance into one cohesive framework.

Based on STARS and recent research on campus sustainability, we define concrete and measurable targets for energy consumption, mobility, waste management, water management, and efficient infrastructure use. These KPIs are linked to a transparent reporting system, making progress in sustainability publicly accessible. This promotes both accountability and collective involvement.

KU Leuven's role as a property manager receives special attention. The university owns a significant real estate portfolio and manages major green areas in and around Leuven. In line with the Leuven Climate Contract, KU Leuven is committed to scaling up depaving and greening, through green buffers, depaving projects, and public parks that also support climate adaptation. In collaboration with the city of Leuven, the climate adaptation task force, and partners like Leuven 2030, we are developing a region-wide depaving strategy linked to water management and biodiversity.

We are also accelerating efforts in construction and renovation. KU Leuven embeds circular construction as a core principle in its real estate policy. This means that in new construction and renovations, we deliberately choose materials that are reusable, recyclable, and locally produced, and we systematically apply urban mining, the recovery of construction materials from existing structures. Together with partners such as Atelier Circuler and the Material Bank Leuven, we explore how our scale can be used to further professionalise circular building practices.

These ambitions are supported by a robust internal structure. We are expanding the Green Office model as a participatory platform where students and staff collaborate on local sustainability projects. Within KU Leuven's internal structure, sustainability coordinators are appointed per region (West, East, Brussels), ensuring that sustainability initiatives are locally rooted and coordinated university-wide. This multi-layered system strengthens the culture of sustainability in the university's daily operations.

### ● ***Sustainability as a cross-cutting theme in education and research***

Sustainability is globally recognised as one of the greatest challenges of our time. We view it as both an academic and societal duty to structurally integrate this challenge into the university's educational and research missions. Not as an add-on theme, but as a cross-cutting principle that permeates curricula, pedagogy, and research culture.

To achieve this ambition, KU Leuven is developing a faculty-supported and context-sensitive framework for sustainability competencies. Rather than imposing a centrally mandated learning path, we support programmes in integrating sustainability into their curricula in ways tailored to their specific disciplines and teaching practices. Students will not only acquire knowledge about sustainability, but also develop skills in systems thinking, transdisciplinarity, climate justice, and ethical decision-making. Educational initiatives such as interdisciplinary modules, practical projects, service learning, and socially relevant bachelor theses will be further supported and professionalised.

Such integration does not happen automatically. We will therefore offer training and support pathways for teachers who want to embed sustainability in their teaching. Through peer learning networks, workshops, and model modules on eco-pedagogy and ethical systems thinking, we create a community of practice where experiences are shared and strengthened. Existing initiatives such as the [Network for Sustainable Education](#), MOOCs on sustainability, [UnaVEx](#), and the course unit Global Challenges will be further developed, supported by KU Leuven Engage and the Sustainability Council. Where possible, these initiatives will be structurally embedded, for example via an interdisciplinary programme oversight committee for cross-cutting course units.

Sustainability will also play a more prominent role in research policy. KU Leuven encourages reflection on the social and ecological impact of research projects and is revising evaluation criteria to explicitly value projects contributing to sustainable transitions in climate, health, energy, ethics, and inclusion. Within the broader valorisation policy, we recognise not only economic but also social and ecological innovations, ensuring that impact on people and the planet is not undervalued.



Collaborations with external partners such as Leuven.AI, VIB, Imec, and VITO enable us to harness technological innovations like AI for sustainable applications, with attention to energy consumption, data responsibility, and societal relevance. By treating sustainability not only as content but also as a pedagogical and research principle, we are building a university prepared for tomorrow's challenges, while already taking responsibility today in shaping a more just and liveable world.

- ***Well-being, healthy lifestyles, and an active campus***

Sustainability includes not only ecological goals, but also the promotion of well-being and health on campus. We aim to further develop KU Leuven into a movement-friendly university, focusing on bicycle-friendly and safe infrastructure, ample rest and activity zones, and initiatives that promote physical activity during the work and study day (such as movement breaks and outdoor work environments). We also promote healthy and sustainable food choices: our restaurants and vending machines will offer transparent information on origin, nutritional value, and allergens. We are working on an inclusive alcohol and drug policy focused on prevention, awareness, and a safe party culture, in collaboration with student associations and wellness partners. These initiatives not only enhance the health of our community but also contribute to a sustainable living environment in which everyone can thrive.

### **3.4 Culture and heritage**

- ***An invitation to cultural participation***

Culture is a particularly multifaceted domain that is expressed in many aspects of our university. A future cultural policy for KU Leuven must recognise this diversity, acknowledge the important steps taken in the past, and proceed with a clear focus. Acknowledging the broad spectrum of cultural activity also includes the awareness that culture is an integral part of our university, specifically, the insight that research and teaching are embedded in a wider context and society.

For students in particular, their time at the university offers a unique opportunity to become acquainted with numerous cultural activities or to develop them further. Our Culture Office offers a programme that gives students a genuine chance to participate. Through initiatives such as the 'Culture Hour', Museum Night, support for theatre (Interfaculty Theatre Festival), visual arts (including Ithaka), and especially the support of vibrant music ensembles (University Symphony Orchestra, University Wind Orchestra, Leuven University Choir...), a broad network is created that offers every student real opportunities for Bildung.

In the next policy period, we will actively work to make the rich cultural offering in Leuven more accessible on our campuses. Taking into account the specific identity of each campus, it should be possible to make real progress in integrating this cultural offering within the broader KU Leuven community.

Experiencing culture through participation is a great asset of university life, yet further steps are possible, particularly by encouraging creativity among students (and staff). In recent years, the Bac

Art Lab has grown into a true arts workshop with limited resources. Students with artistic ambitions can apply for a residency or engage in new forms of education, and their artistic expressions are showcased in this unique (heritage) building. The Bac Art Lab serves as a stage that is increasingly recognised and deserving of recognition. It is a concrete form in which art and science take shape within the university, and it shows in a striking way how the arts can enrich academic practice. An associated Faculty of Arts is not a foreign element but brings the university closer to a truly complete form of knowledge. The further development of the Bac Art Lab therefore deserves strong support, to build on the art-science connection that was reinvigorated during the 600th anniversary celebrations.

Through the Culture Committee and its two subcommittees, Academic Heritage and Contemporary Art, many strong impulses have already been given to KU Leuven's cultural policy (including the acquisition of an impressive contemporary art collection). These committees will of course continue to play an important role in shaping future cultural policy and advising the university's leadership.

### ● ***Focus on heritage***

An institution with a 600-year history naturally possesses a wealth of heritage. Not only the old buildings, continually updated and made more sustainable by our technical services, but also extensive collections that many envy: our archives, libraries, and scientific collections.

In the coming years, several important decisions will need to be made regarding heritage. For our movable heritage, a master plan is required for the valorisation and preservation of these collections. Such a plan must include a collection policy framework, that is, criteria for selection and preservation, as well as appropriate locations for storage. Another key task will be the continued digitisation of our archives, both the digitisation of existing materials (with suitable metadata) and the preservation of digital-born materials.

The master plan should also address collective management, seeking a balance between centralised and decentralised approaches. Integration across campuses remains incomplete: how will we handle the archives of faculties, campuses, and the central administration in the future? The growing public interest in heritage will drive renewed attention to the accessibility of our collections. The Vesalius Museum is an important first step in this regard, but further investments are needed, for example to make the zoological and natural science collections more accessible.

One illustrative example: Arenberg Castle is simultaneously a heritage building, a site for education, research, and governance, and a repository of unique historical artefacts. It also opens its doors to the public. How can we responsibly reconcile these three functions?

In the field of heritage, the challenge will be to bundle the extensive expertise within KU Leuven and seek models to create a platform where academic research and service experience (including technical services) come together. Experience in recent years has shown that this is a domain where teaching, research, and public service can go hand in hand in ways that could position KU Leuven as a European and international leader. Programmes and research from all academic groups, as well as the knowledge and experience of our various services, find here a unique field of action.

KU Leuven also plays a unique and important role in the broader cultural sector in relation to the City of Leuven, numerous cultural actors (such as STUK), and the surrounding region. Many cultural initiatives have had their fruitful beginnings within the university and have since followed their own paths. Maintaining dialogue with all cultural and heritage players will require new impulses.

### **3.5 The university is an investment for the future**

The university does not operate in a political vacuum. The political context in which we have operated in recent years has become increasingly challenging. The attitude of the Flemish government toward higher education raises some concerns, not only due to the lack of much-needed investments, but also due to a growing tendency toward mistrust, control, and austerity measures that strike at the core of our academic mission.

The under-indexation of operating funds leads to a real erosion of our resources, as does the fact that government grants are not keeping pace with the growing student population. Year after year, we are expected to do more with less. This impacts researchers, educators, student support services, and administrative staff alike. At the same time, we are seeing new proposals that affect the employment conditions and pension rights of academic staff, often introduced without consultation.

The rhetoric surrounding English-language programmes is often simplistic and overlooks the reality and added value of an international academic community. The world does not stop at the language border. International students and researchers enrich our university - and the Flemish region - and bring in valuable perspectives.

As rector, I want to send a clear message in this context: the university is not a cost, but an investment in the future. I will strongly defend what our community needs: sufficient resources, academic freedom, international openness, and a respectful dialogue with the government. I will do so not by polarising, but by clearly and consistently articulating the value of a strong university.

### **3.6 Academic care with societal impact**

The academic healthcare institutions UZ Leuven and UPC KU Leuven, together with the university, form a unique cluster where scientific innovation, clinical practice, and education mutually reinforce one another. The existing model of integrated collaboration in education, research, societal service, and clinical care is well-established within KU Leuven's overarching structure and anchored through strong partnerships. The societal impact on Flemish and Belgian healthcare is therefore significant.

KU Leuven remains committed to an intensive and mutually strengthening partnership with UZ Leuven and UPC KU Leuven. By strategically promoting collaboration at multiple levels, from governance to data use and training, the university aims to make a sustainable contribution to the healthcare of the future. A key focus is the encouragement of interdisciplinary research and

multidisciplinary innovation, also involving expertise from the Science and Technology and Humanities groups.

The partnership between KU Leuven and UZ Leuven is a cornerstone of academic hospital care in Flanders and is of great value for education, research, innovation, and clinical care. The university seeks to further strengthen this partnership by investing in shared infrastructure, talent development, and impactful innovation. KU Leuven and UZ Leuven continue to pursue a coordinated approach to support services, especially in IT systems, internal management tools, and career development for clinicians with academic responsibilities. The university will contribute its expertise in data analysis, AI, and data ethics to new initiatives involving UZ Leuven's data access. The creation of a data strategy group focused on academic needs and clinical innovation is being considered, in collaboration with VIB, Imec, and relevant KU Leuven centres (such as Leuven.AI) for AI applications in healthcare.

In terms of education, we will respond to the rising demand for healthcare professionals by working closely with university colleges within the KU Leuven Association on internships and curricula. The results of the Metaforum project "Biomedical Actors of the Future" will serve to update curricula, with a focus on innovative learning paths related to interprofessional collaboration, digital health, and patient participation.

New ZAP members with a primary clinical appointment at UZ Leuven and a significant research component need sufficient base funding and tailored mentoring models that allow for academic growth alongside clinical excellence. Together with UZ Leuven, we aim to develop a career policy that offers clear growth paths and recognition for clinical-academic bridge profiles. High-quality internships at UZ Leuven and UPC are critical to KU Leuven's programmes. This requires coordinated internship planning across faculties and support for internship supervisors (training, time investment, recognition).

The collaboration between KU Leuven and UPC Z.org KU Leuven is becoming increasingly important as a core component of KU Leuven's academic and social commitment to mental healthcare. This collaboration, complementing strong ties with UZ Leuven, represents a unique synergy between education, research, care, and social well-being.

UPC Z.org KU Leuven is a key partner of the Biomedical Sciences Group and the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, with many collaborations in integrated research programmes and professional internship opportunities. The growing complexity and prevalence of mental health issues require a sustainable influx of well-trained professionals. KU Leuven and UPC Z.org KU Leuven are committed to expanding the capacity of mental health education. While growing student numbers pose challenges, they also offer opportunities to connect academic talent to mental healthcare early on.

UPC staff membership in the Leuven Brain Institute provides the opportunity to further strengthen the academic profile of UPC Z.org KU Leuven. Combining expertise in neuroscience, psychiatry, psychology, and technology, and focusing on translational research, directly impacts patient care. UPC Z.org KU Leuven and KU Leuven continue to build strategic networks with external partners, both within and outside the healthcare sector. By actively participating in regional, national, and

international networks, both institutions can amplify their impact, accelerate innovation, and realise joint projects that address societal challenges.

The academic growth objectives and social mission of UPC require continued investment in people, infrastructure, and strategic planning. Together, we must continue advocating to the government the importance of these needs.

### **3.7 Partnerships with society**

#### **● *Innovation and entrepreneurship***

KU Leuven Research & Development (LRD) is the link between fundamental academic research and societal application, and has a global reputation as a technology transfer unit for university research results. LRD supports researchers who wish to collaborate with industrial, economic, and societal partners based on their own findings, including contract research, intellectual property support, licensing, and spin-off creation. LRD facilitates partnerships with external actors such as companies, governments, and civil society organisations to achieve societal and economic impact. The focus is shifting from a purely technological transfer model to a broader approach that also includes social, ethical, and ecological valorisation.

LRD aims to support researchers early in their process to clearly formulate impact objectives from the outset and identify valorisation opportunities. Importantly, this support should not be limited to economic exploitation, but must also explicitly integrate social innovation and sustainable development.

LRD is also taking on a stronger role in interfaculty initiatives around major societal themes such as sustainability, health, digitalisation, and ethics. Collaboration with research groups and societal partners is being expanded, with space for experimental collaboration models such as living labs, open innovation platforms, and co-creation with citizen initiatives.

While cooperation with LRD is going well, there is always room for improvement. Opportunities for valorisation are still often missed, particularly because young researchers do not prioritise this early in their projects or careers. KU Leuven KICK seeks to address this by making entrepreneurship accessible to all students, including PhD students. We aim to strengthen this initiative and ensure that every student is aware of the opportunities offered. Through KICK, we are building an ecosystem that fosters entrepreneurial skills: creative thinking, initiative, collaboration, and addressing societal challenges. Through bootcamps, student start-ups, and interdisciplinary hackathons, students are given the chance to turn ideas into action. These initiatives focus on the circular economy, social innovation, and technological entrepreneurship. We aim to realise this through collaboration between faculties, KU Leuven KICK, and KU Leuven Engage. This positions KU Leuven as a university that not only transmits knowledge but also activates entrepreneurship.

#### **● *KU Leuven as a partner in local and urban development***

Our university positions itself as an active and sustainable partner in the spatial, social, and cultural development of its cities and regions. Through structural collaboration agreements with city

governments, welfare organisations, cultural actors, and knowledge institutions, the university seeks to contribute to policies on mobility, affordable housing (including student housing), climate adaptation, health, and cultural participation. In several campus cities, Living Labs will be established where students, researchers, and city actors can experiment together with innovative solutions for societal challenges. Leuven MindGate will be an important partner in this development, especially in identifying opportunities and business partners.

The university not only provides scientific expertise but also actively involves students through practice-based assignments, internships, and Service Learning initiatives. This approach increases students' civic engagement and impacts the development of civic competencies and local policy formation. Faculties are encouraged to embed this social engagement in curricula through interdisciplinary projects and assignments based on real challenges in the city. This contributes to the societal relevance of higher education, KU Leuven's visibility in its local contexts, and the social innovation capacity of the city and its broader environment.

### ● ***KU Leuven as loyal association partner***

For more than twenty years, KU Leuven has been building a sustainable and meaningful collaboration with its partner institutions within the KU Leuven Association. This close partnership is embedded in multiple campuses across Flanders and Brussels and represents a unique asset in the Flemish higher education landscape. The association allows for high-quality higher education to be widely accessible, close to students, and deeply embedded in local contexts.

The strength of the association lies in the complementarity of its institutions and in a shared ambition: to educate students, generate societal impact, and support excellent research. Today, we work together across the entire spectrum of healthcare professions, from professional bachelor's degrees to academic master's degrees, and we strengthen teacher education through joint trajectories, such as the educational master's in primary education. Together, we develop bridging programmes that facilitate transitions between different educational forms and levels, and we jointly invest in student recruitment and transition efforts through info days, connections with secondary schools, and participation in job fairs (e.g., <https://www.flandersjobfairs.be/nl>). We also continue to build integrated student support services via Stuvo (student services), particularly in mental well-being, nutrition, and housing.

The collaboration goes beyond education. Interdisciplinary student teams such as [Formula Electric Belgium](#) bring students from different institutions together around innovation and sustainability. Didactic infrastructure, such as laboratories, simulation centres, and collaborative spaces, is shared and strengthens our joint educational practice. Collaboration in research is also increasing among association partners, with joint projects and shared infrastructure generating synergy and economies of scale.

The presence of multiple institutions on a single campus offers unique opportunities to harness the coexistence and collaboration of students and staff as a pedagogical and social asset. Pooling strengths is especially needed when reconfiguring campus spaces, for example, as with the Living Campus building on Campus De Nayer. Campuses can host joint cultural events or initiate and support service-learning projects. The specific identity of each campus can also be made more

visible and reinforced for the wider public, for example, by installing a wall of fame, creating meeting spaces for students, teachers, and local residents, or launching social initiatives.

At the same time, we continue to actively connect with local stakeholders. Collaboration with cities and municipalities, schools, businesses, and civil society organisations is essential for the association to make a sustainable contribution to regional development. Our campuses act as anchor points for knowledge, innovation, and social engagement. Together with our partner institutions, we want to further embrace and strengthen this role, with respect for everyone's unique character and in a spirit of mutual trust. For instance, each campus could designate a person responsible for campus-wide external communication.

For us, the KU Leuven Association is not a sum of institutions but a shared project with a common future vision. In that spirit, we aim in the coming years to pursue further policy alignment, shared strategic thinking, and a visible positioning of the association as a coherent and powerful actor in Flemish higher education.

### ● ***KU Leuven alumni – yesterday shapes tomorrow***

For many alumni, KU Leuven has been of lasting significance in shaping their careers, personalities, networks, and interests. This experience creates a strong emotional bond, forming the basis for lifelong and reciprocal engagement. In recent years, we have actively worked to strengthen this relationship, through the development of a participatory alumni policy in collaboration with Alumni Lovanienses, the recognition of alumni circles, and the creation of the digital platform KU Leuven Connect. Thanks to this network, which now includes sixteen international alumni chapters, alumni remain intellectually and professionally connected to their alma mater.

The result is a vibrant alumni community that serves as ambassadors for the university, opens doors for students and researchers, and actively contributes through mentoring, sector insights, and fundraising. During the 600th anniversary celebration of KU Leuven, this connection became very visible and tangible worldwide.

In the coming years, we want to embed this community even more deeply in university policy. We will do so by linking alumni relations more closely to domains such as research, internationalisation, education, and lifelong learning. We will invest in advanced digital tools that allow personalised interaction and better serve the diversity of generations and backgrounds. In a time of growing societal distrust of science and innovation, we see alumni as valuable bridge-builders between the university and society.

We will involve alumni in providing career support to current students, including internships, advice, and mentoring. Furthermore, we increasingly view alumni as a target audience for lifelong learning offerings, and also as contributors to its content. We will continue to invest in a strong structure and initiatives that engage alumni with strategic themes, from science communication to societal impact. In this way, KU Leuven continues to build a global network that brings together knowledge, experience, and commitment in service of society.





### 3.8 Education as a social lever

- ***A future-oriented teacher training***

We are strengthening our commitment to teacher training programmes at the master's level, in close collaboration with the KU Leuven School of Education and the KU Leuven Association. In a world marked by rapid societal, technological, and ecological changes, the role of the teacher is more crucial than ever. At KU Leuven, we aim to respond to the growing need for well-trained teachers who can serve as bridges between science, classroom practice, and society. To that end, we will continue our policy that recognises subject expertise and subject didactics as distinctive features of the master's profile, while also investing in structures that enable programmes to further develop and gain strength and transparency.

First and foremost, we support the continued internal development of the KU Leuven School of Education to efficiently manage processes in an interfaculty context. After years of reforms in teacher training, it is time to settle into a clear, strong, and agile organisation within KU Leuven. We distinguish between further streamlining of educational administrative and procedural aspects on the one hand, and the valorisation of the domain expertise present within the programmes on the other. We strive for clarity for students and feasibility for staff by reducing administrative burdens, while maintaining our didactic expertise, which is unique in Flanders. Organisationally, we facilitate the further development of blended learning pathways at a limited number of campuses across Flanders, as well as distance learning programmes, following their evaluation.

This will allow us to offer and promote attractive programmes throughout Flanders. It also enables us to maintain relationships with external actors from a unified KU Leuven position, including partner colleges within the Association, umbrella organisations, pedagogical guidance services, schools, networks of teacher educators, and the Flemish government. Together, we can contribute to building professional, strong school teams in Flemish schools. Confident in the quality of our programmes, we will make structural space for communication as a key focus. We aim for a clear training offer at the Flemish level, with a diversity of expertise among educational master's and

bachelor's degrees. Complementarity in the continuing education offer for teaching professionals, responding to societal developments, is also a priority. Partnerships with schools for internships, educational research, service learning, and the further expansion of our own continuing education offer will continue to be developed. We fully support and defend our unique organisational model, which includes practice lecturers and internship supervisors with one foot in the field.

The development of high-quality teacher training programmes is a societal responsibility of universities and will require continued investment in the years ahead. That is why it is essential that we succeed in attracting more students to educational master's programmes in the coming years.

### ● ***International solidarity through education***

We are strengthening our commitment to international solidarity through the development of the [Global University Academy](#) (GUA). This initiative aims to provide one million young people in refugee camps and other vulnerable regions with access to high-quality higher education by 2038. It will do so through blended learning paths, microcredentials, and digital learning environments. Initially, the network seeks to implement pilot projects in refugee camps in Uganda and Jordan, demonstrating the feasibility of the chosen approach.

GUA currently includes 17 international universities that contribute didactic expertise, learning materials, and infrastructure. In addition, it works with UNHCR (United Nations Refugee Agency), NGOs, and local educational partners. The societal impact is twofold. On the one hand, GUA empowers young people in humanitarian contexts by offering them opportunities for further education, employment, and social participation. Access to accredited higher education for refugees clearly leads to greater self-reliance, improved socio-economic integration, and increased prospects for stable futures for entire communities. On the other hand, the project also enriches KU Leuven itself, by actively involving students and staff in co-creation, international collaboration, and socially meaningful learning experiences.

The Global University Academy builds on international best practices, such as the blended learning initiatives of Kiron and the project of Southern New Hampshire University in Rwanda, which combine digital learning paths with local mentorship to increase success rates. Our university commits to embedding this initiative in a sustainable way, through patronage, project funding, and the activation of its international networks.

## **3.9 Knowledge and communication in connection with society**

### ● ***Structurally supporting public science and science communication***

We are developing a university-wide policy to anchor science communication and public engagement as essential components of our research culture, not as optional extras. Every research project funded with public money will receive support in translating research findings for a broad audience, using accessible formats such as public lectures, podcasts, citizen science projects, exhibitions, or educational tools. This support will be organised through a central science communication platform, giving researchers access to templates, formats, training modules, and

an overview of available communication channels such as university media, social media, and partner institutions.

Faculties and their communication officers can rely on a communication ambassador who will coordinate local initiatives and help scale them up, in close collaboration with the central Communication and Research Coordination Services. The focus is not only on informing the general public, but also on interactive formats such as citizen science projects and school modules, where scientists and citizens think and learn together.

### ● ***Promoting community engagement among students through service learning***

We recognise and support students who voluntarily engage in social projects within or outside the university. Through the KU Leuven Engage platform, students can make their engagement visible, have it validated, and, aligned with their programmes, under certain conditions, integrate it into their curriculum. This applies to both extracurricular recognition and Service Learning pathways, in which social involvement is explicitly linked to academic learning objectives.

The integration of Service Learning takes place at the faculty level and is context-dependent, respecting the autonomy of programmes. Concretely, this means that programmes decide whether and how social engagement is incorporated, as an elective course, microcredential, or part of internships or project work.

Through KU Leuven Engage, students can participate in initiatives related to youth work, welfare, diversity, education, sustainability, or international solidarity. Programmes that integrate Service Learning do so from a reciprocal approach: students, teachers, and external partners function as co-creators of knowledge and social change.

Students who participate in Service Learning score higher in terms of social responsibility and critical thinking, and they also feel more connected to their academic environment and society at large. Moreover, these experiences contribute to achieving the university's third mission: societal impact, alongside education and research. We will allocate the necessary resources to strengthen support for Service Learning and structurally embed it in our policies. The Service Learning offer will be expanded to include international initiatives, including in the Global South, in collaboration with our international partners.

### ● ***KU Leuven for life***

In a constantly changing world, it is essential that professionals continue to develop and adapt to new circumstances. Various actors within KU Leuven (faculties, institutes, departments, campuses, etc.) are committed to lifelong learning through the [Continue](#) platform, in collaboration with partners within the KU Leuven Association. The offering is already broad and diverse, but can be further strengthened by raising students' awareness, already during their studies, of the importance of lifelong learning and teaching them how to engage in lifelong learning, by collaborating with the professional field and by developing flexible, digitally supported learning pathways.

In doing so, KU Leuven not only supports its alumni but also positions itself more strongly as a beacon of technological development and a champion of personal growth. This leads to a stronger, more resilient community and a significant societal contribution.

## 4. International and intercultural community

*We envision a university where students and staff from all corners of the world not only feel welcome but also supported, valued, and connected.*

*International diversity is not an end in itself for us, but a source of enrichment for the entire academic community. From that conviction, we are building an inclusive learning and working environment on every campus, with attention to both global accessibility and local anchoring.*

*We are making targeted investments in initiatives that promote the integration of international students and staff, such as the International House, buddy programmes, social and cultural networking events, and personalised guidance. Language plays a key role in this: we are developing a bilingual academic environment in which language acquisition is actively supported, for students, researchers, and staff, and in which Dutch and English are used complementarily, depending on the context.*

*We also commit to specific groups, such as students and researchers with a refugee background, through multidisciplinary support programmes and assistance with language, study skills, and psychosocial well-being. At the same time, we encourage the international mobility of staff, both academic and administrative, as a driver for professional development and the exchange of expertise.*

*International inclusion also means paying attention to other forms of diversity. In our programmes, we embed social responsibility through inclusive curricula, co-creative teaching methods, and the professionalisation of teaching teams. In this way, KU Leuven becomes a university where international excellence goes hand in hand with warm hospitality, social connectedness, and language-conscious participation, a place where every student and staff member feels recognised and involved.*

### 4.1 Supporting international students and staff

#### ● **Strengthening the welcoming policy of international students and staff**

New international students and staff need targeted support in finding housing, integrating into the university community, and navigating orientation and administrative procedures. An approach in which the university collaborates with city authorities and other local actors contributes significantly to improving satisfaction and integration among international students and staff, as demonstrated by the Leuven model.

In previous policy periods, we invested in improved services for international students through key action points from the WSIS plan (Working Group on Support for International Students), a collaboration between various university-wide services (including Stuvo, Pangaea, the Education Office, MarCom, the International Office, doctoral schools and faculties) and students (Stura and LOKO). We aim to continue this initiative, with particular attention to students and doctoral researchers across all campuses.

In Leuven, the reception of international students and staff is facilitated by the successful operation of International House Leuven. We will launch similar initiatives in Brussels, adapted to the metropolitan context and in collaboration with local partners. For other campuses, we are developing alternative models for welcoming international students and staff, tailored to their regional contexts and needs. Possible approaches include shared service points with student services, extensive digital offerings, or mobile welcome teams. In every case, optimal collaboration with local governments, public welfare centres (OCMWs), student associations, and partner institutions is essential. Each campus will have a designated contact person or coordinator to assess the needs of international students and staff and implement appropriate initiatives, such as buddy systems, workshops, or consultation hours. Even limited but visible and accessible support on campuses will enhance the academic and social integration of international students.

### ● ***Social integration of international students and staff***

We actively invest in the social integration of international students and staff by offering a diverse range of social, cultural, and professional activities. Social integration during the first months after arrival is crucial for academic success, well-being, and retention. We focus on faculty-level induction programmes, thematic networking events, and access to university community initiatives aimed at connecting international communities with local ones.

Ongoing mentor and buddy programmes will be strengthened, pairing international students and researchers with local peers, experienced students, or emeriti buddies. Such programmes have proven effective in reducing acculturation stress, improving social connectedness, and fostering personal development.

Social integration is further supported by encouraging participation in student and staff representation, volunteer work, and interdisciplinary collaborations, preferably at the level of research groups, programmes, faculties, and departments. Many existing practices at these levels have proven to be valuable and will inform the enhancement of current initiatives. Active involvement in student organisations and governance increases the sense of belonging and ownership within the academic community. To ensure inclusive participation, we offer training and support in intercultural communication, language support, and tailored guidance.

### ● ***Strengthening academic hospitality for refugees***

We continue our commitment to the academic integration of students and researchers with refugee status. We recognise that this group faces specific challenges in accessing higher education, including language barriers, uncertain residency status, psychosocial stress, and unrecognised qualifications. To address these, we are expanding our current support with tailored programmes

for entry into education, buddy systems, mentorship, and workshops on study skills, academic culture, and career orientation. These pathways undeniably contribute to successful integration into higher education.

Where needed, we will offer adapted learning tracks, with support in language, mental health, and legal counselling. We also remain committed to complementary offerings for refugees, such as those developed in the EU-Passworld project. Through this initiative, a limited number of refugees from camps abroad can come to Belgium to follow educational trajectories supported by local communities and educational institutions.

## **4.2 Language support and bilingual work environment**

### **● *Structured language modules from onboarding onwards***

One major challenge for international newcomers at the university is learning Dutch. For professors, we must meet the legal language requirements for permanent appointments. For students and early-career researchers, acquiring Dutch is also important, not only for integration into a Dutch-speaking study and work environment, but also for enhancing future career opportunities in Flanders after graduation or completion of their research. To support this, we aim to further develop the Dutch language learning offering.

We will build on the existing standardized NT2 (Dutch as a second language) programme provided by the Institute for Living Languages (ILT) for international students, researchers, and new staff. We advocate for a structural integration of this offering in the university's onboarding policy, tailored to the academic and professional profiles of the participants. Language acquisition becomes more effective when linked to practical contexts, such as workplace modules using authentic administrative documents, tasks, or lectures. This approach not only improves functional language skills but also strengthens the sense of inclusion and participation in the work environment.

To optimally support the integration of international ZAP members (professorial staff), KU Leuven provides the option of one or, if necessary, two teaching- and service-free semesters at the start of their appointment. This allows them to fully focus on intensive Dutch language training immediately after their appointment, aimed at academic communication, teaching practice, and participation in governance bodies. The exemption from duties is linked to an individual learning pathway, developed by HR and ILT in consultation with the faculty, and systematically monitored.

### **● *Local anchoring and support***

Language policy must be broadly supported. To this end, structural cooperation between the Institute for Living Languages, HR, and the faculties is essential. Each actor plays a clear role: ILT provides high-quality language instruction and training; HR supports staff through tailored learning pathways; and faculties coordinate context-specific offerings.

Local anchoring on campuses is also important and can be achieved by appointing a local contact point. We explicitly commit to ensuring equal access to language support on every campus. This will



rely heavily on online offerings. The infrastructure, support, and learning environments will be harmonized where possible, while remaining flexible to meet local needs.

Regular feedback on the language policy and its implementation, via representatives of students, ZAP, ATP, and PhD students, will enable ongoing adjustments. These evaluation cycles ensure the policy remains responsive and flexible, helping to better and more rapidly integrate students and staff into the university's multilingual environments.

### ● ***Academic Dutch as an inclusive learning trajectory***

Academic Dutch, with its complex sentence structures, abstract terms, and sometimes needlessly convoluted synonyms for everyday words, can often be a stumbling block for students who have not had the chance to practice it in their home environment (e.g., first-generation students, students with a non-Dutch home language) or in their secondary education (e.g., due to teacher shortages). When difficult words are not understood, it can signal to a student that they don't belong in the academic context, even when they have the intellectual capacity to succeed.

Moreover, special remediation programmes for academic Dutch often carry stigma or reflect a deficit mindset ([Agirdag, 2019](#)), or they are introduced too late, thereby failing to support talented students from underrepresented groups.

The path to an inclusive university also includes rethinking our approach to academic Dutch, not merely as a ticket to access education, but as a learning trajectory embedded in every programme. This means that courses (and possibly textbooks) in the early phase of the programme should be delivered at B1-level Dutch. There are already textbooks at this level that avoid condescension and demonstrate how this can work. Naturally, subject-specific jargon should be used where necessary.

Exams in the early stages can be written in B1-level Dutch using AI tools and/or with support from teaching assistants. Each programme will develop its own plan to guide students toward a C2 level of Dutch by the end of their master's. Digital tools, such as AI-based reading level checkers and process-oriented feedback systems, will be used. An example is the [tool Writing Aid Dutch](#), which provides students with individualized support for academic writing. Evaluation studies show that this tool significantly improves students' text structure, style, and coherence, and is perceived as highly relevant and user-friendly.

### ● ***Bilingualism and language practice in the workplace***

To foster an inclusive and internationally accessible work culture, we promote the functional use of both Dutch and English in everyday work life. Depending on the team composition, meeting structure, or governing body, the most accessible working language is chosen. Policy documents, regulations, and internal communications are prepared in both languages, ensuring that all staff feel informed and included. In meetings with international members, English is the default inclusive language, or simultaneous interpretation is provided.

At the same time, Dutch remains the central pillar of the organisational culture. Therefore, we encourage units to promote active language learning through informal practice opportunities, such as lunch conversations, language tandems, and low-threshold language workshops. This may be



supported by language coaches or student assistants. A practical approach like this not only improves language proficiency but also fosters social cohesion and workplace enjoyment. Furthermore, clear agreements and language support in a bilingual (or multilingual) environment lead to better collaboration, higher satisfaction, and increased inclusivity.

We also recognize that not all Flemish students or staff automatically have a high level of academic English. Therefore, attention to language development in both directions is essential in an inclusive language policy. Avoiding implicit language expectations is key: without an explicit policy, informal preferences for a particular language may reinforce social exclusion. A well-balanced bilingual approach, as pursued by KU Leuven, aligns with European insights on multilingual universities, where national and global languages coexist in policy, practice, and infrastructure.



## 4.3 International policy

### ● *Global situation, knowledge security and academic freedom*

The international dimension of the university has become increasingly important in recent years, in terms of research, education, and societal engagement. At the same time, the complexity of international collaboration is growing significantly. A succession of international crises (terror threats, the Covid pandemic, armed conflicts, shifting geopolitical relations...) demands thorough preparation and continuous vigilance when entering into international partnerships and mobility projects. At KU Leuven, this has led to the establishment and strengthening of the Risk Destinations

Committee, a structural dialogue on international crisis situations, and a Knowledge Security Committee. We will continue to monitor and further develop these bodies and provide regular feedback to the Academic Council on these topics.

The university is increasingly confronted with partnership proposals that raise questions about the value systems of potential collaborators. This will continue to require close monitoring by a well-balanced Ethics Committee on Dual Use, Military Use and Misuse of Research, as well as by the university leadership. Strategic decisions and policy choices in this context will be structurally aligned with the various factions within the Academic Council, in which all segments of each scientific group are represented.

It remains crucial for the academic community to stay attuned to international developments. Together with partner institutions and university networks, we remain committed to our core values, independent of external pressures. European values, as defined in the Lisbon Treaty of the European Union, human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law, and respect for human rights, as well as the constitutionally guaranteed freedom of education in Belgium, remain our key pillars in embracing and defending academic freedom and freedom of expression, even in an international context.

### ● ***Evaluation of the internationalisation policy***

In recent policy periods, “genuinely international” was a clear strategic priority. The focus was on attracting more international students to English-taught bachelor’s and master’s programmes, strengthening international partnerships within and beyond Europe, offering a greater number of students international experiences through diverse forms of mobility, and enhancing cooperation with the Global South. Significant progress has been made in all these areas. The number of degree-seeking international students has nearly doubled since 2017. New partnerships with leading universities have been established, supported by mobility programmes (Global Exchange Programme) and research collaboration instruments (Global PhD Programme and Global Seed Fund). The creation of the Una Europa alliance and membership in Universitas 21 have generated new opportunities for collaboration, both in Europe and globally. Partnerships with the Global South, including through additional European and international funding streams, have also expanded.

Many of these initiatives will be consolidated and continued. Particular attention will remain on global development, especially with countries in Africa, Latin America, and Southeast Asia, with full use of available cooperation and funding opportunities such as the European Commission’s Global Gateway programmes. At the same time, now is an opportune moment to evaluate and, if necessary, recalibrate the internationalisation projects undertaken. Under the coordination of the International Office, this task will be carried out by the representative advisory councils, the Council for International Policy (RIB) and the Interfaculty Council for Global Development (IRMO), in consultation with regional committees and working groups active on international topics, such as the Green Erasmus working group and the Inclusive Mobility working group.

### ● ***Priority partnerships and international networks***

KU Leuven has cooperation agreements with 38 universities ranked in the top 50 of the Times Higher Education rankings, both within Europe and worldwide. These partnerships offer valuable opportunities for all members of our academic community and will continue to be developed. We will assess and, where needed, adjust existing tools related to student mobility and seed funds. We also maintain close collaboration with key partner institutions in the region, including UCLouvain, Université de Lille, TU Eindhoven, and other Dutch universities.

We continue our active participation in international networks such as Una Europa, LERU, Universitas 21, and the Coimbra Group. Within these networks, KU Leuven aims to maintain its leading role. In the European university alliance Una Europa, we prioritise joint education initiatives, research collaboration, and pilots for international microcredentials. LERU remains the leading network for collaboration on a broad range of university policy themes and for advocacy with the EU. In Universitas 21, we focus particularly on networking and mobility initiatives for early-career researchers, virtual international classrooms for students, and alignment on global challenges.

### ● ***Promoting international mobility opportunities for staff***

We continue to support the international mobility of staff, both academic and administrative. Mobility contributes to professional development, knowledge exchange, and international visibility, and strengthens KU Leuven's positioning within the European higher education landscape. The existing opportunities for sabbaticals, international PhD placements, faculty exchanges, and staff mobility will be expanded and better facilitated. To achieve this, KU Leuven invests in a mix of funding sources, including central funds and European programmes such as Erasmus+.

Each faculty develops a mobility plan with clear objectives, measures to reduce barriers, and incentives. Gaining international experience is considered an added value in career development and promotion decisions. At the same time, we place great importance on sharing experiences. Mobile staff members will be supported in communicating and translating their international experiences to KU Leuven colleagues, for example, through presentations, workshops, or by integrating insights into teaching reforms.

Virtual and hybrid mobility pathways are also included and will be further developed, building on successful initiatives such as the EU-VIP project on virtual internships and international collaboration without physical travel ([Op de Beeck et al., 2011](#)) and more recent initiatives under Una Europa. Promoting virtual and hybrid mobility is generally more accessible and is particularly important in light of sustainability and work-life balance.

### ● ***Global development***

In the last policy period, collaboration with the Global South was a key part of our “truly international” pillar. In the coming years, we want to deepen this ambition by embedding global development and partnerships with the Global South more firmly. We aim to establish sustainable, structural partnerships with institutions in Africa, Latin America, and Asia, with reciprocity, shared responsibility, and co-creation at the centre.

This collaboration moves beyond traditional mobility and scholarships to focus on joint research agendas, curriculum development, and institutional capacity building. We will make full use of opportunities provided by international university networks (Una Europa, LERU, Universitas 21...) to expand these efforts.

KU Leuven seeks to lead thematically in globally and locally critical areas such as public health, climate adaptation, food security, and sustainable technologies. By stimulating research and education initiatives that align with local needs and contribute to the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), we aim to create societal impact alongside academic value. Capacity building, training of local academics and staff, and the development of innovative teaching models, including virtual and blended formats, are central. KU Leuven students and staff will be actively involved through international internships, project work, and global citizenship programmes, always with attention to ethical and intercultural preparation.

To achieve these goals, both external and internal funding are essential. Externally, we will continue to pursue opportunities via VLIR-UOS, Horizon Europe, and EuropeAid. The current political trend of cutting development cooperation budgets is regrettable and a cause for concern. We will continue to advocate that the Flemish and Belgian governments maintain interuniversity cooperation with the Global South. We will also approach private foundations such as the Gates Foundation, the Wellcome Trust, and the MasterCard Foundation for support.

Internally, KU Leuven will continue allocating research funds to support young researchers through South and sandwich scholarships. The International Office remains the central coordination hub, offering support and expertise for international funding applications, legal and ethical matters, and sustainable partnerships.

Through structural and strategic investment in global cooperation with the Global South, KU Leuven reinforces both its international mission and the societal relevance and inclusivity of its teaching and research. This commitment reflects academic solidarity and engagement toward a fairer world. It also offers students, PhD candidates, and researchers valuable, transformative experiences, both abroad and at home.

### ● ***Regional committees and forums***

KU Leuven organises its international policy in part through regional committees responsible for monitoring partnerships, mobility, networks, and strategic initiatives within specific world regions. This structure has played an important role in recent years in advising and supporting KU Leuven's international ambitions. Given the fast-evolving geopolitical landscape, it is appropriate to evaluate this approach and, where needed, adjust it.

The focus of this evaluation includes clarifying strategic objectives: Does KU Leuven aim for greater efficiency, sharper focus, geographic rebalancing, or thematic deepening of its international strategy? To achieve this, a streamlined evaluation process will be launched under the oversight of the Council for International Policy, supplemented by consultations with researchers and policy staff. The aim is to identify strengths, weaknesses, and potential improvements, and to develop scenarios for the future.

One possible step is the creation of regional cooperation forums for specific (sub)continents. This applies to Latin America, Southeast Asia, and Africa, given their strategic importance, also recognised by the European Commission. Bundling existing expertise and contacts can increase visibility, generate new synergies within KU Leuven, and boost appeal to candidates and funders linked to these regions. Such forums also promote sustainable community-building and can be highlighted to external stakeholders.

## 5. Shared leadership and organisation

*We want researchers, teachers and staff to be able to spend their time on what really matters: good teaching, innovative research and meaningful cooperation with society. Therefore, we are working on fewer rules, fewer unnecessary steps and less (digital and non-digital) red tape. The appointment of a vice rector for administrative simplification and HR policy reinforces this ambition. We are simplifying procedures, ensuring clearer communication and guiding change in ways that are practical for those who will be directly affected. Digital tools such as AI-driven helpdesks and smart forms are not just introduced, but developed with and for users, with a view to saving time and reducing frustration.*

*Faculties will be given room to play their strategic role in terms of their disciplinary uniqueness. We will also optimise the functioning of faculties, departments and campuses, striving for an optimal balance between necessary autonomy and administrative efficiency. Our regional campuses will become more strongly embedded as places of innovation, education and cooperation with local partners. This means clear added value for the entire university. Within the organisation, we are committed to better coordination, smoother workflows and shared structures that make cooperation natural rather than creating extra work.*

### 5.1 Work efficiency through innovation

#### ● **Vice rector for administrative simplification**

We will appoint a vice rector responsible for administrative simplification, process optimisation, and reduction of internal complexity. This vice rector will lead university-wide reforms and serve as a structural link between central administrative services, faculties, and departments. Their tasks will include better aligning processes and systematically translating local needs into workable solutions at the university-wide level. The starting point is to map the KU Leuven organisation as a whole, at all levels, including all major administrative processes. Based on this, we will assess what works well and what does not. What can be improved? What is unnecessary? What requires more staffing? What can be simplified?

The ultimate goal is to work more efficiently and effectively, provide better support, and reduce workload. From this analysis, we will develop a multi-year reform agenda, implemented in phases

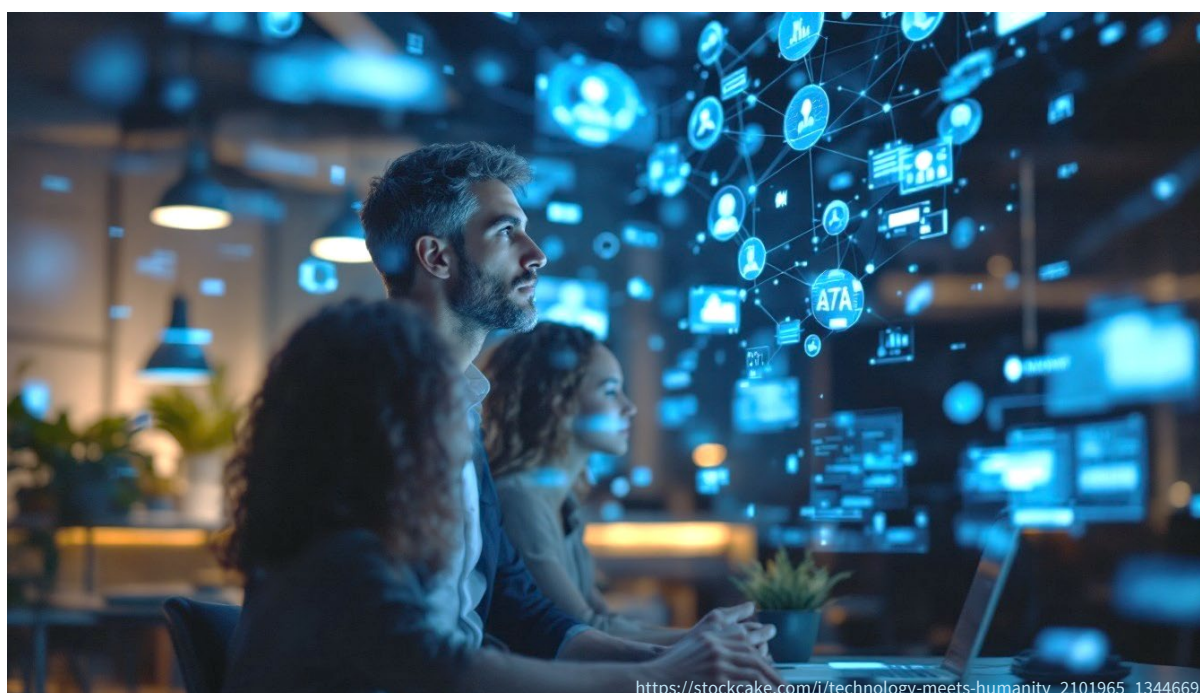


and based on real work experiences, frequent surveys, and international benchmarks with other universities.

Concrete topics include the simplification of appointment procedures, alignment between KU Loker and other digital tools, automation of approval processes, harmonisation of programme structures, and the reduction of reporting obligations. Digital solutions like Robotic Process Automation, which have reduced workload and error rates at other institutions, will also be explored. The vice rector will form a team of process coordinators and change managers, with funding provided through rectoral policy resources and temporary innovation funds. Close coordination with the General Administrative Services, especially ICTS, will be essential. This team will operate through pilot projects and continuous feedback loops to test, adjust, and implement changes gradually. Interim reports to the Executive Board and Academic Council will ensure transparency.

### ● ***AI-powered self-service helpdesk***

We will develop an AI-powered digital assistant for students and staff, based on natural language processing (NLP). This "KU Leuven Assistant" will respond to simple questions about administrative procedures such as registration, leave requests, deadlines, resits, Erasmus procedures, and certificates. The tool will be multilingual, usable across the university, available 24/7 via the student portal and KU Loker, and provide direct access to accurate information or standard documents. For more complex queries, the assistant will automatically refer users to the appropriate service or create a support ticket. Responses will be drawn from central and faculty-level knowledge bases, and the system will continuously learn from user feedback. The initial phase will focus on HR, ethics committees, expense justifications, and education-related questions, with phased expansion into other areas. This AI chatbot will significantly improve the efficiency of university services, reduce the administrative workload, and enhance the user experience by delivering fast, context-sensitive answers.



[https://stockcake.com/i/technology-meets-humanity\\_2101965\\_1344669](https://stockcake.com/i/technology-meets-humanity_2101965_1344669)

## 5.2 Autonomy, structure and efficiency within the university

### ● *Faculties, departments and campuses as organisational cornerstones*

KU Leuven recognises the structural role of faculties, departments, and campuses as the university's fundamental building blocks. This also applies to the leadership roles of deans, department heads, and campus coordinators and their respective boards. Therefore, there is no need for a reform of the university's core structure.

In line with international insights into good university governance, we will enhance the strategic autonomy of these entities and provide them with sufficient policy space to set their own priorities, within an overarching university framework. We explicitly highlight the strategic role of faculties. For centuries, KU Leuven's faculties have formed the core of university policy. Over time, a structure has evolved in which departments, research units, and campuses also play increasingly context-specific roles. KU Leuven's structure functions based on uniform and transparent agreements regarding collaboration between faculties, departments, and campuses. Group boards and group vice rectors play a coordinating role in aligning strategies and cooperation within and across academic groups.

### ● *Strengthening internal collaboration and synergies*

Each sub-entity must be able to make strategic choices in education, research, and staffing, aligned with its unique mission, scale, and thematic focus. However, this does not rule out that procedures and processes can become more efficient and effective through in-depth collaboration and shared expertise across faculty and departmental boundaries. Identifying such opportunities will also be a key task of the Vice Rector for Administrative Simplification, in close interaction with the relevant entities.

We will promote structural collaboration between faculties, departments, campuses, and administrative services through shared support structures, such as joint ICT services, education coordination, and HR platforms. To improve efficiency, we will establish agreements on shared space usage, project management, and coordination of administrative processes. Particular attention will be paid to processes spanning multiple services, which often cause unnecessary delays. To address this, we will create a transversal process management team chaired by the Vice Rector for Administrative Simplification. This team will identify bottlenecks, streamline task distribution, and establish temporary task forces for complex issues. Digital workflow tools will be used to track processes transparently and automate feedback cycles, with the aim of significantly reducing administrative turnaround times.

### ● *Campuses in full development*

Our regional campuses are an essential pillar of KU Leuven's presence throughout Flanders. They not only enhance the university's societal role but also act as bridges to new student populations, local governments, and innovative research partnerships.



Kulak has shown for 60 years how strong local embedding, academic quality, and regional collaboration can go hand in hand. This model inspires the further development of campuses in other regions.

Within the broader regional structure plan, focused on West (Kortrijk, Bruges, Ghent), East (Antwerp, Sint-Katelijne-Waver, Geel, Diepenbeek), and Brussels, each campus will have the space to develop its own profile within KU Leuven's strategic framework. This profiling takes into account regional needs and strengths, such as technological specialisation, local labour market opportunities, or societal challenges. We will build further on each campus's specific strengths and aim for structural support in developing programmes, infrastructure, and collaboration with local stakeholders. We opt for a cross-faculty approach that is not limited to the faculties and disciplines already present on campus. As regional hubs, the campuses also serve as gateways to lifelong learning and strengthen KU Leuven's visibility as a partner in economic, social, and cultural development across Flanders.

## 6. Learning, working and living environment

*Commitment to people is central to our policy and fundamental to successful academic and professional careers. Student services provide a structural and accessible gateway to support, with attention to mental well-being, social integration, and equal educational opportunities across all campuses. By proactively integrating well-being into our education policy, through thematic sessions, peer coaching, and preventive signal detection, we foster a campus culture where stress, dropout, and isolation are actively addressed. This is currently working well, and we aim to maintain it.*

*Stuvo is investigating how and where faculties can be strengthened in terms of academic career guidance. This is a much-needed effort, given the particularly high workload in this area, and we want to respond accordingly.*

*Student organisations and local networks will continue to play a prominent role in strengthening community building and in detecting well-being needs.*

*Clear, multilingual communication and digital access to support services ensure that every student can receive help, regardless of background or campus location. In this way, we build a university where study success and well-being are not individual responsibilities, but shared priorities.*

*Commitment to people is an ongoing task. Work-life balance means different things to different individuals, but prioritizing well-being must come first. A heavy workload should not create undue pressure, and the right to disconnect must be fully respected. By embracing a culture of structural efficiency, KU Leuven can become a workplace where all staff can grow professionally and thrive.*

## 6.1 Student wellbeing and study-friendly environments

### ● *Accessible student facilities*

The recent reform of Stuvo is now being fully implemented across various domains and will require consolidation and follow-up in the coming period. The development of Stuvo hubs at different locations is a very positive step and may serve as a model for replication elsewhere. KU Leuven's student services already serve as accessible gateways to support and provide more than just practical assistance. They create the necessary social and material conditions for mental wellbeing, social integration, and equal educational opportunities. These efforts deserve recognition.

However, it remains important to ensure that students, wherever they study at KU Leuven, have equal access to appropriate support. Unfortunately, this is not yet guaranteed on all campuses, which calls for expanded psychological support, study guidance, and financial assistance. We also opt for an inclusive approach, with specific initiatives for certain target groups where needed. Wherever possible, we prefer group-based support, always using a layered approach embedded in and aligned with local service offerings.

To that end, we will appoint a locally anchored coordinator, across faculties, who works closely with student associations, welfare services, and local authorities. We aim to reduce the workload for staff and improve student access by offering a clear overview of all available services via a digital portal. We want to reach all students by developing active communication campaigns tailored to diverse student groups.

### ● *Wellbeing-oriented support*

Students need sufficient breathing space to balance their studies with other activities. This is especially the case when studies are combined with work, health issues, or caregiving responsibilities in their private lives. To support them, we offer administration-light options for instructors and exam boards to take individual circumstances into account with minimal extra effort.

Neurodivergent students, students with disabilities, students from diverse backgrounds, or those dealing with physical or mental health issues regularly require well-being-oriented help and support. It is crucial to provide timely assistance, and for this reason, we will appoint well-being ambassadors: staff or students trained to recognise signs of stress, dropout risk, or help-seeking, and who can refer individuals to the appropriate support services. This peer-based signalling function not only ensures early detection but also contributes to a sense of belonging in the learning environment.

Additionally, we must strengthen first-line care to ensure waiting lists remain manageable. We favour a differentiated offering that builds on strong first-line services, with low-threshold access to study coaching, stress management, or psychological support. For second-line care, we will continue to pursue strategic partnerships with external (private) providers, partly for reasons of financial feasibility. This layered approach promotes efficiency and broad coverage without placing disproportionate pressure on internal resources.

### ● **Connection and clear communication**

An inclusive and supportive learning environment requires not only accessible care but also clear communication and social cohesion. We therefore aim to expand the socio-cultural offering across all campuses as a driver for community building and participation. Students who feel socially connected are more resilient, experience less stress, and achieve better academic outcomes (see e.g., [Schmiedl & Kauffeld, 2023](#)). That's why we invest in accessible socio-cultural infrastructure, collaboration with student associations, and programming that reflects diversity, internationalisation, and campus identity.

Student associations play an essential role here. They bridge the gap between formal support services and everyday student life. Associations contribute to social integration, provide informal networks of support, and can act as accessible points of contact for well-being issues. We will strengthen their role in onboarding, community building, and inclusive events, and provide structural support to ensure that smaller or less visible associations can also realise their social impact. Co-design research shows that collaboration between students and policy teams leads to more effective and widely supported well-being strategies on campuses.

At the same time, we will make communication about student services clear, user-friendly, and multilingual. From day one, students must know where to find support, both digitally and in person. We will provide a central digital access point for all services, supported by active information campaigns, onboarding modules, and communication through channels that students actually use.

### ● **Student housing**

We must continue working to ensure affordable student housing in Leuven. That begins with strengthening cooperation with the city: we call for more efficient permitting for student housing and aim to use KU Leuven land and real estate for new housing projects, ideally in collaboration with private investors where feasible. At the same time, we seek more transparency in the student housing market through a public rent overview with information about the price-quality ratio of available accommodation. We plan to extend this approach to our other campuses, in collaboration with higher education partners in those campus cities. We also aim to strengthen support for vulnerable students by offering mediation in conflict situations. Finally, we want to broaden the conversation: affordable housing is not a side issue, it is a fundamental condition for equal access to education.

## **6.2 Balance, autonomy and support for staff**

### ● **Ensuring work-life balance**

We aim to foster a working environment in which staff can grow professionally without their well-being being put under strain. A sustainable work-life balance positively impacts productivity, creativity, and retention. Overtime should not be a structural expectation and should be limited to exceptional or temporary commitments. We promote flexible working hours, hybrid working models, and autonomy in planning, allowing employees to align their professional responsibilities

with personal needs and life phases. We also must ensure that those caring for young children, caregivers, part-time staff, or employees with other external commitments do not take on too much and are protected from overburdening themselves. This flexibility, however, must not undermine the effective functioning of departments or services, which is why we continue to offer targeted training for individuals and teams. Topics include boundary-setting, the impact of time management on wellbeing, and supporting teams and managers in promoting wellbeing.

### ● ***Embedding the right to disconnect***

The rise of digitalisation has made it possible to work anytime and anywhere, but permanent availability must not become an implicit norm. We recognise the right to be unreachable outside working hours as an essential aspect of our work organisation. This right to disconnect not only reduces the risk of stress and burnout, but also boosts productivity, retention, and healthy working relationships. This is especially important for more vulnerable groups such as young parents and caregivers, for whom permanent digital availability can be disproportionately burdensome.

Teams and supervisors are encouraged to make clear agreements about availability, to be explicitly discussed during onboarding, evaluations, and potentially in awareness sessions.

### ● ***Fewer, shorter and more efficient meetings and meeting-free weeks***

A frequent concern at our university is the high number of meetings. While structural consultation is often necessary for good governance and departmental function, this issue deserves attention. Four clear proposals can already create time and mental space: i) discontinuing unnecessary working groups, ii) holding shorter meetings, iii) providing guidelines to adjust meeting culture, and iv) organising at least one university-wide meeting-free week per semester.

To move quickly on complex files, we often form new working groups, a practice that has reached its limits. We aim to drastically reduce the number of working groups. If broader consultation is needed, we will first use existing bodies and only set up a new, temporary working group when absolutely necessary, with limited membership and a predefined scope and duration.

Meetings can become unnecessarily long due to late agendas or uneven levels of prior knowledge among participants. Lengthy discussions may also be inefficient when a topic is not yet ready for decision-making. Alongside strict start and end times, clear agreements are essential. We will offer practical guidance and coaching on effective meeting practices, including asynchronous communication, clear agenda objectives, and using the question “Is this meeting necessary?” as a standard check.

University-wide meeting-free weeks will be transparently scheduled in the academic calendar and implemented throughout the university. During these weeks, staff can focus on teaching preparation, research, admin tasks, or reflection without interruptions.

### ● ***Coaching and guidance***

Individual and team-based support is crucial for boosting mental resilience. KU Leuven already offers coaching, workshops, and support pathways, including modules on stress management, time management, conflict mediation, communication styles, and burnout prevention. These are



particularly valuable for early-career researchers, supervisors, PhD candidates, and staff in transition, but they benefit everyone. Team coaching is available to enhance team dynamics or address internal tensions. Staff can join these programmes either voluntarily or at the suggestion of a supervisor.

Though the existing programmes are of high quality and widely accessible, many staff members are still not reached. Given limited resources, we will evaluate the offering and focus on efficiency and impact, especially when it comes to reaching various target groups. Removing barriers for staff from migrant backgrounds, those with neurodivergence, disabilities, or chronic illness is essential.

### ● **Wellbeing check for new processes**

All new policies or administrative procedures will be systematically assessed for their impact on workload. This “wellbeing check”, inspired by the concept of an impact assessment, will be integrated into the development of projects and policy proposals. Faculties and central administrations will work together to create templates and checklists that ensure the check is efficient and straightforward, avoiding added workload. Student participation will also be included when processes affect study feasibility or experience. This ensures that improved efficiency does not come at the cost of job satisfaction or stakeholder support.

We will also critically assess the landscape of working groups, committees, and consultation bodies. Dormant or redundant groups will be merged or eliminated, and new groups will only be created if they bring clear added value. This will free up time for meaningful collaboration and ensure policy development remains feasible and inclusive. This approach supports a culture of structural simplicity and thoughtful innovation.



## 6.3 Balanced and transparent career paths for all staff roles

### ● *Career paths for ZAP: balanced and inclusive*

In line with the recently introduced Appreciation Framework for Quality Academic Work, we will refine the evaluation criteria for ZAP promotions, with more explicit attention to teaching, educational innovation, societal impact, team science, and valorisation. We do not need to develop an entirely new framework but rather deepen the existing model through faculty-level implementation and broader monitoring. Cross-faculty and inter-group coordination is an important priority. To enhance the quality of evaluations, we will include external reviews via peer panels or visits from other faculties or universities. This approach promotes objectivity, avoids local blind spots, and aligns with international academic assessment practices. We also want to better prepare candidates for promotion to full professor by offering a leadership development programme, including modules on strategic thinking, financial management, team dynamics, and diversity. Structured leadership development is effective in fostering vision and inclusive leadership in academic settings and is a key criterion in the final step of an academic career.

Teaching, research, societal impact, and internal engagement will be considered in balanced proportions. Promotion profiles will be formalised for each function type and career phase, with room for personal strengths and contributions. Candidates must have early insight into expectations, procedures, and review moments. To this end, evaluation committees will receive clear frameworks and training on bias-free and inclusive assessment. Feedback will be delivered in written, structured form, with a focus on growth. This fosters trust in the evaluation system and encourages staff to invest in their academic role over the long term.

In developing these evaluation frameworks, we draw inspiration from examples at other research-intensive universities, such as the de [LERU position paper: “A Pathway towards Multidimensional Academic Careers - A LERU Framework for the Assessment of Researchers”](#). The core objective is to reward and recognise a diversity of profiles and contributions, all of which are equally important to the overall success of the institution, be it in research, teaching, or public service.

There is no doubt that teaching quality deserves full consideration in the promotion process. Therefore, we will develop a standardised and simple assessment framework for teaching impact that includes both quantitative and qualitative elements, such as peer feedback, didactic innovation, involvement in curriculum development, and learning outcomes. The new framework should be lightweight, aligned with the faculties, and embedded in all evaluation procedures so that teaching performance is structurally and fairly recognised rather than assessed on an ad hoc basis. The goal is to achieve a balanced system that values both the impact and quality of teaching without creating extra workload.

### ● *Career development for ABAP: perspective and support*

A sound career policy for early-career researchers is of paramount importance. Providing clarity about career prospects is critical. That is why it is essential to inform early-career researchers as soon as possible about available career paths and to provide accessible support. Various pathways should be explored, both within and beyond the university. The YouReCa Career Center already

initiates programmes to clarify career trajectories for postdocs, including paths to ZAP positions, research-focused careers, or roles in the ATP staff categories, as well as careers outside academia. These efforts are crucial and must be further supported. Such trajectories should include attention to portfolio development, career coaching, alumni and industry networking, better identification of transferable skills, and more. Importantly, early-career development must not be limited to research; there must also be recognition for teaching, mentoring, valorisation, and project coordination. We are implementing a digital career portfolio that will automatically populate with relevant roles and experiences, such as teaching evaluations, mentorship, involvement in valorisation, and project coordination. We also encourage young researchers to invest in their own professional growth, for example, through career coaching, external training, or international placements.

Mentoring and coaching play a key role at this career stage. Both formal and informal mentoring enhance professional development and satisfaction and increase the likelihood of successful career transitions and confidence within the academic field. Inclusive mentoring is especially crucial for underrepresented groups, international researchers, or first-generation academics to prevent feelings of isolation and foster professional networks. To this end, we aim to structurally promote (intergenerational) mentoring within teams and research groups.

### ● ***Appreciation and growth opportunities for ATP***

With the development of a new Function Framework 2.0, KU Leuven has outlined a career structure for ATP staff, allowing for career growth based on competencies, experience, and expanded roles. This framework must be fully implemented over the coming years. Job descriptions will be updated, with explicit attention to identifiable growth trajectories and promotion opportunities. This includes introducing senior levels in job classes where they do not yet exist. Functional growth should be structurally recognised for all staff members.

Promotion policies must be as uniform as possible across the entire university. Well-prepared performance and career development reviews between ATP staff and department heads are key, and support will be provided to facilitate this. These conversations should openly address job performance and career progression, including promotion expectations.

Feedback is also essential. A thriving organisation requires a culture of giving and receiving feedback. Ideally, feedback should not be limited to hierarchical lines, peer feedback is often the most instructive. Departments and work environments must foster open dialogue, and supervisors should be receptive to 360° feedback. Training for both supervisors and staff, preferably at the team level, will be crucial here.

### ● ***Socially just recruitment and promotion of staff***

Currently, the university's staff does not fully reflect the diversity of wider society. Women remain underrepresented in higher academic positions; professors of colour are rare; and PhD students from ethnic minorities or first-generation students are still few. Neurodivergent staff often face significant barriers in the neuro-normative academic environment, leading to unnecessary attrition. Our support, policy, and administrative staff often share very similar profiles. Yet we know that



diverse teams perform better and generate more impact, even in science, and that role models are crucial for inspiring future generations.

To attract, support, and retain talent from diverse backgrounds, we need a recruitment and promotion policy that puts social justice at the centre. In addition to existing measures, and in line with the LERU reports (2023) and the JA-VLIR declaration on ethnocultural diversity (2023), we will take further initiatives. We will evaluate and strengthen the Focus+ programme, which offers one-year research scholarships to students from minority groups to gain research experience and prepare for doctoral trajectories. We will implement sustained monitoring of the demographic characteristics of staff across categories to assess which efforts positively impact recruitment and advancement of underrepresented groups. This will happen not only at the university level but also at the more granular levels of faculties and departments.

We will also establish a university-wide solidarity fund to cover replacements resulting from various types of leave and illness. This fund will allow for a gradual return to work without overburdening the individual or their team. In exceptional cases, it can also be used to fulfil contractual obligations not covered by limited research funds (e.g., extending a contract after long-term absence, paying social security during maternity leave for externally funded staff, etc.).

**Passion for knowledge. Commitment to people.**