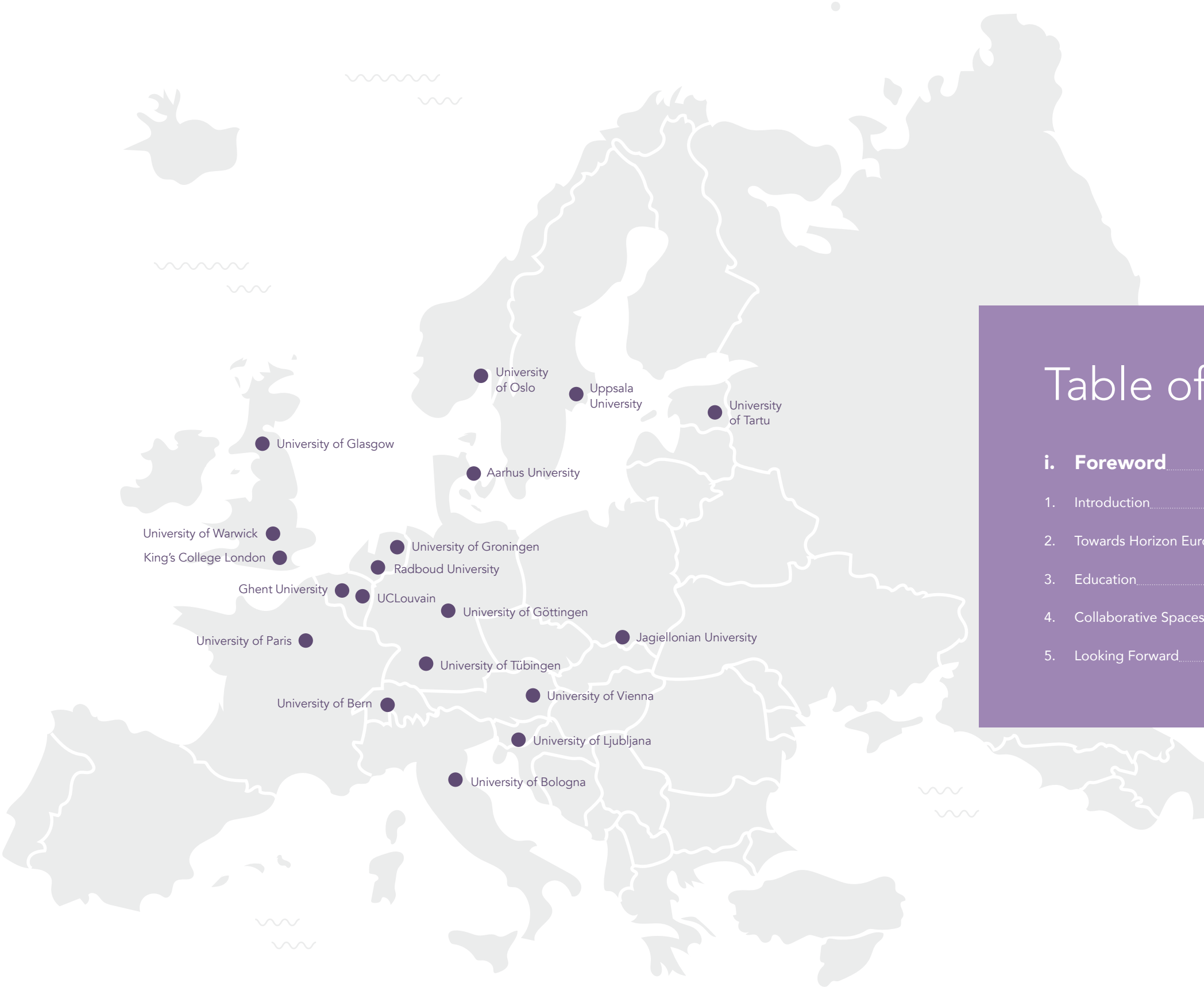


ANNUAL REPORT  
2016 - 2019

# THREE YEARS ON

Towards a transformative network  
of research-intensive universities



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# Foreword



**Vincent  
Blondel**

*RECTOR OF THE UNIVERSITY  
OF LOUVAIN*

As Rector of the University of Louvain (UCLouvain), and Chair of The Guild, I am pleased to introduce this account of the network's activities in the first three years of its existence. In The Guild's creation, nineteen of Europe's leading research-intensive universities expressed an ambition to play a leading part in the development of European higher education, research and innovation. Today, The Guild represents half a million students and 65,000 researchers. Membership has enabled universities to intensify their European presence and their collaborations. This has not only enhanced the voice of our universities in the EU; it has also deepened a discussion and engagement amongst our academic communities about European concerns relevant for universities. Over the past three years, members within The Guild have developed successful structures and processes to ensure that every voice is heard, every view respected, and new ideas thrive. I am confident that The Guild will maintain its momentum in the future and increase its impact, for the benefit not only of its members, but more generally, for the recognition of science and higher education. There are exciting prospects for the future, and The Guild will be there!

**Vincent Blondel**



**Jan  
Palmowski**

*SECRETARY GENERAL  
OF THE GUILD*

When we first discussed the creation of The Guild, none of us imagined that it would establish itself as quickly and comprehensively as one of Europe's leading university networks. This success has been the result of the continued active and enthusiastic participation of our academic and administrative colleagues in our member universities, whose advice and input shapes our positions. It is a testament to the wholehearted support of our Vice-Presidents and the sustained engagement of our Presidents in our bi-annual General Assembly. This commitment has enabled us to respond to changing policy contexts and provide a clear sense of direction throughout. Our Board has also been attentive, involved, and supportive throughout our existence, and I am extremely grateful for its work. I also wish to record my gratitude to other university networks in Brussels for the welcome they have given us, and the openness with which the Commission and other policymakers have engaged with us from the beginning. Last, but not least, I am grateful to my colleagues in The Guild Office, whose insight, judgement, and drive have been critical – not just in what we have said, but in who we have become.

**Jan Palmowski**





## Origins

The Guild was established on 1 June 2016, driven by the shared conviction that our scientific and societal challenges require a more ambitious and sustained response from Europe's leading research-intensive universities.

At the time, the EU provided an increasingly important context for engaging with scientific excellence and global challenges through research, education and innovation. The budget of the European framework programmes for research and innovation (R&I) had grown from €19.3bn for the 6th Framework Programme (2002-6) to €74.3bn for the 8th Framework Programme (Horizon 2020, 2014-20). Alongside an expanding budget, the shape of the framework programmes has been evolving. For instance, in 2007 the European Research Council was created, and in Horizon 2020 the Commission established a single funding framework for R&I.

In addition, the Commission's push towards the creation of a European Research Area demonstrated that policy initiatives at the European level often had a major impact at national levels. The need for universities to increase their engagement with EU policy became clear.

In higher education, Erasmus had become a unique success story, thanks to its transnational mobility scheme. But the programmes' achievements could not be taken for granted, as EU spending priorities became more and more contested. All these developments crystallised the need for a new university network, one that would harness the experience and expertise from its members across Europe to influence policymaking in research, innovation and education.

The Guild was thus created as a network to build bridges between likeminded universities, and it was this ambition that was called to action first. Soon after its creation, the UK's public vote to leave the EU mobilised the association. Within days, it issued its first joint statement on continuing close collaboration between UK and EU universities. This protestation of solidarity was posted on the homepage of each member university. It still serves as a reminder of why The Guild was founded: to create strong ties amongst peer institutions across Europe.

## The vision

Policy influencing does not exist in a vacuum: in order for universities to engage with policymakers, they have to work together to find common positions. Close collaboration and mutual understanding lend greater authority to universities' advice to decision-makers. The Guild's 'Founding Vision'

**articulated a clear ambition to strengthen members' European engagement and create collaborative spaces for university leaderships, administrations and faculties.**

In addition to this commitment to developing closer bonds, The Guild was founded on a clear set of ethical principles:

**to be a strong voice in defence of academic freedom.**

Its role is to support inclusiveness and access to equal opportunities and to promote good scientific practice and research integrity.

As a network of comprehensive universities, it was also created to foster a commitment to the whole breadth of scientific knowledge, covering the Social Sciences, Arts and Humanities (SSH), alongside Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics and Medicine (STEMM) as well as new and emerging fields cutting across these areas.



# Towards Horizon Europe

The Guild's policy work was launched ahead of the Interim Evaluation of Horizon 2020. Immediately upon the network's creation, members came together to define their common interests in relation to the EU's research funding, which laid the ground for its current policy work.

The timing also marked the beginning of the debate on the priorities for Horizon Europe, the future Framework Programme. In this context, the Commission pointed to themes that would become decisive: an increasing emphasis on the impact of research and the pressure to demonstrate it within the course of the 7-year programme, a focus on market-creating innovation, and Open Science. The need for a new network to strengthen academia's response to these topics – which address the core functions of universities – was evident.

Guild members responded to the challenge by introducing a set of priorities, including the need for further investment in fundamental research, articulating the central role for science and education in the future of Europe and promoting universities' role in innovation ecosystems.

As a consequence, The Guild's journey towards becoming an established voice in the EU's policy development evolved quickly in 2017. This was demonstrated by the network's engagement with high-level officials of the European Commission's Directorate for Research and Innovation (DG RTD) at internal and public events, including our forum which attracted nearly two hundred experts in the R&I sector.

That same year, our network also launched a series of Policy Lab debates that brought together decision-makers and academics from Guild universities to discuss more specific topics, which later emerged as key areas in Horizon Europe: the contribution of R&I to European societies and the Sustainable Development Goals, as well as the challenges and opportunities of Open Science in the Social Sciences, Arts and Humanities.



## R&I missions

Focusing on the outcomes of research and innovation

One of the novelties in Horizon Europe was the creation of R&I missions, meant to produce visible impact and advance on challenges where European collaboration has added value. The Guild was one of the first university networks to mobilise its members to design a set of missions by consolidating ideas from academics across faculties. This process served as an exercise for Guild members to adopt a solution-oriented approach to research and innovation, and to identify priorities that would capture the public's interest.

Topics proposed by The Guild were eventually reflected in two of the missions that were approved by EU institutions, namely on Climate-Neutral and Smart Cities, and Soil Health and Food. Furthermore, decision-makers agreed that the missions should build on research excellence and societal needs, foster projects at all technology readiness levels and integrate all disciplines. These principles were core to The Guild's position, published in December 2017. However, demonstrating the critical role of fundamental research in achieving the missions will continue to be important as the emphasis on applied research is growing within the framework of challenge-driven R&I.

Besides giving members the opportunity to take part in shaping the new research agenda, The Guild's work on missions also marked the beginning of wider strategic discussions within our network on the importance of sustainable development, the growing need for challenge-driven interdisciplinary collaboration, and new approaches for citizen science. Moreover, this was a unique opportunity for academics from Guild universities to reflect on the future. For instance, the mission proposal on 'restoring the cultural authority of science' continued to guide our discussions about how universities can – and must – address core societal concerns.

## Widening Participation

Bridging the R&I divide in Europe

One of The Guild's defining features is its composition – the network brings together excellent research-intensive universities across Europe. Its objective of fostering better pan-European collaborations is coupled with targeted policy engagement on the EU funding instruments for capacity-building in nationally-leading universities in EU-13 countries.

The participation gap between EU-13 and EU-15 beneficiaries in the framework programmes quickly became one of the burning topics in relation to Horizon 2020 and Horizon Europe. Building on regional conferences with universities and policymakers in Krakow (2017) and Ljubljana (2018), The Guild presented a wide set of recommendations addressing the needs of universities in Eastern and Central Europe. It urged the EU to continue supporting R&I across Europe and making sure that excellence remains a core criterion for Horizon Europe grants.

The Guild's key proposals included a budget increase for the Widening instruments (of 2.5% of Horizon Europe's total budget, compared to 0.8% in Horizon 2020), the introduction of return grants for the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions to counteract brain-drain, and a call to bring together EU-13 and EU-15 researchers by creating new collaborative networks.

Our position also included a recommendation to increase the number of two-stage calls and the use of blind evaluations as appropriate. These proposals, along with our call to prioritise excellence whilst introducing more effective ways to address the R&I divide, were endorsed by decision-makers. They reflected the positive impact of our network, and the value of developing concrete proposals in an atmosphere of trust and mutual respect.



*Vincent Blondel (UCLouvain) and Jean-Eric Paquet (Director-General, DG RTD – European Commission) at the General Assembly in Louvain-la-Neuve (2018)*



*Ulrike Beisiegel (University of Göttingen) speaking at the 1 June 2017 Guild Forum, Solvay Library.*

## Innovation

Defining the interests of universities

The Guild was created at a time when the EU's R&I policy increased its focus on innovation. New funding instruments were being planned to form the European Innovation Council, intended to act as a one-stop-shop for innovators. In this context, The Guild created an Innovation Working Group to articulate the role and interests of universities in the innovation landscape.

Together with other university networks, The Guild emphasised an ecosystem approach to link universities with other actors producing innovations and called for better connections between R&I at the level of funding instruments.

Promoting an approach that is open to university-driven innovation was also a priority. The Commission recognised these concerns in Horizon Europe's legal base by introducing the EIC's Pathfinder instrument which will be dedicated to advanced research in the innovation pipeline. Furthermore, the legislative documents also reflected The Guild's plea to support innovation across the whole spectrum, from incremental to breakthrough innovation.





## Strengthening the role of Social Sciences, Arts & Humanities

As a network of comprehensive universities, Guild members were motivated from the beginning to address the low levels of funding allocated to collaborative research in the Social Sciences, Arts and Humanities (SSH) in Horizon 2020. Our network emphasised the urgency of addressing Europe's pressing societal concerns through research and innovation, which would require a prominent role for SSH, as equal partners to other disciplines. We joined forces with other academic stakeholders to address the increasingly innovation- and technology-driven R&I policy of the EU.

The Guild organised two public events, published several positions, and regularly put the topic on the agenda of high-level decision-makers at all EU institutions. All this contributed to the efforts of the wider academic community, which helped improve SSH mainstreaming across Horizon Europe.

By 2018, The Guild had also created a dedicated working group for its Deans of SSH. They contributed to the network's policy engagement by providing a scientific outlook on what research could achieve in areas such as democracy, cultural heritage and societal transformations related to technological development.

## Open Science

By the time that The Guild was created, the EU had decided to become a pioneer in the area of Open Science. The Guild embraced this priority by making Open Science the theme of its first public event in 2016 and of a Policy Lab in 2017.

Later it also established an Open Science working group to engage with the eight pillars of Open Science and create a space for members to share best practices and to discuss institutional approaches and policy initiatives related to the topic. For instance, The Guild actively engaged with Plan S by advocating for universities – as the hubs of publicly-funded research – to be at the centre of the debate for a successful transition towards Open Access.



*Jan Palmowski (The Guild) and Robert-Jan Smits (former Director-General, DG RTD) at the 2017 Guild Forum in Brussels, Solvay Library.*

## Strategic planning

### Presenting academic advice

In Spring 2019, significant parts of the Horizon Europe legislation had been agreed upon by EU institutions, and it was time for the Commission to start preparing for the implementation of the first years of the upcoming programme. This process, called Strategic Planning, presented a set of questions defining the nature of Horizon Europe: what pressing global challenges should R&I address in the coming years? And how will the programme approach horizontal aspects such as international collaboration, the integration of SSH, and citizen engagement? The Guild took a proactive approach, addressing these questions in its working groups and providing scientific input to the priority-setting process.

To create trusted spaces for faculties to interact and collaborate, The Guild established the following academic working groups: Deans for SSH, Deans for Law, Deans for Health, Deans for Theology, and a Digital and Industry group for senior academics. The scope and focus of the groups vary, some of them have a temporary character and some of them focus on collaborative activities. Most of them, however, contributed to setting the agenda for Horizon Europe by defining research priorities within their disciplines, and engaged with decision-makers in the process. This made The Guild the first university network to contribute to the Strategic Planning process when we published two position papers in March 2019.

*Eva Åkesson (Uppsala University)*

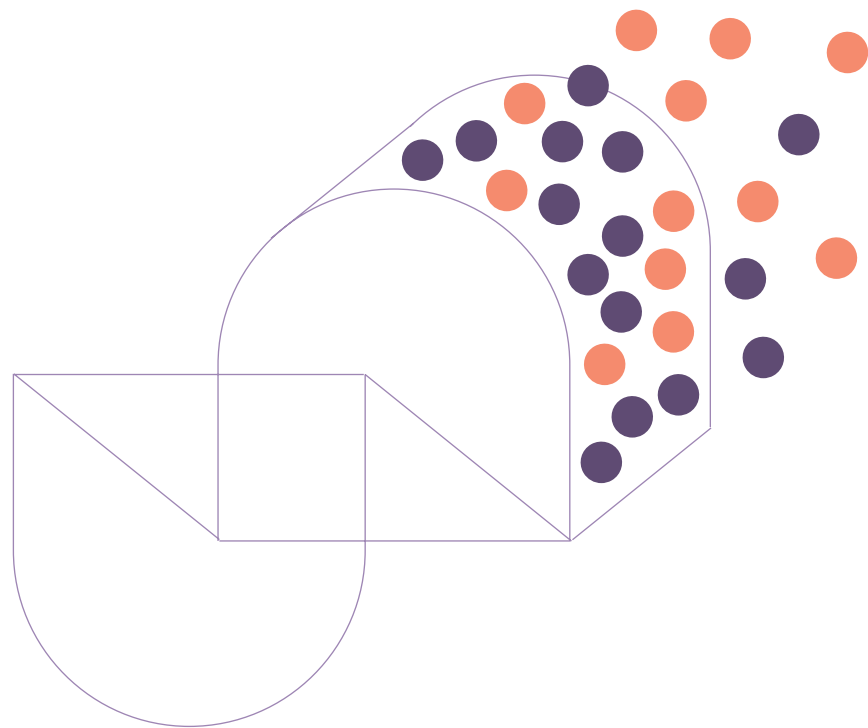


*Bernd Engler (University of Tübingen)  
and Jean-Pierre Bourguignon  
(President of the European Research Council)*





# Education



Engagement in education policy and in educational collaboration is one of the cornerstones of our network.

The Guild began to work in this area in 2017 through a group established to facilitate collaborative projects between members. Another working group was created to engage with education policy, and it contributed to the Interim Evaluation of Erasmus+ where we called for strengthening students' linguistic and intercultural skills and asked for greater alignment between Erasmus+ and Horizon 2020.

**A**t the same time, the Commission was renewing its Modernisation Agenda for higher education, which provided momentum for The Guild to amplify its voice in education policy. Our core recommendations included investing further in the Erasmus programme to enable a larger proportion of students to benefit from mobility experiences, as well as increasing support for institutional collaboration between higher education institutions. The Guild also emphasised the need for further improving the mobility schemes' impact on employability, by facilitating access to internships across disciplines and by strengthening support for transferable skills.

In 2018, The Guild was nominated to represent its members in three stakeholder groups governed by the Commission. These groups cover the development of Erasmus+ mobility and cooperation schemes, as well as the European framework for graduate tracking, and they enabled Guild universities to bring their expertise to the heart of EU policymaking in education.



Dana Samson (UCLouvain) and Antoine Cazé (University of Paris) at the General Assembly in Vienna, 2018.

## European Universities

A transformative scheme for university alliances

**A** significant development in EU education policy took place in September 2017, when French President Emmanuel Macron presented his vision for the future of European higher education. He proposed the creation of 24 leading university alliances where students, staff and researchers would benefit from borderless mobility and European degrees would be granted.

Whilst some academic networks were at first reticent towards the idea, The Guild decided to embrace it from the beginning and create a vision for a scheme that could be truly transformative in the university sector. The Guild presented a number of core elements for the initiative in March 2018, which were later reflected in the first pilot call for European Universities: the importance of the bottom-up nature of the alliances and the multi-level engagement of university governances, linking research excellence to education and innovation strategies, and sharing infrastructures.

Following the publication of The Guild's position on European Universities, many of our members started planning on turning these ideas into reality by establishing alliances responding to the ambitious objectives of the scheme. This further increased the momentum for our network to engage with the initiative. The topic was regularly discussed at The Guild's General Assemblies, at the Vice-Rectors' meetings and at the expert level where applications to receive the European Universities label were drafted.

The Guild continued influencing the concept throughout 2018 at the Commission's dedicated stakeholder group and hosted several bilateral meetings with key decision-makers. By the time the funding call was launched in late 2018, ten Guild members participated in the pilot call. Consequently, besides continuing to influence the policy development of European Universities, The Guild is looking forward to facilitating dialogue and the exchange of best practices between the alliances taking part in the scheme.



# Collaborative Spaces



*Research Support Offices working group, 2019.*

*Marco Kirm (University of Tartu), Brian Bech Nielsen (Aarhus University), Regina Hitzberger (University of Vienna), Daniela Amadio (King's College London) and Martin Čopič (University of Ljubljana) at the 2017 Guild Forum, Solvay Library.*

Learning from each other, forming close relationships, and developing trust have been integral to The Guild in its formative years. The General Assembly – where presidents meet twice per year to set the network's strategic direction and to discuss common issues – has helped define the climate of trust that characterises our meetings at all levels, where concerns and opportunities are shared openly and in confidence.

Guild universities have further strengthened their bilateral relations by initiating visits between faculty and university leaderships, enabling exchanges on strategic priorities and institutional development. In addition to these visits, The Guild has also offered collaborative spaces in Brussels for university delegations (comprising leadership teams, academic and professional services staff, and students) to engage with the EU.

From 2018, collaboration within our network gained traction. Working groups on, for instance, quality assurance and research support, developed activities to exchange best practice and foster capacity-building.

Alongside policy topics, groups at the academic level discussed common concerns in university governance, and how to foster academic collaboration, ranging from summer schools to research networks.

These initiatives have begun to affect how our universities work, including how they advise applicants for Horizon Europe grants. They have also provided opportunities for colleagues to work together: The Guild's contributions to the Strategic Planning process, for instance, reflected the sustained academic conversations held within and across faculties. And at least as importantly, these initial arenas for collaboration have sharpened a collective engagement not just with EU policies, but also with how researchers can best address broader societal concerns through new knowledge. They have enabled The Guild to develop a network in which concerns for policy and for collaboration inform and strengthen each other, to lead from the front.



# Looking Forward

The Guild's first three years form an excellent basis for embracing a number of future challenges that require an even more ambitious response from universities to the European policy agenda.

The challenge that lay at the heart of The Guild's foundation, how to maximise the benefit of collaboration amongst European universities, has been invigorated through the Commission's European Universities initiative. As different academic institutions within and beyond our network develop their own strategies to deepen collaboration, The Guild will continue to act as a platform for exchange with and between alliances, working with them to bring universities closer together, and amplify their voice in Europe.

Much remains to be done to advise policymakers on ways to overcome growing social, cultural and digital divides among Europe's population. These growing inequalities tend to pressure politicians to push for a research and innovation agenda that produces quick, applicable results

to support economic growth. The need for The Guild's influencing activities to support the entire research pipeline, including frontier-led research, will increase in future years.

Breakthroughs in artificial intelligence, computing power and communication technologies are rapidly transforming our lives. Our lifestyles, in turn, are having a devastating effect on the environment we live in. These tendencies not only increase the importance of science, they also create opportunities and challenges for political decision-making. It is essential that policy development builds on scientific evidence and insight in all areas of human knowledge. The need for effective dialogue between science and policymaking has never been greater, and it will continue to grow.

When Commission President Juncker launched a strategic debate about Europe's future in March 2017, The Guild asserted that to uphold "human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights" (Art. 1a, Treaty on the European Union), the EU needs to focus on the economic, social and cultural welfare of its peoples. The Guild will continue to argue that research and education not only sustain economic growth, they help us navigate change and the uncertainty it generates. Universities and policymakers together must find new ways to communicate how legitimate knowledge is produced and used, and how it can build trust, which is a basis for an inclusive public sphere.



# Credits

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