

Our ambitions

In writing this programme, I have been guided by a single question. In what circumstances will *we* be satisfied in 2021, when we look back on four years of policy and governance at the KU Leuven?

I have consciously written 'we' and not 'I'. I do not do this from the overconfident presumption that I write or speak for all of you or from the naive thought that this programme encapsulates the concerns, dreams and ambitions of every student, lecturer, researcher, clinician, professional and assistant.

I write 'we' because I believe that the programme I wish to propose enjoys broad support. It is based on my personal vision for the university. I have tested this vision against the opinions of many others. Some of them are disappointed about the way the university currently works and is administered. Others think that clear choices need to be made in the fields of research and educational policy, and that ways need to be found to reduce the pressure of work. Above all, many people are looking for greater depth and are asking themselves in which direction the university is really travelling. Together, we share the conviction that things can be done differently and better. *Plus est en nous*, at the **KU Leuven+**.

So when will *we* be satisfied when we look back on the next four years of policy? In the following paragraphs, I will outline ten guiding principles that attempt to make clear the direction in which I want to go. Or better still, the direction in which I want us to go *together*. Because you will all help to determine the choices that are finally made, in organs that are intended for that purpose, to which we will give the strength and effectiveness they need.

+ The university, a unique place

There are few places in our society where so much is possible as in a university. Education and research bring together talented people of different ages from different places, but all with the same common goal: improving existing insights and practices, and disseminating new knowledge. Successive generations of students continue to create inspiring interaction, while growing internationalization contributes towards the embedding of our work in a worldwide dynamic.

An unforced passion for knowledge at the KU Leuven leads to excellent results, not only in education and research but also in social engagement. The wide-ranging autonomy that members of staff enjoy is also for many a source of great happiness. Freedom and responsibility go hand in hand in academic circles. Our institution is so successful because everyone gives the very best of themselves every single day.

Even so, making a university is by no means self-evident in this age of high expectations, complex administrative procedures and diminishing finances. My first and guiding principle is that we must continue to cherish our passion for knowledge, as the motor for everything we do in the unique place that is **KU Leuven+**. For every decision we take, for every line we set out, I want to take due account of this passion. After all, the strength of any organization is based on the strength of its members.

+ An inclusive organization

It is one of the special characteristics of the KU Leuven that ever since its foundation in 1425 it has been an overtly 'professor-driven' university. Professors determine its policies and its choices; they provide leadership at different levels and in various sectors. Our university works as a partner organization, in accordance with a co-operative model and with the involvement of many interested parties.

Following the reorganization of the groups and faculties, it seemed that the administrative and technical personnel would be given greater opportunities to contribute on equal terms to thinking on policy matters, making use of their own specialized experience and expertise. However, this has not been consistently applied in recent years.

We need to move beyond our habit of thinking and acting in terms of fixed categories, by focusing less rigidly on statutory differences. The university belongs to the members of its community. It belongs to all of us. To express it in terms of the usual labels: the university belongs to the ZAP, the OP, the ATP, the ABAP and the students. Each of them has an important role to play and each contributes in their own distinct way to the growth and flourishing of our institution.

Every member of our university community must be recognized and respected in his or her own right. The contribution and expertise of each individual must be valued and appreciated. Thinking in terms of fixed categories divides people. An inclusive personnel policy should do the opposite and bring them together.

We want to involve our professional staff in the ATP, who are indispensable experts in their own domain, more closely in decision-making and governance. We want to give our administrative directors and departmental managers the position they deserve, in the manner that was intended when their functions were first created. We want the officials responsible for marketing, press and public relations, personnel, technical services, research and educational policy, etc. to be invited to take part in the discussions of the academic council, when subjects relating to their specialized field of expertise are on the agenda. We want to extend the representation of the ATP in the academic council. This method of working will lead to greater cohesion and result in more support for the decisions that are taken.

+ Putting the student central

Since the 1960s, the KU Leuven has evolved into a student-driven university, in which students have helped to develop participation and co-governance in a mature manner. This is something we want to keep. But we also want to take it a stage further.

At the present time, student participation is primarily *indirect*. They are represented in the governing and advisory bodies. We need to cherish this form of co-governance and co-determination. However, there is still much work to be done to give *direct* participation to every student. This direct participation needs to be given proper shape and content in lectures and seminars, in the auditoria and in the collective spaces. To strengthen this direct engagement of each and every student, we need to realign ourselves more closely with the core of research-supported academic education, whilst at the same time sharpening our attention for activating methods of work.

The LERU paper ['Excellent Education in Research-rich Universities'](#) is a powerful source of inspiration to initiate a debate about direct participation. A debate about how we can best make our students more familiar with research and involve them more intensively with it, so that we can prepare them for the labour market of the future. A dialogue focusing on the most urgent themes: the enhancement of formative and summative evaluation, the development of a coherent testing policy, and a move away from a rigid examination logic. A discussion about how we can help lecturers, both junior and senior, to work together as sparring partners for the promotion of challenging and enabling education. A conversation, with students as experts, about how we can develop a rich eco-system through intra- and extra-curricular learning experiences.

The student has been central in the KU Leuven for many years. We will only look back with satisfaction if this approach is more rigorously adopted in every course unit and in all programmes.

+ The balance between competition and collaboration

One of the most fundamental challenges for the future of our university is to find the optimal level of competition to obtain the research funding and the operational resources we need. This is an optimum that is very difficult, if not impossible, to calculate.

Nevertheless, there are many who feel, as I do, that we are currently some way off achieving a healthy balance. Competition and market forces are necessary and healthy. They are a motor for excellence and allow already excellent teams to develop further. But the argument that 'competition is good' should not lead us to the conclusion that 'more competition is better'. Competition and market forces no longer fulfil their function if we find ourselves locked in a situation where every euro needs to be fought for, where basic funding is wafer-thin, and where (many) professors, research groups, departments and faculties need to constantly project themselves on 'the market' in order to guarantee their continuity.

We are facing a problem of 'application fatigue'. There is increasing frustration because the game is played with ridiculously long formats and templates, which are different for each match. Worse still, there is a seeming inability to define priority research lines across different disciplines.

We will look back with satisfaction in four years time if we have conducted a fruitful debate about shifting the focus from the motivation of individuals to the support of groups; if we have made choices about minimum requirements for faculties and departments and about basic funding (unconditional or not).

+ Cooperation between the Groups

The way the university looks today is not, in our opinion, the way a university of the future should look. Compartmentalization into groups and disciplines limits our possibilities and therefore frustrates our ambitions.

Although in the past I actively worked to promote the expansion of the groups, today I now have serious doubts about the current group structure. The groups are a 'manageable' level for governance and administration. But we need to look more frequently beyond group boundaries. The setting up of joint initiatives and the creation of cross-group institutions should be encouraged, rather than discouraged. Metaforum can play an important pioneering role in this respect.

We will look back with satisfaction if we have made possible joint appointments in faculties; have created more double and joint diplomas at both bachelor and master level; have worked to promote greater interdisciplinarity, built on a strong disciplinary basis; have further developed Metaforum and better anchored it in the breadth and depth of our institution; have helped to make dialogue between different disciplines self-evident.

We will feel more secure, when determining the future organization of our own university, if we allow ourselves to be inspired by the example of others and, in particular, how they have been able to bring different disciplines together.

+ Work smart, not hard

A smarter organization of work leads to a higher well-being. This smarter organization can only be achieved when everyone, irrespective of the level they belong to, is allowed to think along about how, when and with whom the work is being done. To organize work smarter also involves positive motivation of the individual and structures that are set up for the people and not the other way around. Smart work leads to better results than hard work and creates a better balance between work and the other things we find important in life.

Smart organizing means that we arrange every administrative workflow transparently, based on the needs of the user and without unnecessary nuisance. Smart work goes hand in hand with shorter decision processes and less unnecessary fine-tuning and

coordination. It means to work in mutual trust, especially between academics and administrative personnel. Smart work heads for contemporary organizing, with an open mind towards the work of the ATP, independent of time and place.

To organize smartly demands here and there for an improvement of complex structures. For example the way faculties, departments, technology clusters and campuses are intertwined in the Group Science, Engineering and Technology. Or the clinical services that are sometimes scattered among multiple departments. The clinical community must come first, a community where professors, doctors, assistants, researchers, nurses, paramedics and technicians on a par develop, each from their own expertise, groundbreaking medicine.

Smart work concerns each and every one of you, on a small and on a larger scale and in every entity of the KU Leuven. There are excellent examples of smart organizing in many entities, faculties and departments. I want to bring these examples to the surface, so that we can all benefit from them.

+ A connected administration

Differences of opinion and vision are often enriching. Differences need to be cherished and utilized. Too much unanimity leads to an oversimplification of reality.

Differences of opinion within a university administration do not negate cohesion. We want an administration that is open to diversity and sees this as a source of creativity. But we also want to work towards and with an administration in which the group of vice-rectors seeks to elaborate and protect common lines of action, lines which are more focused on the strengthening of the whole rather than on the defence of just a part.

We will look back with satisfaction on the next four years of governance if cohesion is broadly visible and tangible; if a vice-rector for education has also taken genuine interest in a research plan and vice versa; if all the vice-rectors, under the guiding hand of the rector, have worked together as a team to create a plan for the development of a truly international university, a plan that can be supported by the whole university community and can serve as a lever for scientific research, academic education and social engagement; if the attention devoted to sustainability, diversity and equal opportunities takes root throughout our institution in its entirety, both in heads and in structures.

We will be satisfied if the gap between policy and general management is completely closed, because it is only when both sides work together in harmony that our university is truly strong.

This requires a connective and unifying rector, who not only looks towards the 'outside' but also devotes equal attention to the 'inside' of the university.

+ A single policy plan with lateral connections

In recent years we have seen commendable efforts to incorporate governance choices into policy plans: a policy plan for research, a vision document for education and students, a memorandum for internationalization, a programme for diversity and equal opportunities, a code for sustainability, etc. There is a need, however, for lateral connections between these different plans, a common denominator that can bring them all together.

At the KU Leuven, we far too often try to optimize specific elements, rather than having a vision of the wider picture. This is a well-known phenomenon in organizational theory: the optimization of constituent parts leads to the sub-optimization of the whole. This applies both to grand strategy and operation details. We are feeling the effects of this most severely in terms of excessive pressure of work and conflicting demands on our time. This will be familiar to anyone who has ever had to rush to complete a programme change by a given date, whilst simultaneously preparing a C1 project proposal for submission by the same deadline, often during the same period when there are hundreds of exams to correct.

What **KU Leuven+** offers is an integrated policy plan for the entire institution, focused on its future; a policy plan that forms a coherent and collective story and looks beyond the short-term four-year period of the mandate.

We need a policy plan that is developed, shared and supported by the whole of the Common Office and is discussed with all sections of our university. In short, a rector's plan and a plan for the university he represents.

+ Global and international, with ambition

The KU Leuven is an outstanding educational institution, with a reputation for excellence that is reflected in numerous important rankings. Our university is an organization of which we can rightly be proud. The commitment and engagement shown by everyone connected with the university is testimony to that pride. We have all of us, together with our many predecessors, helped to make this university what it is today.

However, there is no room for complacency. Nor should we feel superior towards other universities, whether at home or abroad. We need to make better use of our own strengths and work more closely with others to get more things done from the government.

We need to set the bar higher, when we search for international partners, participate in Erasmus Mundus programmes and invest in preferential collaborations. It is essential to do this, in consultation with the faculties and departments, since this will maximize opportunities for students, lecturers and researchers.

The KU Leuven is a Flemish university, and that is the way it should be. However, we will only be able to do full and authentic justice to that Flemish identity if the focus of our mentality, culture and ambitions is global and international. Only then will we be able to truly make our university a bridge to the world for our region and for the Flemish Community.

We will look back with satisfaction if we can expand, transmit and socially valorise our knowledge in an open and constructive spirit of collaboration with other institutions: with the scientific institutes to which we are structurally linked (including IMEC, VIB and the Vlerick Business School) and with the university colleges that form part of the KU Leuven Association; with the other Flemish universities and scientific institutes; with other Belgian universities and, in particular, our sister university of UC Louvain; with neighbouring institutions like Aachen, Eindhoven, Maastricht and Tilburg; with the other partner universities in LERU.

We will look back in satisfaction if the universities that measure themselves against Leuven create joint and double degrees for our students; if we have once again developed a credible story in the field of developmental collaboration with universities and other educational institutions in the poorest countries and regions, where we can help to mobilize intellectual potential and create opportunities to the benefit of local communities.

+ The university of tomorrow

In our university we are too concerned with the trends and problems of the here and now. The agendas of the administrative, advisory and consultation organs are all too often focused on the short term. This is both tempting and understandable, but at the same time it is also dangerous. We are searching for solutions to the problems that face us *today*. However, our university urgently needs to ask itself where we will stand *tomorrow*, in 2025, in 2030... We will therefore look back with satisfaction if we not only successfully tackle the problems of the present, but have also set out the first guidelines for the architecture of our university's future; if by 2020 the university has a vision and a plan for 2040.

The **KU Leuven+** will focus on *improvement*. Not on 'change for change's sake', but on real improvements that will make us ready to face the future. This is not always possible within our existing organs and structures, because they are part of a script that we have been following rigorously for decades. For this reason, we want to ensure that the academic council, the faculties, the departments and the services are nourished by a representative *academic forum* that looks to the long term and has the authority to decide which internal and external experts it wants to use.

We will encourage the diverse membership of the forum to think about the future of academic careers and the professorship; about our mission statement; about our electoral and decision-making processes; about the architectural structure of our auditoria; about the relations between professors, students, professional staff, researchers and clinicians; about the best way to support and guide our students; about the best way to achieve greater integrity and interdisciplinarity.

Our programme

The following paragraphs outline our programme. It is possible that this programme contains suggested preferences that are not yet fully mature. Should this become apparent during subsequent debate, I would be pleased to hear it. Because debate and campaign should not be reduced to a simple matter of winning and losing.

Above all, debate and campaign are a unique opportunity to formulate viable ideas and feasible plans with input from you all; a chance to gauge opinion about the different options to make this university an even stronger and more cohesive whole.

As far as possible, the programme avoids the use of categories and separate entities. As a result, we have no individual programmes for ATP, ABAP, ZAP, etc. Nor do we discuss the campuses individually, although we do, of course, devote attention to their specific needs in a number of different areas. Our starting point is an inclusive programme.

There is no separate chapter about the ATP, because we do not wish to approach these valuable associates, who form the backbone of our university, as a separate category. They are an integral part of the totality of our university, and will be given a place that reflects this.

There is also no separate chapter about researchers and doctorandi, because we also wish to give them the place they merit, as fully-fledged members of our research units, departments and centres. We do not talk about programme points for junior ZAP, female professors, emeriti, male lecturers or clinicians, because an eye for difference starts with inclusion in the whole. We do have a chapter about the scientific community and academic career.

Although 'the campuses' receive the necessary attention throughout the text, we have made no explicit distinction in our approach between Leuven and 'the campuses'. What applies for Leuven must also apply for Bruges, Ghent, Antwerp, Aalst, Kortrijk, Sint-Katelijne-Waver, Geel, Brussels and Diepenbeek. All these places are Leuven: **KU Leuven+.**

For the same reason, we have also made no distinction between different groups, faculties and departments, and treat the university hospital as part of the greater whole.

We have devoted great thought and attention to the future of our students. This attention is evident throughout the different chapters of our programme, but also in a section about education and student policy that will appeal to students, teaching staff, support staff and researchers alike.