



LE  
RU

PUSHING  
THE FRONTIERS  
OF INNOVATIVE  
RESEARCH  
2002-2022



LERU  
The Second Decade  
2012-2022



**Bigger and stronger**  
**Respected and connected**

This booklet tells the story of LERU's second decade, recalling some of LERU's major milestones, activities and accomplishments. As the title suggests, we have built this story on four key words for LERU's second decade: we have become bigger and stronger; we are widely respected and connected. In addition to the narrative, pictures and infographics, we have also tried to show in an up-close and personal way how the LERU community acts and interacts and what it means for people to be involved in LERU. At the end of each key word section, each of the past four Chairs reflects on his experience of being at the helm of LERU in the second decade. Each section also puts the spotlight on a few people who have been involved in LERU's groups and activities. In a final section LERU's current Chair, Prof. Karen Maex, Rector Magnificus of the University of Amsterdam (UVA), looks ahead at LERU's third decade.

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# Foreword

## “Leading by example”

2002  
2022

This was and still is the first leitmotiv of the League of European Research Universities (LERU) since its creation in 2002. For more than 20 years now, LERU has been the leading voice promoting frontier research, innovation and research-based education in the European Union. This booklet “The Second Decade”, presented at the occasion of LERU’s 20th anniversary, illustrates this abundantly. It shows the impact of LERU’s activities on many topics of EU research, innovation and education policy, and beyond. As the title of this booklet, developed by its editor, Dr Katrien Maes, clearly states: LERU has grown bigger, stronger, more respected and more connected during its second decade.

This is not so obvious as it may seem. The biotope of LERU and its members has changed significantly since LERU’s creation in 2002. The challenges for universities and their many societal partners and interlocutors have increased exponentially and were exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic of the last two years. And this already complicated world became even more unsettled in early 2022 with the war in Ukraine. The full impact of this conflict is not yet known, but one can already say now, with certainty, that it is a geopolitical game changer which will have far reaching consequences for the European Union, its member states, its citizens, its universities.

In this complex world, research-intensive universities, such as LERU’s members, are and will remain a guiding societal force: through our research, innovation and education activities, society must be able to tackle the many societal challenges with which it is confronted. LERU’s second leitmotiv, excellence in diversity, must make sure that the researchers we train and the students we educate, pursue and deliver the excellence society needs in many different shapes, locations and moments.

In order to be able to do this, universities need a trustful and reliable partnership with local, national and European authorities, which guarantees their academic freedom and institutional autonomy, and ensures an open flow of knowledge. Together with the necessary funding, this will give them the possibility to collaborate with the most suitable partners worldwide. As we have seen during the Covid-19 pandemic, international collaboration is key for the progress of frontier research and the solution of known, emerging and still unknown societal problems. That is why the EU, notwithstanding its policy on “strategic autonomy”, must open up, again, to research-innovation-education champions outside the EU, in the first place the United Kingdom and Switzerland.

So, let us celebrate our successful second decade; we have earned it. But let us also look ahead to the third one: even though it will be as or even more challenging than the first and second decades, LERU and its members are ready for it!



**Prof. Kurt Deketelaere**  
LERU Secretary-  
General

2002  
2012

# LERU's first decade

## In a nutshell

LERU was founded in 2002 as an association of 12 research-intensive universities with common viewpoints on higher education and research. It acts as a powerful advocate for Europe's research-intensive universities, speaking up on many issues related to European research, innovation and education policies.

Over the past 20 years, LERU has become a valued interlocutor for the European Commission and other EU bodies. Through their membership, the current 23 LERU members benefit from mutual learning and the exchange of good practices within the network, and from opportunities to influence national agendas with relevant European clout and backing.

The membership was expanded twice in the first decade, with eight and two universities joining in 2006 and 2010, respectively, and one university leaving (the Karolinska Institute, 1 March 2011).

LERU membership, which is by invitation only, follows an evaluation against a broad set of quantitative and qualitative criteria, including research volume, impact and funding, strengths in PhD training, size and disciplinary breadth, and peer-recognised academic excellence.



Signing of the letter of intent by the twelve founding members of LERU, Leiden, July 2002

## Reflections by David Livesey, LERU Secretary-General 2005-2009

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**Dr David Livesey**  
LERU Secretary-  
General 2005-2009

From its outset, LERU has been committed to a broad advancement of the understanding by European governments of the importance of world-class research-intensive universities, even though by design it included a small group of members. It was therefore a privilege as the second Secretary-General to engage with many others in helping the European Union to increase this understanding and to support research funding programmes focussed on excellence based on competition.

Whereas engaging with the European Commission and Parliament was an early ambition that progressed well, the European

Council, the route to which is via national governments, remained more elusive. Research-intensive universities for many national governments were a small part of their higher education agenda. Perhaps, not surprisingly, one of the most influential and to-this-day relevant LERU papers was 'What are universities for?' (Boulton and Lucas, 2008), in which "loose thinking" by governments and society about the role of universities is exposed and universities' speaking-truth-to-power responsibility is called upon.

By creating, across its members, groups of vice-rectors, deans and other senior leadership members, LERU built up a solid foundation for exchanging university policies and good practice between members and for developing and advocating its policies and positions in a way which both met the needs of the LERU universities and also advanced members' own local positions.

My being Secretary-General of LERU from 2005 until 2009 was a wonderful way to end my academic career. My previous university roles had had an inward focus. Hence, I much enjoyed the travelling and the diversity of people with whom I conversed on LERU's behalf at a very opportune time for advocating excellence. It was exciting and great fun working with my very able LERU staff colleagues to build a team from almost nothing, not least because they indulged my frequent and not always totally relevant metaphors and similes.

2012  
2022

# LERU's second decade

## A few highlights



### 2012

- Bernd Huber is LERU's third Chair
- LERU 10th anniversary, with the anniversary conference in May at the Universitat de Barcelona, as one of the highlights
- ERA Memorandum of Understanding signed with the European Commission

### 2013

- First global meeting of LERU partner networks and Hefei statement
- LERU delivers key messages for Horizon 2020 and Erasmus+
- Speech by Herman van Rompuy, President of the EU Council, at the LERU Alumni Chapter event

### 2014

- Alain Beretz appointed fourth Chair
- LERU delivers key messages to the new European Commission and Parliament
- Launch of the LERU Law PhD Exchange Scheme

### 2015

- LERU meets with its global partners and United Nations in Geneva, and signs up to UN Academic Impact principles
- LERU calls for fundamental change to the financial model behind journal publishing
- LERU hosts MEPs and Nobel laureates' conversation on animal research at the European Parliament

### 2016

- Bert van der Zwaan appointed fifth Chair
- First meeting of LERU and 7 Central European universities
- LERU statement on open access with almost 10,000 signatures handed over at the EU Competitiveness Council under the Dutch Presidency





## 2017

- LERU celebrates its 15th anniversary with a conference on science diplomacy
- LERU enlarges to 23: the University of Copenhagen and Trinity College Dublin become members
- Re-organisation of LERU's working groups

## 2018

- Jean Chambaz appointed sixth Chair
- LERU initiates joint actions with other European university associations on the Horizon Europe budget and programme proposal
- LERU obtains consultative status with the UN's ECOSOC

## 2019

- LERU engages in self-assessment and organisational development
- LERU delivers key messages to the new European Commission and Parliament
- LERU receives University of Geneva Honorary Medal

## 2020

- LERU goes online as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic
- LERU organises its first townhall meeting on artificial intelligence
- LERU and 14 associations representing more than 800 universities call for an ambitious long-term EU budget for research, innovation and education

## 2021

- Karen Maex appointed seventh Chair
- LERU New Year's Debate about China and Europe on the New Silk Road
- LERU, with four other university networks, sign the Prague Declaration II to reaffirm their commitment to cooperation, the free exchange of ideas, autonomy, democracy, tolerance and humanism

## 2022

- LERU 20th anniversary, with the anniversary conference in May at the Universiteit Leiden, as one of the highlights

# A bigger LERU – Increasing our size

## A small but important third enlargement

LERU had successfully expanded twice in the first decade, from 12 to 20 members in 2006 and from 20 to 22 in 2010. At the start of the second decade the organisation was well established and flourished. Still, as a matter of good governance, the LERU Rectors periodically reconsider membership in relation to LERU's long-term plans and strategic needs. As Prof. Huber, LERU's third Chair, explains in his interview, membership expansion in LERU starts with a research-focused bibliometric analysis, but there are other, qualitative and strategic factors to consider.

LERU's enlargement discussion started for a third time in 2015 and resulted in two new members joining on 1 January 2017. With the University of Copenhagen and Trinity College Dublin, two leading universities in different countries were added to strengthen LERU, bringing the total number of members to 23.

In the third decade LERU also developed ties with other universities and university networks in Europe, in particular with seven Central-European universities, and by initiating regular meetings with similar networks of research-intensive universities across the globe, as described in the “Connected” section further down.

“Bigger and stronger.  
Respected and connected.”



**777,046**

Total number of students  
at LERU universities  
in 2020-2021



**201,024**

Total number of staff  
at LERU universities  
in 2020-2021



University of Copenhagen



Trinity College Dublin

## The 2021-2022 Board of Directors



**Prof. Karen Maex**  
LERU Chair and Rector Magnificus  
University of Amsterdam



**Prof. Bernhard Eitel**  
LERU Board Member and Rector  
of Universität Heidelberg



**Prof. Yves Flückiger**  
LERU Board Member and Rector  
of Université de Genève



### LERU Chairs 2012-2022

Bernd Huber	16/05/2008	17/05/2014
Alain Beretz	17/05/2014	18/11/2016
	Board member since March 2011	
Bert van der Zwaan	18/11/2016	22/05/2018
	Board member since May 2014	
Jean Chambaz	22/05/2018	22/05/2021
Karen Maex	22/05/2021	present
	Board member since May 2018	

### LERU Board of Directors 2012-2022

Malcolm Grant	1/10/2009	31/08/2013
Andrew Hamilton	01/09/2013	31/12/2015
Alice Gast	01/01/2016	22/05/2018
Jukka Kola	19/11/2016	22/05/2018
Michael Arthur	22/05/2018	21/11/2020
Yves Flückiger	21/11/2020	present
Bernhard Eitel	22/05/2021	present

### Changing of the guard

The LERU Rectors' Assembly, which constitutes LERU's highest decision-making body, appoints a Board of Directors and among them a Chair. The Board members and Chair are elected among the Heads of the LERU universities and serve a renewable three-year term, or less if they cease to be the Head of their institution.

In the second decade, chairmanship changed hands four times and also Board members rotated on a regular basis (see table). In five interviews spread over this booklet, the four past Chairs and the current Chair reflect on what LERU has achieved and what has stood out to them.

## LERU Office 2012-2022

Kurt Deketelaere	1/07/2009	present
Katrien Maes	1/02/2004	present
Laura Keustermans	15/01/2007	present
Bart Valkenaers	14/05/2009	present
Veerle Van Kerckhove	1/09/2009	present
Alea López de San Román	1/11/2013	16/07/2018
Francesca Bucci	9/01/2017	present
Claire Gray	9/01/2017	present
Alain Smolders	1/09/2018	present
Caro Dralants	5/10/2020	31/05/2021
Esther Driessens	5/07/2021	present
Yasmine Nowicki	5/07/2021	present

**From left to right: Yasmine Nowicki, Bart Valkenaers, Francesca Bucci, Kurt Deketelaere, Katrien Maes, Laura Keustermans, Alain Smolders, Claire Gray, Esther Driessens**



Throughout the second decade, the LERU Office has been headed by Prof. Kurt Deketelaere, who was appointed in 2009 as LERU's third Secretary-General, and reappointed in 2014 and 2019. The Office staff grew steadily along with the increase in members and activities, from five employees in 2012 to ten (9.3 full-time equivalents) in 2022, including the Secretary-General.

### The number of groups and people involved in LERU increases

As LERU grew, so did the number of individuals involved at the member universities. Among the senior leadership, upper management, professional and academic staff, dozens of staff at each member university participate in LERU activities. The number of various committees and groups working on an increasing range of issues grew steadily from 18 in 2012 to 32 in 2021. The spotlights in this section and the next ones represent just a handful of testimonies from LERU universities' representatives, and a few also from elsewhere, who have been working at the coalface with LERU.

As the number of groups working within LERU grew, and with it the number of people and resources needed to make it work, it became clear by 2015 that a review of how, and how many, LERU groups were set up and operated would be necessary. More about this review and the resulting reform of LERU groups can be found in the "Stronger" section.



## Equality, diversity and inclusion

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**Prof. Jadranka Gvozdanović was the Chair of the (now) LERU policy group Equality, Diversity and Inclusion and (previously) the Thematic Group Gender until 2021, and the lead author of several LERU papers on gender equality in academia. She is a Professor of Slavic Linguistics at the University of Heidelberg, where she has also served as Rector's Envoy for gender equality.**

Jadranka, you have been instrumental in developing LERU's work on gender, right from the start when the working group was set up in 2011. You chaired the group when it became a policy group and the remit was broadened to equality, diversity and inclusion. What is for you the benefit or value of collaboration between the academic and managerial leaders from 23 LERU universities and 12 countries in Europe on this topic? Can you give an example?

In early 2011, before the European Parliament resolution of 17 November 2011 on gender mainstreaming, Katrien Maes contacted gender Equality Officers of the LERU universities with the proposal to coordinate LERU's work on gender. This group published the first LERU paper on gender in 2012 ('Women, Research and Universities: Excellence without Gender Bias') and the paper was well received, widely cited and applied. Three more papers followed and all of them had a significant impact on European, national and university-level policies. The focus increasingly shifted from gender to equality, diversity and inclusion and the group became a Policy Group in 2019. As Chair I witnessed a growing impact of this group on all policy levels from providing quality standards for equality in research and organisation at LERU universities to actively shaping priorities for Gender Equality Plans for Horizon Europe.





## Interview with Bernd Huber, LERU's third Chair

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**Prof. Bernd Huber was LERU's Chair from May 2008 until May 2014. He has been the President of Ludwig-Maximilians Universität München since October 2002, where he was reappointed for a fifth term in 2019. He is a Professor of Economics.**

### What stands out from your years as Chair of LERU?

I particularly remember travelling to China in 2013, to sign the Hefei statement on the key characteristics of research universities. This was an important part of LERU's globalisation, since it brought together university networks from North America, Australia and China. But there was also a funny side: after the signing, there was an official photograph, but because the nine Chinese universities had signed individually, rather than as a network, they all wanted to join in, and the photograph just got larger and larger [laughs].

### You were Chair in the first and second decades. How has LERU changed?

When I became Chair, in 2008, there was an underlying optimism in Europe. There was a feeling that European integration would proceed further, and we would make progress on many aspects of scientific cooperation. Then the financial market crashed, and that changed the landscape a great deal. No-one would have imagined in the first decade, for example, that the UK might eventually leave the European Union. So, in all, I think LERU's second decade was harder than its first.



### Was expanding LERU's membership a hot topic at this time?

For the second enlargement, we spent so much time discussing which universities might be admitted, which should not, that it was distracting us from LERU's main role, which is to be a lobbying organisation making the case for basic research. So, once that process was concluded, I suggested we pause all discussions of further expansion for some time. Having this pause on new members allowed us to focus our efforts, and intensify our contacts with the EU institutions. One outcome, which I'm still proud of, was that we were able to establish LERU as an official stakeholder in EU policy discussions through a memorandum of understanding with the European Commission.

### What happened when that pause in discussing new members ended?

One very helpful development was that we had a more refined bibliometric approach to analysing which universities might be invited to join LERU. But we still had to discuss the geographical balance of LERU's membership. We'd already admitted the University of Barcelona in the 2010 enlargement, which was an important step in showing that we had a commitment to southern Europe, but I am positive that, in the future, universities from Central and Eastern Europe will achieve a performance comparable to those of the LERU universities.

### **At one point a form of associate membership was discussed...**

I was strongly opposed to that. It would have produced a two-class system, which would have been very unwise politically, and unfair, if you consider the history of Eastern Europe. I could not imagine a situation where LERU universities were divided into different member categories. That would not have been the message we intended to send.

### **Yet LERU did expand in the second decade.**

After it became clear that it was too soon to admit a university from Central and Eastern Europe, it was still important that we enlarge the number of countries represented by LERU. And the inclusion of Trinity College Dublin in Ireland and the University of Copenhagen in Denmark achieved that and was supported by the research metrics.

### **How did the expansion change things?**

For an organisation like LERU there are opportunities and risks in expansion. You represent more universities and broaden your portfolio, so to speak, and that is clearly beneficial. If LERU speaks for 23 universities, it is better than speaking just for 10 universities, particularly if the 23 universities are all strong and highly respected academic institutions. But the risk, if you expand too quickly, is that the commitment of individual rectors might decline. In the first decade, LERU was small, and all the Rectors were very close, so it felt as if the success of the organisation depended on us as individuals.

### **How can you tell if LERU's influence is being felt?**

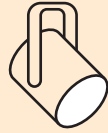
The simplest measure of influence is that people return your calls [laughs]. That is the first indication that you are not completely irrelevant. But in all seriousness, we can see that LERU's policy papers are read, and are making a significant contribution to the debate. And ultimately the fact that we were accepted as a stakeholder in the European policy debate was a signal that LERU is viewed as an influential organisation.

### **Are there examples where you think LERU has made a difference?**

We've had many successes. One example is that we were able to shape the proposal for the European Institute of Innovation and Technology, so that it became a network, strengthening existing universities, rather than a single, physical institute starting from scratch. Another is that we were instrumental in ensuring that the European Research Council has remained an organisation that supports basic research, judged solely on scientific quality, without political interventions.

### **Are there other signs of LERU's success?**

The commitment from its members is not only a sign, but one of the main reasons for LERU's success. While LERU has grown, only one member has ever left. That was the Karolinska Institute, and to a certain extent that made sense, because it is essentially a medical university and did not fit into the spectrum of comprehensive universities that most LERU members represent.



## Interdisciplinarity for stronger links

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**Prof. Raul Ramos has been a member of the LERU Policy Group of Social Sciences, Humanities and Arts Deans since April 2017, and a steering group member as of April 2018, until he was appointed Vice-Rector Internationalisation Policy at the Universitat de Barcelona in the spring of 2022. He is a Professor of Applied Economics.**

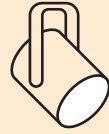
Raul, through your involvement with the LERU group of Deans of Social Sciences, Humanities and Arts, you are also connected to the other groups of Deans in LERU (Deans of Biomedicine and Deans of Natural Sciences). Since a few years, the three Deans groups have held joint meetings. How important is it to connect the SSHA Deans to Deans in other disciplines? Can you give an example?

LERU's 2017 position paper on interdisciplinarity formulated recommendations for universities, governments and funders on how they can incorporate interdisciplinarity in their policies and programmes. The initiative to organise joint meetings from different disciplines is a good sign of LERU's commitment to this strategy. I remember attending the face-to-face joint meeting of the Deans groups on 5 March 2020. As a quantitative economist working also on migration-related topics, I found the meeting really inspiring, especially the break-out sessions I attended on artificial intelligence and sustainable development.

I think that this initiative has helped to create stronger links and synergies between the representatives of the different groups, and it constitutes a first step towards the creation of a virtuous circle between disciplinarity and interdisciplinarity, in education, research and innovation.







## Highly trusted professionals

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**Dr Laure Ogniois is a steering group member of the LERU Policy Group Research Integrity and member of the Ad-Hoc Group Dual Use. She has also been involved in the Vice-Rectors Research group in the last decade. She is Director of Research Services at the Université de Genève and holds a PhD in Modern Swiss History and an MPA in Science Management.**

Laure, you have been involved in the work of several LERU groups, covering research integrity, dual use, and other research issues dealt with in the LERU Vice-Rectors Research group. What benefit or value have you derived from your LERU involvement for your work at the Université de Genève? Can you give an example?

For me, LERU is much more than an association of excellent research-intensive universities in Europe. It is a network of highly trusted professionals and friends from all over the continent, moved by common academic and societal values, and driven by common institutional challenges. It is a second home you always can rely on and a spirit of life-long learning and better performing in a respectful manner.

In my capacity as Director of Research Services at the University of Geneva, I have greatly benefitted from LERU over the last decade in finding a strong and valued partner for pushing the lines inside the institution and also in the country. For instance, LERU has always been a great voice in advocating for the participation of Switzerland to the EU Framework Programme and a considerable asset for Swiss institutions in making Bern aware of the importance of the Swiss participation in the EU programmes. In the LERU Integrity community, I am now tackling the topic of whistleblowers protection as a safeguard of science integrity. I am very confident that putting this issue on the agenda will help all our institutions to move forward with our perception of whistleblowers and the protection needed.

I am deeply grateful to LERU for its commitment in a time where a strong voice is needed for tackling academic and societal challenges globally. I wish LERU all the best for the future.

# A stronger LERU – Developing and assessing our operations

## **Making the LERU working groups stronger**

As mentioned in the previous section, by 2015 it had become clear that a reform of how LERU groups were set up and operated would be necessary for the network to work successfully without overburdening available resources at the member universities and at the LERU Office. Much time was devoted to this internal reorganisation in 2016, which took effect in 2017. The reform created four different types of groups (policy, thematic, network and ad-hoc groups), which have different remits and ways of working. It has successfully strengthened LERU's dual function of and interaction between policy development and advocacy on the one hand and mutual learning and exchange on the other hand.

## **Assessing LERU to make it stronger**

Another major milestone in LERU's second decade was an internal self-assessment carried out in 2018-2019. The LERU universities assessed the added value of LERU to them, and vice versa. The LERU Office also ran a self-assessment on its operations, activities and output. Conclusions and an action plan were adopted by the Rectors in May 2020 and implemented in the 2021 work plan. The self-assessment confirmed the member universities' commitment to the network and to each other as partners, as Prof. Jean Chambaz, LERU's fourth Chair, says in his interview. It also reaffirmed LERU's core business of developing policy positions with which to influence the European higher education, research and innovation spheres, and LERU's ambition to be the leading voice of and advocate for Europe's research-intensive universities.

At the same time, it was argued, LERU should arm itself against the challenges of today and tomorrow, which turned out to be imminent when the Covid-19 pandemic erupted in early 2020. LERU could be even more outspoken and bolder, it was suggested, and could focus on further increasing its impact. The evaluation also produced recommendations for operational changes, for example on LERU publications, how groups operate, for example with more online meetings, joint group meetings (cf. spotlight with Prof. Raul Ramos), etc. The work of LERU group of senior officers, some of whom have been active since LERU's early days, was and continues to be crucial to LERU's smooth operation (cf. spotlight with Ms Raffaella Delli Santi).

## **Stronger universities**

What LERU has achieved in terms of policy development and advocacy at the European level and beyond has been possible thanks to the active engagement of the member universities. One could therefore ask: what has been in it for them? First of all, if LERU helps to improve conditions for research, innovation and education at the EU level, it often benefits universities directly, for example with more EU budget for education, innovation and research or with access to programmes. In recent years LERU has also worked tirelessly for access to Horizon Europe and Erasmus for our UK and Swiss members. Moreover, it is fair to say that the discussions, exchange of views and learning from each other have also benefited the LERU universities in other ways. Being part of LERU has helped universities to develop or progress strategies within the university in some instances, in others, it has given them the ammunition to push things at the national level.





**88**

LERU policy papers,  
notes, statements and  
declarations (2012-2021)



**168**

LERU news releases  
and opinion pieces  
(2012-2021)



**51**

Major, public LERU  
events (2012-2021)



**9,500+**

followers on Twitter  
in 2021



**1,700+**

followers on LinkedIn  
in 2021



**20,913**

Number of doctoral  
degrees conferred  
by LERU universities  
in 2020-2021



## LERU Doctoral Summer School

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**Prof. David Bogle has been the Chair of the LERU policy group on doctoral studies since 2009, and the lead author of several LERU papers on doctoral education. He is Pro-Vice-Provost of the Doctoral School at University College London, and a professor of chemical engineering.**

A resounding success story has been the LERU doctoral summer school. In its twelfth edition in 2022, the initiative has become a highly attractive and successful professional and personal development programme for about 50 bright young minds meeting around a non-discipline-specific theme of interest every year since 2010 (although, due to the corona pandemic, it was postponed in 2020 and held online in 2021). The participants are semi-advanced doctoral researchers selected on the basis of a university-wide competition at LERU members, and, since 2016, at the CE7 universities.

Soon after forming the doctoral studies policy group in 2009 we launched the first LERU doctoral summer school in 2010. We wanted to bring together selected doctoral candidates from all LERU universities (and sometimes beyond) from a wide range of disciplines to consider generic topics. There were plenty of discipline-based summer schools but few bringing together potential research leaders in this way. The LERU summer schools were immediately very attractive. More important though is the great success of the events and the hugely positive comments we had from the attendees.

Over the years the summer schools have explored a range of generic issues for researchers: communication, entrepreneurship, open science, leadership, research integrity, data stewardship and citizen science. More recently they have tackled some significant challenges of the research world including 'Building research capacity and a collaborative global community', 'Reasserting the value of the expert' and in 2022 in Utrecht 'The University of the future: Rethinking the role of universities worldwide in the face of the challenges of the 21st century'.



We are very proud of the way the talented doctoral candidates at our universities grasp these topics and produce exciting ideas and outputs.

The LERU summer schools have really delivered more than we dared hope. They have given the participants the international, open and collaborative perspective that we want them to embrace as future research leaders.

**LERU Doctoral Summer School 2018, Leuven →**





## Interview with Jean Chambaz, LERU's sixth Chair

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**Prof. Jean Chambaz was LERU's sixth Chair from May 2018 until May 2021. He became President of Paris 6 Pierre and Marie Curie University (UPMC) on 13 March 2012 and President of the new Sorbonne University (a merger between UPMC and Paris-Sorbonne University) in 2017, which he remained until his retirement in 2021. He is a Professor of Cellular Biology.**

### **What stands out from your years as Chair in the second decade?**

LERU is a group of very smart people, and its positions are very clear and very strong, so being Chair is quite an easy role [laughs]. Personally speaking, I was elected Chair of LERU just three months after Sorbonne University was created from its two parent universities, so that was a fantastic vote of confidence that the project would work and develop in a good way. It recognised us as a true research university.

### **You've been involved LERU for many years. How has it changed?**

When I was first involved in LERU in the early 2000s, it sometimes felt more like a club of Rectors of research universities, rather than an organisation that set out to make a difference. In the second decade, research universities faced more and more challenges, and felt an increasing need for political lobbying. And that is what LERU has become, a powerful advocate for Europe's research universities.

### **Does that role come naturally?**

Not always. I recall the BiGGAR report in 2017, which LERU commissioned to assess the economic impact of research universities. When the results were presented to the Rectors' Assembly, they were very strong, but the Rectors reverted to being scholars. They scrutinised the results from an academic point of view. Then a few of us said: this is beside the point; the idea is to have three or four strong arguments we can present to politicians to show what we are giving back to the economy. So, we have to remember that we are not a club of scholars, but an assembly of political leaders of research-intensive universities.

### **How did the self-assessment exercise of 2018-19 contribute to strengthening LERU?**

The self-assessment was a chance for the Rectors to think about their involvement in LERU. Some universities participate very actively, others less, so it made us think about our commitment to the organisation. When I was running Sorbonne University I found it very useful to be a member of LERU and to benefit from its reflections, but ultimately you get from LERU what you put into LERU, and if you put more in, you get more out. Secondly, the self-assessment was important for the LERU Office to have feedback about its role. And it was also necessary to make some changes, for example to have a better connection between the work of the LERU groups working on specific policy issues and the academic leadership, i.e. the Rectors, Vice-Rectors, and so on.



## The economic impact of LERU universities in 2016 as determined in the BiGGAR report

# €100 billion

Gross Value Added is the LERU universities' contribution to the European economy

# €4.83

Gross Value Added is generated by LERU universities for every €1 of income they receive

# €33 billion

Gross Valued Added is generated in Europe by LERU universities' transferring their research into industry through licenses, spin-outs and services to business

### Was that connection weak in the past?

Sometimes, for example with open science. The groups involved in this issue are made up of specialised, convinced advocates for open science, and they were developing a very nice policy, but they were developing it on their own with the LERU Office. When it came before the Rectors' Assembly, it ran into problems. It's good to be leading the debate, but we need to have the link. So, the question was how to better articulate the work of the policy groups with the political leadership of universities, and how to foster real conversations and substantial decisions at the Rectors' Assembly. If we can do that better in the future, then the Rectors will be more involved in pleading the issues of concern to LERU at the national level.

### And that will make LERU stronger...

We saw with the debate over the Horizon budget that lobbying in Brussels is not enough. It's even more important to lobby in each country, because the final decision is made by the Heads of State in the European Council, not by the Commission or the Parliament. This is why the question of LERU's expansion, or not, is still open, and why our work with the CE7 group of universities in Central and Eastern Europe is so important.

### Did the self-assessment have any other outcomes?

It was also important to reaffirm that we are a lobby organisation and not a platform to develop collaborations between universities. That is suggested from time to time, but it's not useful. Of course, when we set about building alliances for the European Universities Initiative, most of us picked partners from LERU, because we knew and appreciated each other. But we all have our own networks for international collaborations, so LERU doesn't need to do that.

### But LERU does help its members learn from one another...

That is extremely important. It's about speaking together, reflecting on our missions, and exchanging ideas and good practice. I would never have attempted the merger that created Sorbonne University without the clear idea LERU had given me of what a research-intensive university should be and where it stands. It was an extremely strong source of confidence. And I expect it is the same for most LERU members. We continually benchmark ourselves, and we are stronger because we know that all these other great universities are facing the same problems and responding in the same way.



## Invaluable expertise and mutual trust

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**Ms Raffaella Delli Santi has been LERU's senior officer at LMU Munich since 2010. She is a policy officer at LMU's President's Office and works directly for President Bernd Huber.**

With the growing number of activities and groups to support, the LERU member universities have increasingly relied on and strengthened the role of the LERU senior officer. Every LERU university has a senior officer and collectively they work within LERU as the senior officers network (SON). The SON was the first LERU working group to be set up at the start of LERU in 2002, and still plays a crucial "spider in the web" role. Senior officers know their university well and have direct access to the university leadership.

Over the years, the number of working groups and activities has continuously increased, as did the complexity of the topics LERU deals with. At the senior officers' meetings, LERU provides well-prepared information about current matters as well as insights into how, for example, the European Commission works – this and the collaboration within the SON help gain deeper knowledge of intricate subjects. What I treasure most about the LERU senior officers network is the invaluable expertise and the atmosphere of mutual trust among the colleagues which allows for a productive exchange of knowledge not only about EC issues, but also about the higher education systems of our home countries and characteristics of our universities. This enables us to effectively relay complex information and insights to our home institutions. At all times, we can rely on the LERU Office and on a direct line to all senior officers. Beyond this outstanding exchange at the professional level, SON meetings also always feel a bit like a class reunion – which testifies to the uniqueness of the dynamics of this group.

# A respected LERU – Strengthening our voice and our impact

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[www.leru.org/files/LERU-Briefing-Paper-Universities-and-the-future-of-Europe.pdf](http://www.leru.org/files/LERU-Briefing-Paper-Universities-and-the-future-of-Europe.pdf)

The range of issues LERU has dealt with in the second decade truly has exploded. To wit, the briefing paper LERU developed for the incoming European Commission and Parliament after the 2019 EU elections summarises many of LERU's key messages to politicians and policy makers, referencing over 30 LERU policy papers and statements.

## Framework programmes that work for universities

The EU framework programmes for research, innovation and education, and the multi-annual financial frameworks within which they are set, are tremendously important to universities. LERU has directed much of its effort into providing evidence-based input and offering constructive dialogue with EU and other organisations. Whether it is for new multi-annual programmes under development, which happened in 2014 with Horizon 2020 and Erasmus+, and in 2021 with Horizon Europe and Erasmus+, or whether it is for making sure the programmes deliver to the university sector what has been promised in terms of content and budget, from year to year, LERU has continuously spoken on behalf of Europe's leading research-intensive universities with strong views, clear messages and with decisive impact.

For Horizon 2020, for example, LERU successfully pleaded for sustainable funding, with project funding rates of 100% of direct costs, 25% of indirect costs plus VAT. In 2018 LERU initiated joint actions with other university associations active at EU level, first arguing for a doubling of the Horizon Europe and Erasmus budget, then formulating a joint response to the Horizon Europe proposal and jointly tabling amendments to the proposal. Almost every year at budget time, LERU has called out against threatened cuts to these programmes proposed by the Member States, making sure that they do not renege on promises made. In his interview, Prof. Bert van der Zwaan, LERU's fifth Chair, talks about some of these issues that stood out to him.

## Co-creating a European Research Area and a European Education Area

The European Research Area (ERA) has been an important pillar of the EU's research policy since its inception in 2000. Aimed at increasing Europe's competitiveness in research and creating a "common market" for research and innovation, it focuses on more and better multinational collaboration, an open labour market for researchers, innovative doctoral education and attractive research careers for women and men, and improved knowledge transfer.



**20%**

Of ERC grants awarded to researchers at LERU universities



**2,459**

Number of MSCA fellows in Horizon 2020 from LERU universities



**5.9** billion euro

Total amount of research income in 2020-2021 at LERU universities



**8,143**

Number of research grants from Horizon 2020 awarded to LERU universities



**2,420**

Total number of created start-ups and spin-out companies at LERU universities





**LERU Chair Prof. Alain Beretz presents the LERU statement on open access with almost 10,000 signatures to Mr. Sander Dekker, Dutch Secretary of State, at the EU Competitiveness Council on 27 January 2016.**

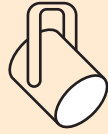
LERU has been an early and strong supporter of ERA. On 17 July 2012, LERU signed a Memorandum of Understanding on ERA with the European Commission (cf. interview with Prof. Bernd Huber), which was the basis for working together with the EC and other organisations in a Stakeholder Platform and participating in ERA-related committees, expert groups and meetings. As part these activities, LERU took stock of progress on the ERA topics in its member universities and reported back to the EC on progress in 2013. Just as with the Framework Programmes, LERU regularly collaborates with other European university networks to strengthen universities' voice on the European Research and Education Areas.

#### **Other policy issues where LERU set the tone or moved the dial**

In the past decade LERU has spoken out on many issues of importance to LERU universities. Hailed as truly impactful by several of the past Chairs in their interviews is LERU's work in the area of open access and open science (cf. spotlight with Dr Paul Ayris). As a result of this work, and building on the vision and recommendations expressed in several policy papers and statements, LERU launched a petition on open access in late 2015. The petition gathered almost 10,000 signatures and was formally handed over to the Dutch Presidency in March 2016. The Council Conclusions of May 2016 were consequently warmly welcomed by LERU as an important step in the right direction for open access and open science.

There have been many issues where LERU has set the tone or moved the dial for universities. From how to attract and nurture bright and talented students, academic and professional staff, and how to develop the right skills sets in them inspired by a research-led ethos, to training exceptional doctoral and post-doctoral researchers (cf. spotlight with Prof. David Bogle), to how to be an inclusive and diverse university (cf. spotlight with Prof. Jadranka Gvozdanović), to strategies for innovative education (cf. spotlight with Prof. Sari Lindblom), to the importance of the humanities and social sciences, interdisciplinarity, societal impact, the use of animals in research, research integrity (cf. spotlight with Dr Laure Ognois), knowledge security and foreign interference, dual use and export control (cf. spotlight with Dr Katleen Janssen), the roles of technology transfer and entrepreneurialism, research infrastructures, ATMP (advanced therapy medicinal products), GDPR ... these are just some of the many topics where LERU's tone-setting insightful policy and advice papers, reports and statements have made an impact with EU policymakers, with governments, funders, the private and other sectors, and not least with universities themselves of course, in Europe and beyond.





## Student satisfaction and teaching quality

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**Prof. Sari Lindblom chaired the LERU policy group Vice-Rectors Learning and Teaching from 2020 until 2022. She was Vice-Rector for academic affairs and Deputy Rector at the University of Helsinki as of 2017, served as Rector during Rector Jari Niemela's sick leaves in 2020-2022, and was appointed as Rector in February 2022. She is a professor of higher education.**

I joined the LERU Policy Group Vice-Rectors Learning and Teaching at the beginning of the year 2017 when I became Vice-Rector. In spring 2020 I was selected as the Chair of this group. The collaboration among the LERU Vice-Rectors in this Policy Group has always been cordial, fruitful and very valuable. For example, during the pandemic, the group has been an important forum for sharing experiences and solutions to various challenges during lockdown.

In my opinion, the group's most significant achievement in recent years has been the publication of the statement in December 2021 entitled 'Concerns and recommendations on the use of student satisfaction in measuring teaching quality'. We wanted to warn against the common practice of using student satisfaction surveys for the assessment of university teachers or as a criterion for evaluating teaching quality. Instead, we wanted to emphasise the need to focus on different components of teaching and learning, including the students' perception of various aspects of the teaching-learning environment, when measuring teaching quality. This statement really helps universities to develop measures to evaluate the quality of teaching in a functional way.



## Open access and open science

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**Dr Paul Ayris chaired the LERU policy group Information & Open Access since its start as a working group of library directors in 2010 until 2021. He is a history scholar and Pro-Vice-Provost at University College London, responsible for Library, Culture, Collections, Open Science & Scholarship.**

Having chaired the LERU group of library directors for many years, I can point to the team's work in highlighting the areas of open access and open science and making these visible to the LERU Rectors. The members of the team are university librarians or senior managers in some of the great universities in Europe. Libraries are helping to lead the way in supporting universities develop local research cultures which reflect the values of open science – openness, transparency, collaboration.

What have I enjoyed the most? I have really liked working in Brussels with the various Directorates of the European Commission and with the European Parliament. Friendships were made and healthy discussions on topics of mutual interest have led, I hope, to a stronger European position on open science. This has made Europe one of the leaders in the open science movement anywhere in the world.

LERU is a tremendous partnership of research-intensive universities who have great influence on educational and research policy and practice across Europe. Universities are some of the oldest and most stable institutions in Europe. It has been a privilege to work with colleagues in LERU to help secure university futures for the next generation.



## Dual use and export control

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**Dr Katleen Janssen is a member of LERU's dual use and export control ad-hoc group. With a PhD in Law from KU Leuven, she works as legal counsel at KU Leuven Research & Development.**

Katleen, you were one of the lead people in LERU's ad-hoc group on dual use and co-authored a statement in 2018, submitting LERU's concerns and proposals about the revision of the dual use Regulation to the European Commission and others. How do you judge the effect and impact of LERU's views at the EU level on this topic? Can you give an example?

Over the past few years, LERU has grown to become a regular discussion partner for the European Commission on export control and dual use. These topics consider the use of technology, from research results to products, etc., for civilian and military applications, and any export controls that may apply to them. We managed to get the Commission and the national authorities to acknowledge the specific challenges faced by universities in export control, for instance relating to publications and intangible technology transfer. LERU's efforts in this were a direct cause for the European Commission's development of specific guidelines for internal compliance programmes in academia. Something to be very proud of in my opinion!

To me, the fact that we managed to achieve this is a great example of the power of LERU: getting people together who are working on similar issues, exchanging ideas and experiences and together trying to make a change for the better.



# Interview with Bert van der Zwaan, LERU's fifth Chair

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**Prof. Bert van der Zwaan was LERU's fifth Chair from November 2016 until May 2018, after having joined the LERU Board of Directors in May 2014. He was appointed as Rector Magnificus of Utrecht University on 1 May 2011, which he remained until he retired as Rector in May 2018. He is a Professor of Biogeology.**

## **What stands out from your years as Chair in the second decade?**

What I really remember is the strong tie I felt between the LERU Office and the Secretary-General, and the Board of Directors. It was a pleasure to work with professionals. And on a personal level, I felt that my typically Dutch, direct way of framing would not be taken the wrong way, which is also important. But most of all I loved the feeling of asking: how are we going to manoeuvre and reach our goals, without disturbing the coherence of LERU.

## **What threatened to disturb that coherence?**

There were a number of dividing forces. Brexit was one, a second was the idea of enlarging LERU, and a third was the need to open up to Eastern Europe. In all my conversations as Chair I tried to minimise the impact of Brexit, and maximise the awareness of what was going on in society; how we should be perceived; how we should open up towards Eastern Europe; and how we should get more members in order to become more representative within the European Union.

## **How does LERU's image as an elite fit with it being respected?**

My feeling is that there is no contradiction in being an elite and being respected. Respect is not one-dimensional. It's not just saying that you are the best, you have to demonstrate it and show your impact, the force you are in society. LERU's arguments for the importance of research universities were always strong and the papers well founded. The paper 'What are universities for?', written by Geoffrey Boulton and Colin Lucas in 2008, was very well done. After that, not a lot remains to be said in general terms about the importance of research universities. What then becomes effective are papers that address issues where research universities and society more broadly need to move forward.

## **For example?**

Open science is a good example. LERU's paper on open access to research publications, in 2012, was a very early contribution to that debate. Then we pushed successfully within our respective countries to put open science on the agenda, when few national governments were interested in the topic. Looking back on this second decade, open science could very well be the most important change in the way we express ourselves as universities.



### **What made that paper so effective?**

There are a number of elements, many of which are characteristic of LERU papers more generally. It was very well documented. It was cutting edge, presenting a position for tomorrow, but at the same time with a clear, realistic goal. And it went through a lot of channels, so it was a mature document. A lot of care was taken over its wording, and the lead author, Paul Ayris of University College London (cf. spotlight), was supported by a number of people from countries across Europe, which gave the paper a feeling of multi-nationality, and a lot of authority. And LERU followed up with another very good paper in 2018, showing consistency and, in that way, becoming a key player in the international debate.

### **In addition to papers, what contribution do LERU's other activities make?**

Part of the respect you gain is by being visible and being heard. The officers and Secretary-General do tremendous work networking, particularly in Brussels, and the Chair of LERU is also part of that. When it comes to public events, ideally the Chair or someone from the Board should be there. But of course, networking in Brussels is not the only approach, it is also important to get the message back through the rectors to national governments. Looking back, I would say that there is room for LERU to improve.

### **The EU research budget is also a perennial question. How has LERU addressed that?**

It has been important to have a meaningful view on how research should function in the European Union. We need to be able to explain why research really is important, and why cutting the budget is so bad. But this is also an issue where we can easily lose respect, so it is always very important to be careful when opposing measures proposed by the European Parliament or the Commission. We tried to keep relationships intact and communication channels open.

### **What influence has LERU had on the EU's research and innovation programmes?**

The multi-annual EU framework programmes are extremely important for universities, but we have to be realistic about the forces in play. It's not just the Commission and the Parliament, it's 27 national governments now, and a huge amount of lobbying by organisations far more powerful than universities. So we cannot overrate our influence on the bigger picture and the budget. But where LERU can have a lot of influence is on how effective the framework programme is and how obstacles can be removed for universities. In Brussels, they are really afraid of the word 'inefficient'. If you tell them something is inefficient, then you get movement.



# A connected LERU – Working with other organisations across Europe and the world

## Across Europe

The research-intensive universities that are members of LERU have been able to form a unique bond over the past twenty years and have been successful in advocating the interests of research-intensive universities in Europe and beyond. They are also keenly aware that, regardless of their location and other differentiating factors, all research universities in Europe face similar challenges affecting all aspects of their intertwined activities – education, research and societal engagement. There are similar challenges for universities all over Europe, which differ more in intensity and in degree of development, than in fundamental characteristics. That is why in 2016, a group of seven Central-European universities (CE7) and LERU decided to join forces, with the aim to improve the framework programme conditions for research and education across a broad front in Europe. The seven universities, the Universities of Belgrade, Eötvös Loránd, Ljubljana, Prague (Charles University), Tartu, Warsaw and Zagreb, form a voluntary platform, with leadership meetings twice a year to exchange views (cf. spotlight with Prof. Renka Lovná). Furthermore, a series of meetings and seminars have been organised on specific topics with specialists from the CE7 and LERU. Also, students from CE7 universities attend the LERU doctoral summer school.



**First meeting of LERU and CE7 Rectors, 8 October 2016, Charles University, Prague**



### Across the world

In May 2012 LERU had celebrated its tenth anniversary with a conference at the Universitat de Barcelona, in which leading university networks from Australia, China and the US had participated, namely the Group of Eight Australia (Go8, cf. spotlight with Ms Vicki Thompson), the Consortium of China 9 Research Universities (C9), and the Association of American Universities (AAU). Building on that first collaboration LERU, AAU, C9 and Go8 signed a joint statement on the characteristics of research-intensive universities in October 2013 at a meeting of university rectors in Hefei, China, the so-called Hefei Statement. Other organisations later signed up to this statement, namely the Russell Group, Hong Kong 3, U15 Canada, RU11 Japan, and the Association of East Asian Research Universities (AEARU).

The meetings continued in Leiden 2014, Berlin 2015, Tokyo 2016, Brisbane 2017, Geneva 2018, Zurich 2019 and Paris 2020, with the U15 Germany joining as of 2018. Online meetings were held in 2020 and 2021. Four more global statements were issued: the 2014 Leiden Statement, on the role of social sciences and humanities research worldwide, the 2016 Shanghai Statement on the critical role of research-intensive universities in global innovation ecosystems, the 2016 Tokyo Statement on the need for long and substantial investment in frontier research at research-intensive universities, and the 2020 Sorbonne Declaration on the sharing and proper use of data, which was also signed by the African Research Universities Alliance. At LERU's 20th anniversary conference in May 2022, LERU and its global partners are releasing a new statement, identifying shared common principles critical to ensuring research-intensive universities' continued and valued contributions as the world emerges from the Covid-19 pandemic.

In his interview, Prof. Alain Beretz, LERU's fourth Chair, speaks about the political importance of LERU's international connections.

### With the United Nations

Convinced of the important role universities play in an ever more connected world with interconnected global challenges, LERU started to develop links with the United Nations. In the city of Geneva, seat of the European UN Office and home to the University of Geneva, LERU and its members, represented by their Rectors, signed up to the UN Academic Impact Principles (UNAI)<sup>1</sup> in 2015.



**LERU Rectors' Assembly meeting at the Université de Genève and at the United Nations in May 2015**

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.un.org/en/academicimpact>



**Global meeting on Social Sciences and Humanities (SSH),  
November 2014, Leiden**

UNAI is an initiative to align institutions of higher education, scholarship and research with the UN and to generate a global movement of minds promoting a new culture of intellectual, social responsibility, and commitment to such bedrock principles as ‘freedom of inquiry, opinion and speech’, ‘educational opportunity for all’ and ‘global citizenship’.

The Geneva Science-Policy Interface (GSPI)<sup>2</sup>, a centre set up by the University of Geneva in 2018, acts as a natural conduit and platform for LERU’s interactions with the UN. In 2018, for example, both the LERU Vice-Rectors for Research and the global network of LERU and university associations held joint meetings with the GSPI at the United Nations.

In the same year, LERU obtained special consultative status with the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC)<sup>3</sup>. This status allows LERU to express its views and influence the work of the UN Council through meetings, events, presentations, by providing expert analysis, raising public awareness of relevant issues, etc.

<sup>2</sup> <https://gspi.ch>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.un.org/ecosoc/en/home>



## Central European universities

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**Prof. Lenka Rovníá is Rector's Board Member and Representative for 4EU+ at Charles University Prague. She is actively involved, with her Rector, in the LERU CE7 activities. She is a Professor of European Studies and Ad Personam Jean Monnet Chair.**

When the Rector of Charles University, Prof. Tomáš Zima, and his team started their first term in February 2014, his most ambitious dream was to connect with LERU. As Vice-Rector for European Affairs I took his advice to heart: I made personal contact with the majority of LERU Rectors at different occasions and in the end my Rector invited all of them to Prague in May 2016 for a conference celebrating the 700th anniversary of the King and Emperor Charles IV, the founder of Charles University. The aim was to show our partners from LERU and other universities that we are a reliable partner.

Our encounter between the Rectors of LERU and Central European Universities resulted in the formation of LERU CE7 on 8 October 2016 in Prague, an initiative of LERU and seven leading Central European Universities. Closer cooperation of the universities' leadership, middle management and researchers has resulted in mutual learning and several common projects, as well as shared viewpoints on European research policy.

For Charles University a most exciting venture has been the creation of the 4EU+ European University Alliance, which brings us together with four LERU universities and the University of Warsaw. We are happy and excited about these opportunities!



# Interview with Alain Beretz, LERU's fourth Chair

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**Prof. Alain Beretz was LERU's fourth Chair from May 2014 until November 2016, after having served as LERU Board member from March 2011 until May 2104. He became President of the Université Louis Pasteur Strasbourg in June 2007 and, following the merger of the three Strasbourg universities, President of the Université de Strasbourg in January 2009, which he remained until December 2016. He is a Professor of Pharmacology.**

## **What stands out from your years as Chair in the second decade?**

Towards the end of the first decade there was an important change in profile of the LERU Secretary-General, from a high-level academic to a high-level lobbyist, who is also an academic by the way, and that led to a different approach and a change of pace. That made the Rectors' Assemblies very demanding, but it was also a lot of fun, meeting these exceptional people in beautiful academic settings, all with different traditions. It was a lot of work, but always a pleasure, and built up a real community.

## **You've been involved in LERU for many years. How has it changed?**

What stands out is LERU's increased significance in the policy landscape. Previously, its image and influence were mainly due to the reputation of its 12 founding members, but in the second decade LERU became important as a major stakeholder in its own right. It had an increased capacity to be heard, and there was an increase in the number and quality of policy papers.

What sets LERU apart is that it is not defensive; it is a pro-active and creative community, more so in the second decade than in the first, and I think that is also a guarantee for the future.

## **What part have LERU's global connections played its development?**

These connections have been very important in the way that LERU went from being a closed club to having a broader outreach on the basis of its goals and values. One part of that is academic networking, the other is political networking in the wider sense. In the case of the United Nations, for example, it's important to stand up for universities and public research in institutions where they are probably not on top of the agenda. Having a presence in these institutions is politically important.

## **How does the academic networking advance LERU's goals?**

Some of LERU's interests are European issues, while others, such as academic freedom, are basic issues that universities face regardless of where they are. If LERU can agree on a joint statement on issues such as academic freedom with comparable institutions around the world, that brings political weight to LERU itself. It's saying: our position is supported by leading university networks in Australia, Asia and North America, and despite their different cultures, they say the same thing. But it is also important to make sure these statements are turned into practical action, and do not just sit on the shelf.



### **Does the benefit flow both ways?**

It can be important in helping our colleagues from less favoured environments to reach higher standards or secure basic values. Academic freedom, again, is not the same in every country, and having universities that work in very different local contexts all support the same principles and commit to the same values should help secure that basic standard. On a more practical level, for example, there are countries that don't invest enough in research and higher education, where having an international standpoint can help exert pressure for change.

### **What other advantages are there from these global links?**

We are academics, so we learn from each other. We probably agree with our North-American or Asian colleagues on the basic issues, but the way they are addressed or prioritised can be different, so we can get inspiration from those conversations. Similarly, on technical issues such as innovation and the way research translates into society, we can learn from different approaches in other continents. They can be interesting, although we have to be careful, because they are often based on different regulations and legislation.

### **LERU also has a special collaboration with Central and Eastern Europe.**

That is a good example of original thinking by LERU. At the time, we were all keen to have the 'new' EU member states on board, but did not want to greatly expand, or broaden LERU's entrance requirements. So, it was decided to help to set up an informal platform with leading Central and Eastern European universities.

Now, LERU has regular links with the CE7 group and can channel its views, yet there is no compromise in what LERU is doing. I think this model could be extended, for example to research universities in Africa.

### **You've played important roles in French research policy. How do you see LERU's role at the national level?**

The main higher education funding channel is national and the main policy making is national, so LERU also has to influence national governments. It's about making sure that they are addressing the same priorities that are considered at the European level, so that one reinforces the other. If that is not happening, then the whole community loses out. This was why we set up CURIF to bring together the research universities in France. We were convinced that we needed LERU's philosophy, which puts excellence first, on the national level.

### **Does that also help LERU in Brussels?**

When ministers from national governments come to Brussels, they come with their positions ready prepared. When I stood in for my minister at those meetings, all I could do was give the official French position. I couldn't improvise in the way I could when representing my university! So, clearly the influence needs to be on the national level if LERU wants to influence the Council of Ministers.



## International partnerships

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**Vicki Thomson is the Chief Executive of the Group of Eight (Go8), Australia's eight leading research-intensive universities.**

International collaboration among our world leading research-intensive universities is more important than ever in the current global environment and the League of European Research Universities plays a vital role in this partnership.

Australia's Group of Eight (Go8) has a long association with LERU and over many years research collaboration between our member universities has delivered life changing outcomes for people around the world.

The past two years have been particularly challenging for universities and through our regular virtual meetings with like-minded colleagues in the Global Research-Intensive Universities Network (GRIUN) we've shared experiences and identified solutions to many of the issues presented by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Our discussions range from best practice research funding to optimal hybrid learning environments and how best to manage Covid on campuses. The contribution and leadership of LERU to this debate has been invaluable and of great assistance to the Go8 in supporting our member universities during this period. I trust our relationship is mutually beneficial and I personally look forward to a close continuing collaboration.

Congratulations LERU on an outstanding contribution to international research and education over 20 years!



# Looking ahead to the third decade

## Interview with Karen Maex, LERU's seventh Chair

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**Prof. Karen Maex has been LERU's seventh Chair since May 2021, after having served as a member of its Board of Directors since May 2018. She has been Rector Magnificus of the University of Amsterdam (UVA) since June 2016. Previously, she had been Dean at the UVA's Faculty of Science since 2014, and before that Vice-Rector at the KU Leuven leading its Science and Technology Group. She is a Professor of Nanosciences.**

**You have been Chair of LERU for a year now. What has this experience been like?**

Personally, I find LERU a very inspiring organisation, with discussions on just the right level. Looking back, when I was first involved years ago, the feeling was that we are all excellent universities and we want to stay that way. But it's different now. We all realise that we face an age of change, on many levels, and that brings us together in another way. Each LERU university is different, and does not have to defend those differences. Each brings with it a different view of things, which enriches our discussions and helps us go forward, for example addressing the big themes such as digitalisation.

**Does this mean that excellence is less important than it was?**

In the early years a focus on excellence was appropriate, but it is a little bit self-regarding. Now I think the emphasis is more about respect. Being respected is not about what you have done in the past and how the people you work with see you, but how society in general sees you. That's the new framework we have to bring to our science.

**What do you think has caused this change in emphasis?**

We live now in an interconnected world, with complex, interconnected problems, and that means a change in the way we do research. We have to bring independent knowledge to bear on those problems, being clear about where that knowledge is incomplete. And in order to do that we need to be respected. At the same time, we do not bring solutions; we bring knowledge so that society can find solutions. That is a very different mindset.



**Has the Covid-19 pandemic strengthened the position of universities?**

Science has never been as prominent in the discussion as it is now, and I think that's a good thing. The pandemic has allowed us to show how important science is. All of these molecules, and the vaccine technology, were investigated before there was any pressing need for them. Independent science, based on curiosity, is a cornerstone for the future.

**Does this raise expectations regarding other challenges, such as climate change?**

I think we have shown our strength as a sector, which is the wealth of knowledge in our universities. And while you cannot copy-paste solutions from one problem to another, the approach for an issue such as climate change is the same: we have to look into our science and work together across disciplines to find a way forward. What is important for universities is to be organised, so that for any problem that comes along we can be there to take a first step, and then to find each other and partners in the private sector to see how we can advance. It's also important to recognise that there is a lot of knowledge within social sciences and humanities groups. These researchers know how people react, they have studied how behaviours change. Hence the importance of broad universities, like LERU's members, which bring together these different disciplines.

**You mentioned digitalisation as an important theme for LERU in the decade ahead.**

Data is at the heart of everything now. It defines our public space, and if we do not have the right laws and regulations, the public space will become smaller and smaller. For example, so much data is collected now by private companies, and they have so much control over what you can do with it, that the area in which universities can work is becoming restricted. And we have to be careful of that. Companies optimise their systems for financial ends – there is nothing wrong with that, but our interest is completely different.

**Is this related to open science and access to research publications?**

Yes, but the problem with data is orders of magnitude bigger than the problems we had with the publication of written papers. And the reason the journal publishers are now giving in on open science is because they know this is no longer the future. The future is data, and they are focusing all their effort now on data. So, we need laws and an ecosystem that set a limit on how far they can go, to ensure that there is a level playing field. Without that there is a risk that there is no longer space for the independent knowledge produced by universities to reach society in a healthy way.

**What kind of legislation is required?**

The European Commission has done a lot with its Data Governance Act, but this is not sufficient for us. There has to be an approach that either gives public data a special status, or gives universities a legal ground from which we can at least keep track of the flow of independent information.

**What work is LERU doing on this issue?**

We have put together our own Data Act, which is a detailed, accessible statement of our concerns and what we think needs to happen. LERU also has the expertise to back up this up. Our member universities have experts in European legislation, who do research on how this can be effectively organised, so I think we can play an active part in finding a solution.

**What other issues are important for LERU in decade ahead?**

Just as we need a solid legal basis for universities, to give us a stronger voice, we need legal protection for academic freedom. There needs to be a right to explore and find independent knowledge, and I think that should be protected. It is also important that universities participate in many more policy-making groups, so that we can bring independent knowledge to the fore. We've taken it for granted that a university education would transfer a lot of the independent knowledge we have to the people who will make and shape the world of the future. But changes now are so rapid that this mechanism no longer works effectively, so we need to be much more closely involved in decision-making bodies.

**Are you suggesting that university education is failing?**

Not at all. When I was first involved in LERU, it was all about research. Now education is also an essential part of the discussion, and that is so important, because education is the first translation of your research, to university graduates who then bring that knowledge into society.

**How do you see the global aspects of LERU's work?**

Our idea is to make the role of research-intensive universities, which is global, not just European, much more visible. We work in a global world, and for independent knowledge in particular there should be no borders. The flow of information is crucial, and it needs to be free. We have been working with a global group of like-minded university networks since LERU's tenth anniversary conference, and we are renewing this commitment at our twentieth anniversary conference this year.

**Are you optimistic about the future of universities?**

Universities have been there for centuries, and will remain, although we do have to adapt to the world we live in. But that world will always need new independent knowledge, and that's why we need laws on academic freedom or the university as a legal entity. In a world that is changing so fast, we should make sure universities are protected.

## LERU universities in 2022

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■ University of Amsterdam



■ Universitat de Barcelona



■ University of Cambridge



■ University of Copenhagen

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■ Trinity College Dublin



■ University of Edinburgh



■ University of Freiburg



■ Université de Genève



■ Universität Heidelberg



■ University of Helsinki



■ Universiteit Leiden



■ KU Leuven



■ Imperial College London



■ University College London



■ Lund University



■ University of Milan



■ Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München



■ University of Oxford



■ Sorbonne University



■ Université Paris-Saclay



■ University of Strasbourg



■ Utrecht University



■ University of Zurich



## About the author

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Dr Katrien Maes has worked in several capacities for LERU since 2004. She has contributed to policy development and networking within LERU and at the EU and international level. She has also been involved in LERU's organisational development. She is currently LERU ambassador special initiatives engagement and impact. She holds a PhD in linguistics from the University of Delaware in the U.S.A., where she worked as an

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## About the team

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Ian Mundell carried out the Chairs' interviews with Katrien Maes and wrote the articles. Ian is a freelance journalist based in Brussels who specialises in higher education, science and innovation.

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