

PRESS RELEASE
8 October 2016

LERU and Central-European universities team up for better research and education policies

The research-intensive universities that are members of the League of European Research Universities (LERU) have been able to form a unique bond over the past fifteen years and have succeeded in successfully 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, not only within the Western and Southern European quadrants, where LERU universities are located, but also in Central and Eastern Europe, with challenges differing more in intensity and in degree of development, than in fundamental characteristics.

That is why a group of Central-European universities (hereafter “CE7”) and LERU are joining forces. Today a delegation of LERU universities and seven respected Central-European universities had a successful meeting in Prague. Representing LERU were the rectors of the Universities of Freiburg, Helsinki, Leuven, Utrecht and Zurich, representing Central Europe were the rectors of the Universities of Belgrade, Eötvös Loránd, Ljubljana, Prague (Charles University), Tartu, Warsaw and Zagreb. Also present was LERU’s Secretary-General, Prof. Kurt Deketelaere.

Prof. Bert van der Zwaan, Chairman ad interim of LERU and Rector Magnificus of Utrecht University, said: “We had an extremely interesting and productive meeting today, and I am very pleased that we can now announce a joint initiative to demonstrate to policy makers across Europe that there is more that unites research universities than divides them.” This sentiment was echoed by Prof. Kurt Deketelaere, who added: “Together, we will take on a number of thorny issues, reflect on them, and show policy makers that win-win solutions are possible.”

For example, universities across Europe suffer from chronic Horizon 2020 (the European Commission’s research funding programme) problems, such as ongoing excessive red tape and underfunding in much needed areas of research, and some of which are becoming critical, such as success rates for proposals getting funded in a free fall towards 10 percent and less in some H2020 programmes. In some countries in Europe, these problems are compounded by others, such as low salaries, lack of infrastructures, sub-optimal policies and lack of prioritisation. Also in the area of education, there are common EU-level challenges, for example in the area of student mobility, online learning and skills development for students.

LERU is a member of the European Research Area (ERA) Platform and the Open Science Policy (OSP) Platform; these are channels through which LERU and other research organisations interact with the Commission on the ERA and the OSP strategy. Our first objective with the “LERU-CE7” initiative is to bring common challenges, views and possible approaches as agreed by the partners to these fora - again, taking into account different degrees of intensity and state of development in different places and circumstances.

Secondly, LERU and the “CE7” want to jointly develop and broadly share knowledge on the ERA and the OSP topics, both at the national and at the EU level. We will do so, as we have in the past within LERU, by exchanging information, learning from each other what works and what doesn’t, and developing policy positions on that basis. As in the past, our aim is not to improve the success of those involved, but to improve the framework conditions for research and education across a broad front in Europe.

Thirdly, LERU and the “CE7” will discuss the so-called “widening” actions by the European Commission, specifically the twinning, teaming and the ERA chairs instruments aimed at Central Europe, which do not function optimally. We will jointly and honestly reflect on why that is so and formulate proposals for better approaches in the upcoming Framework Program 9. Other initiatives such as the fellowships to encourage potential ERC grantees will also be discussed and could be a target for common action.

Finally, as regards bilateral or multilateral collaboration between LERU members and the “CE7”, Prof. Tomas Zima, rector of Charles University Prague, states: “Analysis has shown that there is already a considerable amount of collaboration between us. This proves that universities in regions with a more and a less intensive research system successfully can undertake initiatives like joint PhDs, collaborative research projects and teams, student exchange, mobility of teachers, researchers and administrative staff, joint conferences and evaluation systems. It is our clear intention to increase these forms of collaboration in the years to come.”

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About LERU

The League of European Research Universities (LERU) is an association of twenty-one leading research-intensive universities that share the values of high-quality teaching within an environment of internationally competitive research.

Founded in 2002, LERU advocates education through an awareness of the frontiers of human understanding; the creation of new knowledge through basic research, which is the ultimate source of innovation in society; and the promotion of research across a broad front in partnership with industry and society at large.

The purpose of the League is to advocate these values, to influence policy in Europe and to develop best practice through mutual exchange of experience. LERU regularly publishes a variety of papers and reports which make high-level policy statements, provide in-depth analyses and make concrete recommendations for policymakers, universities, researchers and other stakeholders.

The LERU universities are:

- University of Amsterdam
- Universitat de Barcelona
- University of Cambridge
- 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
- Pierre & Marie Curie University
- Université Paris-Sud
- University of Strasbourg
- Utrecht University
- University of Zurich

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