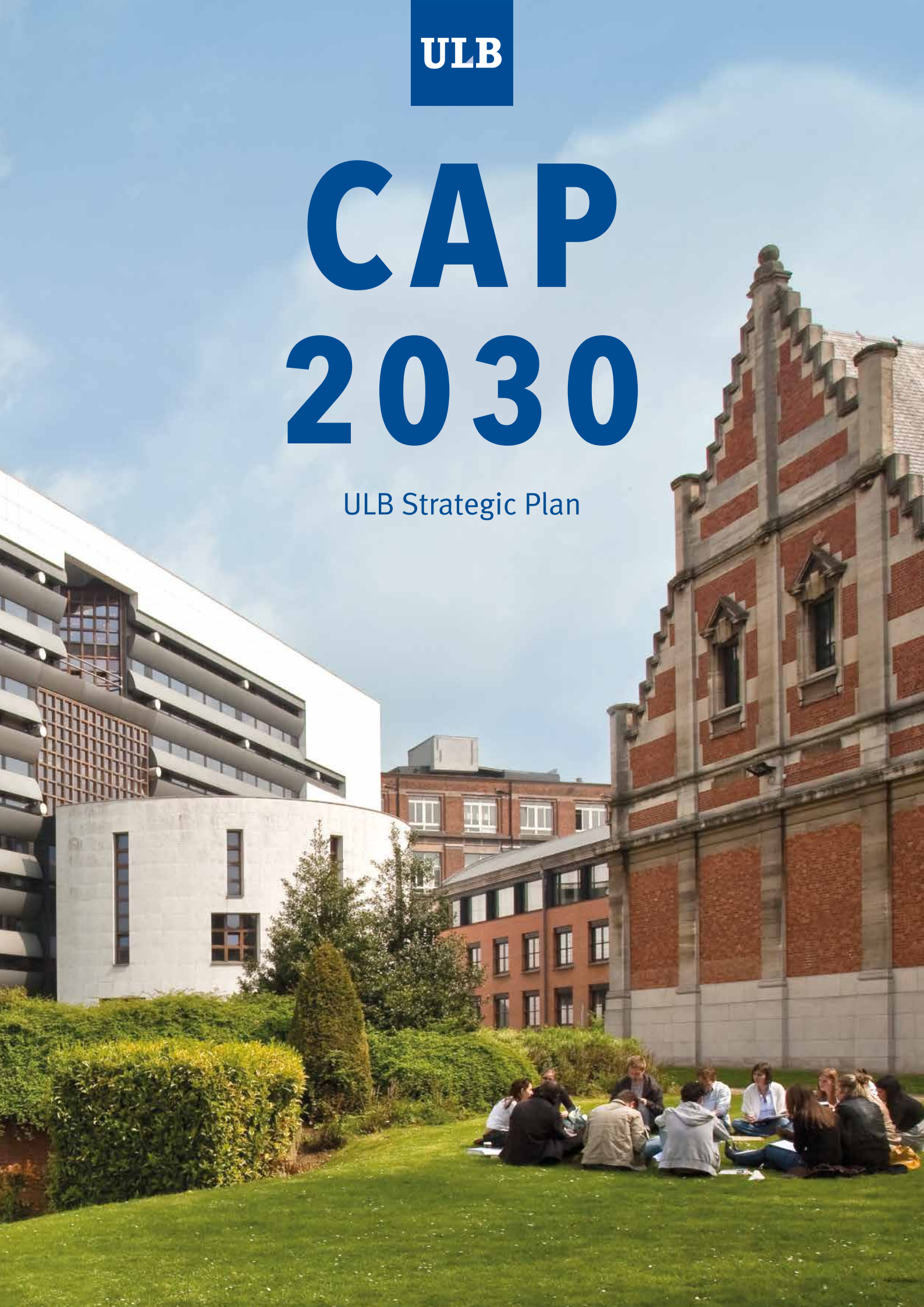


ULB

CAP 2030

ULB Strategic Plan



Foreword

A forward-looking university, the Université libre de Bruxelles is steadfast in its determination to shape its own future at a time when major changes in our societal, scientific, pedagogical and economic environment strongly impact the University and its missions.

We therefore rigorously and lucidly undertook the major task of clarifying for the years to come the nature of our project, the scope of our ambitions and the main orientations of our actions, while reaffirming our identity and core values and taking into account external constraints.

Our Strategic Plan, ULB CAP 2030, was inspired by the University's core principles: participatory democracy and free enquiry. The process was underpinned by a fundamental confidence in our future: confidence in our institution's ability to create for itself a future that is both worthy of its missions and respectful of its history, confidence in the relevance of its values, its vitality and its ability to adapt to tomorrow's world.

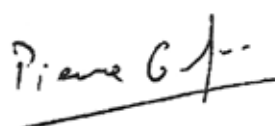
After 30 months of work involving the whole ULB community and our external stakeholders, with help from international experts, our Strategic Plan ULB CAP 2030 was approved on 14 October 2019 by the University's plenary assembly, its highest authority.

This plan would not have been possible without the involvement of many people to whom we collectively extend our warmest thanks. We are especially grateful to Professor Kristin Bartik, Vice-Rector in charge of the Strategic Plan, Professor Alain Eraly, Advisor for the Strategic Plan to the University authorities, Jeremy Weynands, Policy Officer, Monique Tavernier, General Secretary of the University, Mélanie Vander Geeten, Administrative Officer, and all members of the various working groups for their dedication and perseverance throughout the whole process.

The Strategic Plan is an open instrument that will help us collectively appropriate the Université libre de Bruxelles of tomorrow. It is with conviction and pride that we share it with you!



Yvon Englert,
Rector



Pierre Gurdjian,
Chairman of the Governing Body



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Preamble

By elaborating a Strategic Plan, ULB demonstrates its determination to look beyond its immediate concerns – however serious they may be – and reflect on its future. The University's statutes state that its plenary assembly is responsible for approving the plan.

The University's Strategic Plan ULB CAP 2030 is the result of a collaborative process involving people from all bodies of the institution, thereby ensuring a shared understanding of the challenges and a shared vision of the future. Ten working groups were established, each working on a specific topic during the 2017-2018 academic year. A digital platform was set up to give all members of the university community the opportunity to share their ideas. A meeting, in the form of a 'world café', and a discussion evening with our Alumni were also organized. A study day with the *Centre d'Action Laïque* provided an opportunity to discuss the updating of the concepts of free enquiry and secularism with respect to our institution's future.

The work was supervised by a steering committee with twenty-one members, designated by the University's plenary assembly. A management group – made up of the University's President, Rector, Director General, Vice-Rector in charge of the Strategic Plan, General Secretary, Advisor for the Strategic Plan, Strategic Plan Officer and the Rector's Chief of Staff – met twice a month to ensure the process was on track.

Given our University's public service mission, our strategic reflection could not be conducted in isolation. We held open and informal discussions on the major issues to be tackled with more than fifty stakeholders from the political, economic, cultural and social spheres. The process was enriched by meetings with the heads of a dozen universities and the analysis of around sixty strategic plans from other institutions. We also invited several experts to share their expertise in academic matters during seminars open to the entire university community. While the document was being drafted, its various sections were regularly discussed with the steering committee and the plenary assembly. The final document was presented to the entire university community in two stages, at meetings held on each of our four main campuses. It was also presented to the works council and to the directors of ULB's administrative departments and faculty administrations. It was only after these many exchanges that the final document was approved by the University's plenary assembly.

The document is organized into five chapters. The first three cover the fundamental dimensions of our identity, the evolutions in our environment that prompt us to change and the various challenges that we face as an academic institution. Chapter 4 presents our vision for the University in 2030, and chapter 5 is devoted to the main strategic orientations that we intend to follow in order to respond to evolutions in our environment.

These strategic orientations will translate, over the years, into action plans that take into account the priorities and resources defined by the University's relevant authorities. In order to factor in the changing context and constraints facing the University, the institution plans to conduct a midterm assessment and – if necessary – make readjustments. The vision and strategy for the University's hospital network were intentionally not discussed. The University and the Hôpital Erasme should be conducting their own analysis and reflection, in collaboration with the Health Cluster faculties, in order to complete this section of the strategic plan.



1. The fundamental dimensions of our identity

The history of our University, which was founded in 1834, is part of the intellectual legacy of humanism and modernity. Our identity is deeply intertwined with the history of our society, and naturally has much in common with that of many other Belgian and European universities: (i) the central role of research, (ii) education that is open to all and essentially subsidized by public authorities, which results in low registration fees and non-selective entrance, (iii) an organizational model characterized by an alliance between centralized administration and academic autonomy.

Our identity is also built around characteristics that, historically, are more specific to ULB: (i) the tradition of free enquiry, (ii) participatory governance in an inclusive and democratic management model, (iii) a strong community engagement and (iv) a Brussels identity combined with a foothold in Wallonia.

1.1 The central role of research

Belgian universities, especially ULB, are worthy heirs to the Humboldtian university model, which promotes the unity of teaching and research activities on the one hand and learning through research on the other hand. The University's research mission has gradually become more important, confirming its central role within ULB and profoundly shaping, over the past decades, the functioning of faculties that were traditionally more focused on teaching and training, such as the Solvay Business School and the Faculty of Law and Criminology. The Humboldtian model is a key reference in the vision the members of ULB's academic staff have of their profession; all conduct research or are involved in one way or another in science-related activities.

ULB is recognized as a research university. Its ability to attract Belgian and European funding and win scientific awards bears witness to this: it has won more Nobel Prizes in science (4) and Fields Medals (1) than any other Belgian university. In addition, throughout its history ULB has won 24 Francqui Prizes and half the Quinquennial Prizes awarded by the *Fonds de la Recherche Scientifique – FNRS*.

This relationship to science promotes high academic standards, which justify the university's policy as regards selection of teaching assistants, researchers and members of academic staff, the criteria for doctorates and publications and the demanding level of our study programmes.

1.2 Students welcomed in an open, inclusive and emancipatory university

Higher education, and in particular university education, has undergone widespread democratization in OECD countries and beyond. In the aftermath of World War II, Belgian universities were all but exclusively accessible to upper-class students, and they have gradually become open to all social strata – even though young people from less privileged socio-economic backgrounds still have more limited access. While women are still underrepresented in certain academic fields,¹ they have largely gained access to university and currently account for more than half the student population in the Wallonia-Brussels Federation. In a knowledge society, universities have become an essential driver of social emancipation and upward social mobility.

ULB has always strived to be open, inclusive and emancipatory. This is why it was the first university in Belgium to open its doors to women, as early as 1880. Its pioneering social policies also led it to establish the first student hall of residence, in 1932. ULB has always been attentive to the social and emotional needs of its students, providing them with access to sports and cultural activities and to social and medical services, while supporting activities organized by student associations.

Non-selective entrance (except in engineering and, more recently, in medicine and dentistry) and relatively low registration fees have contributed to the growth of the student population in universities in the Wallonia-Brussels Federation. In 2018, ULB had nearly 30,000 students, while it had less than 17,000 in 1998 and just over 10,000 in 1968. The constraints of the law on the funding of higher education (a fixed budget is shared between all universities on the basis of their number of students) and the scarcity of alternative modes of funding have resulted in a gradual reduction in funding per student. This explains, in part, why lectures in large lecture halls are prevalent in the first years of certain programmes. Moreover, high dropout and failure rates are observed in students' initial years at university.

While potentially in conflict where resource allocation is concerned, research and teaching missions are nevertheless both carried out – albeit in different ways – by all members of academic staff. While some tend to focus more on one of these two missions, most are active in both areas and adhere to the principle of research-based teaching.

¹ In the Wallonia-Brussels Federation, less than 20% of students in engineering and around 30% of students in science are women.



1.3 An alliance of centralized administration and academic autonomy

ULB, like all universities in the Wallonia-Brussels Federation and many others, has an organizational model characterized by a combination of centralized administration, with standardized and formalized processes, and decentralized faculties and research activities. This organizational model is also characterized by the considerable autonomy enjoyed by academic staff.

Administrative centralization and standardization largely result from the need to streamline processes in order to manage the large number of students and the increasing grip of public regulations. They are also inspired by the principle of statutory and formal equality, regarded as a synonym of social justice. However, the increasing specialization of knowledge has gradually led to a multiplication of faculties, departments and research centres. As each of these structures is driven by its own requirements and needs, the University's faculties – and even certain departments within these faculties – have become relatively isolated from one another.

The concept of academic autonomy is connected to that of academic freedom.² UNESCO, in its *Recommendation concerning the Status of Higher-Education Teaching Personnel*,³ states that the right to education, teaching and research can only be fully enjoyed in an atmosphere of academic freedom and autonomy for institutions of higher education. It also defines freedom for members of academic staff as: '*freedom of teaching and discussion, freedom in carrying out research and disseminating and publishing the results thereof, freedom to express freely their opinion about the institution or system in which they work, freedom from institutional censorship and freedom to participate in professional or representative academic bodies*'. The recommendation adds that this freedom comes with specific duties and responsibilities, including the obligation to respect the academic freedom of one's peers and to undertake such appropriate duties as are required for the collegial governance of one's institution. Academic freedom, one of the major advantages of a career in academia, must not however be at odds with the missions of the institution.

² The reference to academic freedom is contained implicitly in our organic statutes, in (i) the statement on the principle of free enquiry, which postulates, in all matters, independence of judgement and the rejection of arguments based on authority, and (ii) the acknowledgement of internal democracy, which postulates the guaranteeing of the exercise of fundamental liberties within the University.

³ http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL_ID=13144&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html



1.4 Secularism, the tradition of free enquiry and our intellectual heritage

Since its foundation, ULB has always been strongly attached to the values of secularism, free enquiry and democracy.⁴ Our University, which was founded in 1834 in response to the ecclesiastical authorities' grip on teaching, added to its statutes in 1894 that it based its teaching and research on free enquiry, which postulates independent reasoning and the rejection of arguments based on authority. In the 19th century, free enquiry above all evoked knowledge free from religious dogma and emancipated from all forms of spiritual authority. At that time, the enemy took the form of the Catholic church. With time, the definition of free enquiry has broadened to include the idea of knowledge emancipated from all forms of authority. The very principle of authority was challenged not only in the realm of knowledge, but also in the management of the institution. From the foundation of the Brussels School of thought to recent social tensions – including, of course, the closure of the University in 1941 during the Nazi occupation and the May 1968 uprising – ULB's history has been punctuated by crises relating to the challenging of the exercise of power within the University, whether this power was wielded by the Governing Body, the rector and deans, or members of academic staff. Free enquiry evokes not only the widespread recourse to debate based on arguments, but also free access for all to this debate. This means that nothing and nobody can be exempted, in an authoritarian way, from contradictory debate, which is the only way to resolve disagreements in a pluralistic society.

From our long history, we retain a tradition of critical thinking, a spirit of resistance and an instinctive mistrust of authorities – initially religious authorities, but increasingly political, economic and administrative authorities – and their propensity to influence, if not regiment, research and teaching. We consider the University's autonomy and academic independence to be necessary conditions for the autonomy of knowledge, and they remain a fundamental issue that demands our full vigilance. The suspicions that regularly arise concerning privately funded chairs, research funded by industry and partnerships with the private sector stem from this fundamental mistrust.

Free enquiry has placed ULB at the centre of its environment, with close links with compulsory education, the hospital network and the secular world permeated by our values.

⁴ In article 4 of the statutes of the *Centre d'Action Laïque*, secularism is defined as the humanistic principle according to which freedom and human rights are founded on the impartiality of a democratic civil authority free from any religious interference. This principle requires that the constitutional state guarantee its citizens' equality, solidarity and emancipation through knowledge dissemination and the exercise of free enquiry.

1.5 Participatory governance

While ULB's founding values have led it to gradually enhance the participatory nature of its mode of governance, it was the events of May 1968 – which were especially memorable at ULB – that prompted it to conduct a radical reform of its organic statutes, resulting in a truly inclusive and democratic management model.⁵ All bodies within the University are now involved in defining and implementing the main orientations of the University, its departments and faculties.

This internal management model makes it possible to maintain a lively democracy within the institution. It also emphasizes the individual autonomy of our community's members, especially members of academic staff. This independence undeniably fosters creativity, be it in terms of scientific research, teaching programmes, partnerships or social initiatives. In addition, it permits risk taking, which is an essential component of scientific progress and knowledge transfer. ULB can thus be proud of the many distinctions awarded to its researchers. Many of our University's major scientific achievements are the result of individual trajectories, and our academic staff's high degree of autonomy weakens to a certain extent our ability to deploy an institutional scientific strategy.

Participatory governance necessarily implies additional responsibilities for the members of the community who get involved. These should be borne collegially, but they are sometimes very heavy for certain members and then risk being fulfilled to the detriment of their main duties.

1.6 A firm community engagement

Our attachment to secularism and free enquiry has led us to embrace, since our foundation, the democratic ideals of equality of rights and dignity, self-determination and emancipation. These core values have placed us at the forefront of the struggles for freedom of the press and secularization of society, and against all forms of discrimination, whether against women or related to sexual orientation, philosophical choices or origins.

From the launch in 1938 of university development cooperation programmes to the 'Solidarity with refugees' campaign initiated in 2015, from participation in acts of resistance during World War II to the May 1968 protest movement, ULB has always been at the forefront of the fight for freedom and emancipation, both within its own community and in society as a whole. It was also active in the fight for universal suffrage, the promotion of responsible parenting and the decriminalization of abortion, and was a pioneer in the defence of individual autonomy in bioethics debates in Belgium, whether relating to euthanasia or assisted reproduction. In addition, the implementation of the 'cascade' initiative regarding the promotion of academic staff members, as well as the adoption of the 'Diversity Plan', demonstrate ULB's commitment to gender equality and the promotion of diversity within its community.

Our commitment to progress and openness to our social, political and economic environment are intimately linked to our conception of knowledge, which refuses to confront theory and practice, fundamental and applied research, knowledge and advice. All our faculties offer Master programmes, Advanced Master programmes and lifelong learning programmes intended for professionally active adults, even though some faculties are more explicitly involved in professional training than others. Furthermore, many faculties have teaching practitioners among their staff, such as the Faculty of Medicine and its university hospital, the Brussels School of Engineering, the Solvay Brussels School of Economics and Management, the School of Public Health and the Faculty of Law and Criminology. A significant part of contract research is also conducted with a view to advising public authorities, businesses and local associations. However, this form of community engagement does not in any way imply that fundamental research is subordinated to criteria of immediate relevance.

The analysis and resolution of major societal problems such as health, inequalities, climate change or urban management increasingly require the combining of contributions from several disciplines. Our community engagement has thus led us to develop interdisciplinarity in our research and teaching, by creating, for example, the Institute of Sociology, the Institute for European Studies and, more recently, the *Maison des Sciences Humaines* and the Neuroscience Institute.

⁵ Article 2 of ULB's current statutes stipulates that the University's organization is founded on internal democracy, independence, autonomy and solidarity. Internal democracy postulates the guaranteeing of the exercise of fundamental freedoms within the University, and the vocation of the bodies that make up the university community to take part, with voting rights, in the University's management and in monitoring of said management.



1.7 A Brussels identity and a foothold in Wallonia

Our historical position in Brussels has largely shaped our institution. This can be seen in the composition of our Governing Body, in our relationships with the city's hospitals or in our Saint-Verhaegen's day parade.⁶ Student recruitment, housing, mobility, real estate constraints, safety and our cultural activities are all determined, to a large extent, by our location in the Brussels-Capital Region, which attracts students from the entire Wallonia-Brussels Federation as well as from Flemish Brabant and abroad. We continue to enhance our presence in Brussels, as evidenced by initiatives such as *Usquare* and *WeKonekt.Brussels*, launched in collaboration with VUB, our Flemish sister university.

Very early on, Brussels played a central role in the internationalization movement.⁷ As the capital of Europe, it is home to the headquarters of the European Institutions and to international organizations such as NATO. It has become one of the world's most cosmopolitan cities, with over 50% of its population having non-Belgian nationality at birth.⁸ This context explains why ULB rapidly opted for an international orientation, by forming strong partnerships with universities and research centres around the world and by promoting the mobility of its students and researchers. With over one third of our student body coming from abroad, we are now the Belgian university with the highest proportion of international students.

Our Brussels roots have not, however, prevented us from developing in Wallonia. The establishment of ULB research centres in Gosselies, over 20 years ago, attracted a large number of academic and non-academic players that have helped place ULB at the heart of the *BioPark Charleroi Brussels South* ecosystem. Aware of the low number of university programmes available in the Charleroi region, we are investing in this domain too, in partnership with the University of Mons. We have thus become a major player on the Charleroi Ville-Haute campus.

⁶ Article 7 of ULB's founding statutes indicates that the mayor of Brussels chairs the University's Governing Body. <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k5751678d/f48.item>

⁷ In politics, figureheads of this movement included Henri La Fontaine, Paul Hymans and Paul-Henri Spaak. In science, the 1911 Solvay Conference was the first major international scientific conference.

⁸ Brussels Institute of Statistics and Analysis: http://statistics.brussels/themes/population?set_language=en (2018 data); World migration report 2015 http://publications.iom.int/system/files/wmr2015_en.pdf

2. The main evolutions in our environment that prompt us to reflect on our future

The major changes in the world around us, and their repercussions for the research and academic community in particular, impose a number of constraints on our institution that profoundly impact the various facets of our identity and influence our missions. These constraints do not converge; in fact, they even tend to exacerbate a number of tensions and contradictions that exist within our University.

2.1 The legitimacy of the university as an institution in a democracy in crisis

The future of our University has always been intimately linked to the future of our democracy. The Université libre de Bruxelles is radically committed to civil liberties, to free enquiry, to independent research, to the values of equality in law, equal respect and self-determination and to all struggles for emancipation; it strives to both defend these principles in society as a whole and apply them to its own management.

However, these principles are being threatened throughout the world by the spread of religious, nationalist and sectarian radicalism, by the emergence of authoritarian regimes in many countries, by the commodification of knowledge, by the perverse effects of social networks and by the normalization of racism and antisemitism. We are witnessing a reduction in universities' autonomy, the challenging of independent research, the bringing to heel of intellectuals, the widespread dismissal, and sometimes imprisonment, of researchers and teaching staff, the reign of fake news, conspiracy theories and victimization stories, and censorship and auto-censorship. The academic world is not only faced with the emergence of populist regimes, but also with a growing populist sentiment within our democratic societies.

For a university like ours, these changes result in a series of imperatives, such as the need for greater vigilance with respect to our scientific and academic partnerships and collaborations, and to the conditions associated with research funding. They also require us to offer support to institutions at risk and to participate in the public debate even more resolutely than before, by affirming our vocation to enhance scientific knowledge and foster critical analysis.

2.2 A changing relationship to knowledge: the explosion of information and of information and communication technologies

Our relationship to both the production and transmission of knowledge is changing rapidly. It is currently faced with several evolutions, in which the rise of information and communication technologies (ICTs) play a major part.

So-called 'traditional' university teaching methods are being openly challenged. The old-fashioned figure of the lecturer teaching from a pulpit, with a monopoly on knowledge and its transmission, is now obsolete. Top-down teaching methods, in particular lectures, are accused of fostering passiveness in students, of neglecting the importance of self-study, and also of inducing boredom and fatigue. The need to make learners more autonomous and to encourage them to take a more active part in their learning is essential; teaching staff should be intermediaries between students and sources of knowledge.

ICTs enable us to radically rethink teaching methods. For example, they can help reduce the number of lectures in large lecture halls, increase interactivity and provide individualized learning support. This means, however, that we need to rethink not only our programmes and course materials but also our facilities and equipment. Teaching is all the more profoundly challenged now that students are constantly checking their laptops and smartphones, and finding it increasingly difficult to confine themselves to being passive listeners. They will desert lecture halls and classrooms unless teaching staff use more active pedagogical methods.

However, the rise of ICTs also leads to a certain weakening of scientific knowledge. With the development of the internet and social networks, billions of virtual pages have created a huge, diverse and volatile information space in which it is all the more difficult to get one's bearings, because algorithms contribute to confining users to their own cognitive space by feeding them information that fits their previous choices. Information is mixed with disinformation, in an inextricable confusion. Eventually, the information overload ends up driving out knowledge and it becomes increasingly difficult to filter, structure, interpret and criticize the heterogeneous information we are bombarded with, and to build solid convictions about how the world is changing.



In just a few decades, science has diversified in a spectacular manner. Disciplines break down into sub-disciplines and new specializations constantly emerge, resulting in a proliferation of specialized networks and journals and a massive increase in the number of scientific publications. In the University's internal structure, this vast differentiation process has resulted in a multiplication of research centres and teams, and also of curricula. However, major societal challenges such as health, mobility, inequalities, the rise of intolerance, the transformation of economies and jobs, climate change, sustainable development and the management of the state, require multidisciplinary approaches that go against this trend towards the hyper-specializing of fields of cutting-edge research. This means that universities are, on the one hand, in the throes of a permanent process whereby fields of knowledge are differentiated and isolated from one another and, on the other hand, faced with the growing need to integrate all these fields of knowledge in both fundamental and applied research. This tension between specialization and interdisciplinarity is also found in university curricula, which aim to provide students with a solid foundation on which they can build their civic awareness and cultural education, in the noblest sense of these terms.

Furthermore, academic research increasingly faces competition from companies in the new technologies sector – such as the GAFAM in the US and the BATX in China – who can afford to invest massively in cutting-edge research based in part on the potential of the data they have collected.⁹ This means that the University must anticipate the partial loss of its primacy as a producer of scientific knowledge.

Throughout all these changes, the university must remain the place *par excellence* where disinterested and non-utilitarian knowledge can be produced and transmitted, which, it must be stressed, is not at odds with the development of applied knowledge within the university.

The landscape is made even more complex by the general tendency to view science and data as a 'common good'. In this context, two growing trends are putting academic research under pressure: (i) the 'open science' movement, which strives to make scientific research data and results accessible to all levels of society, professionals and non-professionals alike, and (ii) the 'citizen science' movement, which encourages non-professionals to participate more actively in the development of knowledge. While citizens can take part in data collection through fieldwork that does not require specialized training or expensive equipment, it is important to note that this trend could also result in scientific research being controlled by citizens with a political agenda.

In the light of our changing relationship to knowledge, the University, more than ever before, will have to fulfil its mission to produce and transmit knowledge in the public space. It will have to develop new forms of interdisciplinarity, in both research and curricula, and will no longer be able to do without ambitious pedagogical and digital strategies.

⁹ GAFAM: Google, Apple, Facebook, Amazon, Microsoft ; BATX: Baidu, Alibaba, Tencent, Xiaomi.



2.3 New time frames for learning

The extraordinary boom in knowledge and rapid innovation cycles have led to knowledge becoming obsolete much more quickly. This makes it necessary for us to constantly update initial education programmes. Professional careers are also becoming less linear, with people increasingly seeking to reorient their career during their working lives. Incorporating all the skills to be mastered during one's lifetime into one single degree is no longer conceivable. Learning is now a process that occurs at all ages and lifelong learning has become an essential tool to advance one's career or change profession. Some professions, such as health care and teaching, already require practitioners to refresh their skills.

Lifelong learning now complements formal education and it is the higher education sector that has seen the highest growth in student numbers in recent years.

Sandwich courses, where students learn a profession by alternating periods of theoretical study at university and practical training in a company, are also rapidly gaining ground. Moreover, the programmes offered by the *Université Inter-Âges* (CEPULB) are particularly successful, thanks to rising healthy life expectancy.

The university, seat *par excellence* of scientific awareness and of knowledge creation and transfer, has a pivotal role to play in the evolution of learning time frames. It must offer citizens training programmes that are coherent and adapted to the socio-economic and cultural challenges of our changing world.

The linear nature of training programmes is strongly called into question and compels us to think about the relationship between our initial education and lifelong learning programmes. Lifelong learning is a major area of development for our University, which must position itself as a legitimate major player and a reference in this area.

2.4 The massification of higher education

Recent decades have seen the expansion and growth of higher education in Belgium and around the world. Between 2000 and 2017, the proportion of young adults (between the ages of 25 and 34) holding higher education degrees rose from 26% to 44% on average in OECD countries and from 36% to 46% in Belgium.¹⁰

Since its foundation, ULB has seen a steady, albeit irregular, growth in student population. Between 2000 and 2018, the number of students enrolled rose from 17,750 to nearly 30,000, with a particularly high annual growth rate since 2013. This is due in part to the lengthening of study programmes as a result of the Bologna Process, the integration of non-university higher education institutions (*‘hautes écoles’*), the recruitment of international students and also the substantial number of new students enrolled on our Master programmes.

Other universities in the Wallonia-Brussels Federation have also seen similar growth (the number of university students in the Wallonia-Brussels Federation rose from 61,500 in 2000 to 95,630 in 2015) and, as there is a fixed amount of public funding, there has been a dramatic drop in funding per student. The ratio between universities’ operating budgets and the weighted number of students eligible for funding has decreased by almost 25% in just over 10 years.¹¹ Paradoxically, despite this regime, universities in the Wallonia-Brussels Federation are trying to increase their student numbers in the hope of increasing their share of the funding – which leads to an almost suicidal competition between universities.

According to the ARES report published in 2017,¹² given the demographic evolution of our recruitment pool, 14,000 additional young adults aged 18 to 24 will be attending a higher education institution in the Wallonia-Brussels Federation in 2030. It should be noted that this demographic evolution runs counter to the trend observed in other European countries.¹³

Given the greater importance of lifelong learning and the growing number of international students coming to study in Belgium, the report forecasts a total of 44,000 to 65,000 additional students in Wallonia-Brussels Federation higher education institutions by 2030. This corresponds to an annual growth rate of 1.5 to 2%.

However, the impact of these demographic forecasts on the evolution of ULB’s student population is not easy to determine, as it will depend on many factors including:

- Evolution of the admission rate of first-generation students in French-speaking universities. The rate rose from approximately 22% in 2000 to over 27% in 2017, but varies significantly within the Wallonia-Brussels Federation. It is markedly higher in Walloon Brabant (almost 37% in 2013) followed by the Brussels-Capital Region (almost 27% in 2013).¹⁴
- Changes in our national recruitment pool. Pupils from Belgian secondary schools account for 78% of our newly enrolled students. Of these, 60% come from the Brussels-Capital Region (the region that will see the greatest increase in its population of 18 to 24 year-olds in the coming years), 26% from Wallonia and 14% from Flanders.
- Changes imposed by decrees such as the Bologna decree – which has led to the lengthening of studies – or decrees integrating certain fields of study into universities (architecture, translation and interpretation), and the implementation of initial teacher-training.
- Our attractiveness at international level – a factor that is all the more important for ULB, because international students now account for more than one third of our student body.
- Changes in our failure, graduation and drop-out rates.
- The development of online courses.

10 Education at a Glance 2018: OECD Indicators - <https://doi.org/10.1787/eag-2018-en>; Table A1.2. Trends in educational attainment of 25-34 year-olds, by gender (2007 and 2017).

11 This ratio was €5,894 in 2006 versus €4,512 in 2018. CRef (Council of Rectors) memorandum in anticipation of the 2019 parliamentary elections.

12 FINANCE J.-P., LEONHARD D. et al., L’enseignement supérieur en Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles à l’horizon 2030 (‘Higher education in the Wallonia- Brussels Federation in 2030’). Report by the Collège d’experts extérieurs. Brussels: ARES, July 2017.

13 UNESCO database (accessed in January 2018), quoted by Campus France in Chiffres clefs, April 2018

14 DECROLY J.-M., MARISSAL P. and CASIER C., Étude interne, UR Géographie appliquée et géomarketing [Internal study, Applied Geography and Geomarketing Unit] – IGEAT – DGES – Faculty of Science, November 2018

Forecasts by ULB's Applied Geography and Geomarketing Unit show that at the current growth rate, and taking into account the expected evolution of the population old enough to start university in our traditional recruitment pool, ULB can expect to have 4,500 more students in 2030 than in 2017. If, in addition, the University pursues a proactive policy to increase its market share of first-generation students, it would attract up to 7,500 more students.

This raises the question of how the University will be able to provide a decent environment for all its students – both on a human level, given its low staff-student ratio, and in terms of infrastructure, given the age of its facilities and the current budgetary constraints.



2.5 A student body with heterogeneous educational and socio-cultural backgrounds

The vast majority of our first-year students come from secondary schools in the Wallonia-Brussels Federation and more specifically from schools in the Brussels-Capital Region. According to the findings of the OECD's PISA survey, secondary education in the Wallonia-Brussels Federation unfortunately has many shortcomings.¹⁵ Pupils' results are well below those of pupils attending schools in Flanders: they are almost one school year behind pupils in the Flemish Community, and over one fifth of pupils aged 15 do not possess the minimum level of skills required for full participation in today's society. Furthermore, secondary education in the Wallonia-Brussels Federation is one of the least equitable in OECD countries, with socio-economic factors having a particular impact on pupils' results. It is also very segregated where pupil performance is concerned.¹⁶ Students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds are thus at a double disadvantage, since the disadvantage stemming from their home environment is compounded by that of attending a school at which they will make less progress. There are also significant differences between the performance of pupils who have an immigrant background and those who do not.

¹⁵ DANHIER J. et JACOBS D., *Aller au-delà de la ségrégation scolaire, Analyse des résultats à l'enquête PISA 2015 en Flandre et en Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles (Beyond educational segregation – An analysis of the results of the PISA 2015 survey in Flanders and the Wallonia-Brussels Federation)*, King Baudouin Foundation, 2017.

¹⁶ The indicator used in the study to measure the unequal distribution of pupils between schools, according to whether or not they belong to a target group, is to be interpreted as the proportion of pupils that would need to change school in order to achieve an equal distribution of the target group between schools.

The quality of secondary education in the Wallonia-Brussels Federation has, without doubt, an impact on success at university. Many students arrive at university without the preparation required to embark on their studies. According to CRef (Council of Rectors) data pertaining to all French-speaking universities,¹⁷ over 40% of young people who currently enrol at university leave the university system without obtaining a degree (around 20% leave after one year, 15% after two years and 5% after three years). The CRef data also shows that while the proportion of first year students who obtain 45 of the required 60 credits is improving (43.7% in 2016–2017, up from 37.2% in 2011–2012, the year prior to the implementation of the ‘landscape’ decree), the same cannot be said for the proportion who obtain all 60 credits, where the success rate has fallen significantly (from 33.7% in 2011–2012 to 27.6% in 2016–2017). This means that less than one third of first year students continue their studies without having to retake courses and exams. It therefore comes as no surprise that the ‘on time’ graduation rate is only around 25% and is falling (having dropped from 26.7% for students who started university in 2011–2012 to 23.7% for students who started in 2014–2015). Universities therefore enrol an increasing number of students who they are unable to retain. In addition, those who do obtain a degree are taking longer to obtain it: more and more students are taking four or even five years to get their Bachelor degree.

Given our recruitment pool, centred on the Brussels-Capital Region, we are faced with a population of first-year students with particularly heterogeneous educational backgrounds. Moreover, many of our students are economically disadvantaged, as evidenced by the number of financial aid grants awarded each year by the University’s social services (currently more than a quarter of our first year Bachelor students receive some form of financial aid).¹⁸ A significant proportion of our students therefore start their studies under unfavourable conditions and need appropriate support.

A comparison of ULB data with the CRef averages shows that despite our study guidance initiatives and the provision of learning support in the first year of Bachelor programmes, we are unable to cope with our students’ heterogeneous educational backgrounds. We have difficulty getting many of these students to make progress in their studies. This comes at a considerable human and psychological cost for both students and the University’s administrative and teaching staff. It also comes at a more global cost for the Wallonia-Brussels Federation, which funds students who are slow to reach the labour market.

As we are already under pressure with our current student population, it is no surprise that we are struggling to implement the measures necessary to attract and foster the success of young people from disadvantaged sociocultural and/or economic backgrounds, for whom joining the university education system is not an obvious choice.

In order to enable our University to continue to fulfil its mission to foster social emancipation and upward social mobility, without compromising on the academic demands of its curricula and while improving student success rates, it needs to have an active recruitment policy and provide better guidance and support tailored to the heterogeneous educational backgrounds of its new students. This also requires us to question our teaching methods.

2.6 Growing European and global competition for students

Studying abroad is a major experience and, for several decades, we have been witnessing a significant rise in student mobility. This gives young people the opportunity to access high-quality or innovative education, acquire competences that are not necessarily taught in their home country, discover different cultures and improve their language skills. An international experience also improves their employability on labour markets that are increasingly global.

According to OECD data, the number of students who have left their home country to study abroad has more than doubled over two decades (up from 2 million in 1999 to over 5 million in 2016). Over 50% of international students who are studying in an OECD country come from Asia.¹⁹ The ‘Bologna’ process has also strongly fostered intra-European student mobility and led, in 2010, to the creation of the European Higher Education Area.

¹⁷ CRef statistics (<http://www.cref.be/annuaire/apercu-historique>) and CRef Doc 342-VI-4, 19 November 2018.

¹⁸ In 2017–2018 of the 6,161 students enrolled in the first year of a Bachelor programme, 1,907 received student-aid. At ULiège, 1,047 students (just over half the number at ULB) received a grant, while the number of students at this level was only 15 to 20% lower.

¹⁹ Education at a Glance 2018: OECD Indicators - <https://doi.org/10.1787/eag-2018-en>; Indicator B6



Over 60,000 students who did not obtain a previous diploma in Belgium are currently studying in a Belgian higher education institution. This corresponds to an inbound student mobility rate of over 12%.²⁰ In the Wallonia-Brussels Federation, over half these students come from France. This can be explained by the fact that we share a common language, but also by the ‘bypassing strategy’ for programmes with a *numerus clausus* in their home country. ULB is the university in the Wallonia-Brussels Federation that welcomes the highest number of international students.²¹ This first place is undoubtedly a source of enrichment for the institution. It gives our Belgian students the chance to experience internationalization at home. However, if we want to further expand our international recruitment pool, it is essential that we develop programmes in foreign languages.

A significant number of Belgian students are now choosing to complete an entire programme abroad; approximately 15,000 students have chosen this path, corresponding to an outward mobility rate of 2.8%.²² The three most popular destinations are the United Kingdom, France and the Netherlands, which each have more than 3,000 Belgian students.²³ The popularity of international university rankings, which has accentuated the perception of a quality gap between institutions, and the interest in studying at the most prestigious among them, is a determining factor in the decisions made by students who are potentially internationally mobile.

20 Ratio between the total number of international students and the total number of students enrolled in higher education in Belgium. The main countries of origin are France (27%), the Netherlands (7%), African countries (10%); currently less than 1% come from China. Global Flow of Tertiary-Level Students, UNESCO UIS 2019, <http://uis.unesco.org/en/uis-student-flow> (accessed on 24 January 2019).

21 33% of our students are not Belgian; 14% of our newly enrolled first-year Bachelor students are of foreign nationality and did not obtain their secondary school diploma in Belgium (average for the years 2010 to 2015); roughly 13% of our newly enrolled Master students did not obtain their previous degree in Belgium.

22 Ratio between the number of Belgian students studying abroad and the total number of students enrolled in higher education in Belgium. Global Flow of Tertiary-Level Students, UNESCO UIS 2019, <http://uis.unesco.org/en/uis-student-flow> (accessed on 24 January 2019).

23 Higher Education in Facts and Figures 2016, Universities UK www.universitiesuk.ac.uk; Incoming student mobility in Dutch higher education 2017–2018, <https://www.nuffic.nl/en/subjects/facts-and-figures/>

Information and communication technologies have also significantly increased international competition. We are seeing a rise in the number of online programmes (podcasts, e-learning, interactive platforms, etc.) that partially release teaching from spatial and temporal constraints. For example, it is now possible to obtain a degree from a reputable American university such as Arizona State University (ASU) without residing there. ASU, which has nearly 100,000 students, offers around 100 online programmes followed by over 25,000 students.²⁴

As students are increasingly mobile, there is growing competition to keep the best students in Belgium and attract students from abroad. This should encourage us to offer attractive and innovative teaching methods, good studying and working conditions on our campuses and high-quality student housing.

2.7 Increased pressure on members of academic and research staff regarding scientific output

Like most other European universities, ULB advocates the unity of teaching and research. This is reflected *inter alia* in its desire to create a synergy between research and Master programmes. Over the years, the University's research mission has also become increasingly important, resulting in permanent demanding academic standards.

Competition to attract the best talent is currently largely European but is becoming increasingly global. Whereas in the past many members of academic staff recruited by ULB had completed their studies and their doctorate at our University, today nearly half our doctoral candidates, two thirds of postdoctoral researchers and one third of members of academic staff do not have a ULB degree. The implementation of the European Research Area has led to growing researcher mobility within the European Union. University rankings and reputations play an increasingly decisive role in the choices made by researchers, thereby making the concentration of talents a stratifying factor between universities.

As mobility within the country is particularly easy, Flanders is very attractive to Belgian talents due to the considerable amount of funding earmarked for research in the Flemish Community and to the advantages granted to researchers in terms of teaching load. By way of comparison, in 2018 the annual budget of the Research Foundation - Flanders (FWO) was €340M, while that of the National Fund for Scientific Research (F.R.S.-FNRS) was €120M.²⁵ The Wallonia-Brussels Federation, however, still benefits from permanent F.R.S.-FNRS positions, which the FWO no longer offers.

The competition to obtain research funding is also intensifying, both for national funding (F.R.S.-FNRS, Walloon Region, Brussels-Capital Region) and international funding (mainly European), with success rates of below 10% for the most competitive calls. The budget for the EU's 'Horizon 2020' programme is nearly €80B.²⁶ Belgium is in a respectable position, attracting almost 4.8% of the budget while its population represents just over 2.2% of the total EU population.²⁷ However, this good national ranking conceals the fact that Flemish universities and research centres are the frontrunners in this competition; KULeuven, for example, receives €186M of funding, more than five times what ULB receives.

Where the F.R.S.-FNRS is concerned, we are doing very well. However, as we have submitted fewer applications on average in recent years than our two major competitors, UCLouvain and ULiège, our market share is shrinking. ULB is nevertheless the university in the Wallonia-Brussels Federation that obtained the largest share of funding from the 'Excellence of Science' programme in 2017. However, our ability to attract Walloon funding falls far short of our two competitors, and the projects we obtain from the Brussels-Capital Region do not compensate for this difference.

24 <https://asuonline.asu.edu/online-degree-programs> (accessed 6 February 2019).

25 CRef Doc 344-VI-2, January 2019

26 https://ec.europa.eu/commission/future-europe/eu-budget-future_en; the programme's successor, 'Horizon Europe', should receive a budget of €100B.

27 European Commission (2018), H2020 Projects summary, (accessed on 12 February 2019)

<https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/dashboard/sense/app/e8a41234-20b4-4e7e-80ef-335dd9e6ae36/sheet/941d3afe-da24-4c2e-99eb-b7fcbd8529ee/state/analysis>.



With the emergence of new university players, located mainly in Asia, the competition for both talent and international funding has become even more fierce in recent years. A good indicator of this changing landscape is the evolution of the number of scientific publications: an analysis of the Scopus database shows that China currently publishes more papers in the fields of science, technology, mathematics and engineering than the United States, whereas it published three times less just 15 years ago.²⁸ Another indicator is the spectacular rise (1,700%) in China's gross domestic expenditure on research and development over the past twenty years. China's expenditure relative to the country's GDP is now higher than that of the European Union, whereas 15 years ago it was far below.²⁹

Universities are also competing with companies in the new technologies industry that are engaged in cutting-edge research based largely on the potential of the data they have collected. The concentration of capital and data in the hands of a small number of companies calls into question the research capabilities of European public universities, particularly in the field of artificial intelligence.

This competition highlights the fact that research is the primary criteria taken into consideration for the scientific and academic evaluation of universities. The evaluation is often based on bibliometric criteria that do not always take into account differences between disciplines; the link between scientific quality and bibliometric criteria is also increasingly being called into question.³⁰ Many countries have gradually introduced incentives to publish more and currently, over 2.5 million papers are published each year in nearly 29,000 scientific journals, corresponding to an annual growth rate of around 3%.³¹ This explosion in the number of academic publications has led to an increase in the number of peer reviews done by researchers.

Despite its limited funding, ULB retains a good reputation as a research university. However, given the competition and in the absence of corrective measures, we risk seeing a gradual erosion of our international position, as do many other European universities. There is growing pressure to increase our high-quality scientific output in order to consolidate our position as a research university. Members of our academic and research staff are clearly torn between the need to continually perform well in research and the desire to invest in teaching.

In order to remain a university renowned for the quality of its research and avoid becoming an undergraduate university offering professional training, without neglecting the importance of our teaching mission and our community engagement, we need to better structure our research, reduce the other tasks expected of academic and research staff, implement a proactive recruitment and retention strategy and also re-assess our promotion and remuneration policies.

28 TOLLEFSON J., 'China declared largest source of research articles', NATURE, Vol 553, p390, 25 January 2018.

29 OECD (2018), <https://data.oecd.org/rd/gross-domestic-spending-on-r-d.htm>

30 In 2017, Universiteit Gent revised its evaluation system based on precise indicators and adopted a support system based on trust. <https://www.ugent.be/en/news-events/ghent-university-talent-rat-race-transformation-career-evaluation-model.htm>

31 WARE M., MABE, M., The STM Report, An Overview of scientific and scholarly journal publishing, International Association of Scientific, Technical and Medical Publishers, The Hague, 2015.

2.8 The expansion of national and international academic collaborations

The past decades have seen the emergence of a multitude of ways of opening up higher education to its immediate environment and the outside world, facilitated by the massive increase in the use of information and communication technologies. Collaborations between university partners have become a true way of transforming teaching, research and institutions' perception of their own role in society.

Where teaching is concerned, ULB offers many degree-awarding programmes in collaboration with universities and higher education institutions in the Wallonia-Brussels Federation and also with European and non-European universities. Through the Brussels University Alliance, we are also expanding our provision of multilingual programmes with our partner institution, the Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB). We currently have around 130 co-organized or joint-diploma agreements, including four Erasmus Mundus Master programmes. The complementary expertise of our various partner institutions has enabled us to develop more specialized programmes such as the Master in CyberSecurity or the Advanced Master in Gender Studies. Our collaboration with the Université de Mons (UMons) on the Charleroi Ville-Haute campus enables us to offer university Bachelor programmes in a region where little university education is currently available.

Alongside these agreements governing structured programmes, we also have an increasing number of Erasmus mobility agreements.³² We currently have 345 bilateral institutional cooperation agreements and 1,000 incoming/outgoing students per year. The 'European University' initiative, launched in 2018 by the European Commission, calls for even greater student mobility, in such a way that it becomes a reality for all, with the clear objective of language learning. It also offers an opportunity to develop our teaching partnerships, with the mobility of staff and research units benefitting from an unprecedented critical mass. Our CIVIS University – A European Civic University – as well as our existing networks and our privileged partners thus offer great potential for our future development.

Where research is concerned, collaboration between universities has existed for decades. Currently, one in five doctoral theses defended at ULB was co-supervised by an academic in another institution, and more than 80% of our publications listed in international databases are co-authored with colleagues from other universities or research institutions. These collaborations are increasingly encouraged by funding bodies, be it for projects funded by the Walloon Region, F.R.S.-FNRS large equipment calls, multi-partner platforms, cross-community EOS programmes or H2020 programme calls.

Researchers are increasingly mobile, and collaborative programmes and institutions' participation in research networks have thus become key factors of attraction. This also holds for students, who are increasingly seeking innovative programmes and mobility opportunities in line with their expectations. Moreover, international rankings, however questionable they may be, undoubtedly play a role in certain students' choice of institution.

Negotiating and managing an increasing number of teaching and research programmes puts considerable pressure on the institution. Similarly, the setting up and administration of collaborative teaching programmes, as well as the monitoring of research partnerships and incoming and outgoing student mobility, create an enormous administrative burden, with members of academic staff often serving as the point of contact with partner institutions. The prevalence of programme accreditations is an additional factor that increases the workload of university staff. In addition, there is a need for multilingual staff who can adapt to the constraints stemming from the welcoming of international students and academics and a greater need for communication and administrative transparency.

Given the change in the scale of university teaching and research networks, we must move from an essentially internal management model for our University to one that is systematically more open to our environment and to regional, inter-regional and international partners. We must strengthen and streamline the management of partnership processes in order to liberate time, so that members of academic staff and researchers can continue to fulfil their primary missions and administrative staff can avoid an excessive workload. In addition, we cannot completely disregard the growing number of international rankings.

³² In Europe, the number of students who benefitted from the Erasmus programme rose from 3,000 in 1987 to over 300,000 in 2017. Source: https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/about/factsheets_fr



2.9 Evolving expectations of students and staff, and changes in how campuses are used

The ways in which campuses are used are changing considerably, due to the expansion of higher education, the transformation of students' modes of learning, the changes in work modes and in teaching and research methods, the emergence of new technologies and the specialization of research areas. Major issues related to sustainability also highlight the expectations of the entire community regarding both the environmental quality of our campuses and the quality of life on campus.

While lecture halls are far from full for some traditional *ex cathedra* lectures, we observe that more and more students wish to study on campus in a more nomadic way. Available seating in libraries is becoming scarce, and convivial spaces are occupied at all hours of the day by students hunched over their laptops or notes. Paradoxically, digital technologies have reinforced rather than mitigated this need to occupy a physical campus. The saturation of these spaces during revision and exam periods is especially noticeable; working in a common space clearly enables students to be monitored by their peers and ensures that they concentrate better. Recent developments in pedagogical practices – which call for a reduction in lectures and an increase in interactive teaching – require us to rethink not just our teaching, but also our learning spaces, their equipment and the times at which these spaces are accessible, in order to meet the needs of collaborative work in small groups.

As the university is not just a place for study or work but also a living space, both students and staff also want convivial spaces, cultural and socio-medical services, good quality food options and easy access to amenities that meet their day-to-day needs. The development of student accommodation is also an important factor of attraction, for both Belgian and international students. With over 90,000 students registered in higher education institutions, Brussels is the country's top student city. More than one third of these live in student accommodation, of which there is a severe shortage in Brussels; students have difficulty finding accommodation that meets their needs where rent, shared amenities and access to public transport are concerned.

Campuses and their infrastructure must also evolve with changes in work modes, not only to respond to the hyperspecialization of research, but also to meet the need for flexible spaces conducive to interdisciplinarity.

ULB cannot isolate itself from its environment, particularly because it is mainly an urban university. The border between the campuses and the city is becoming increasingly blurred: our campuses permeate the city, calling into question the very notion of the campus as a physical space. The university is an urban domain of knowledge, it cannot develop without taking into account environmental management issues, such as the development of green spaces, recycling, energy saving and mobility both on and between its various campuses.

The quality of a university's missions is highly dependent on the quality of its infrastructures. This is an increasingly decisive factor when students, researchers and staff are choosing where to study or work. The reworking of spaces to meet the expectations of the community has become a key feature of the development of many universities. As competition is now Europe-wide, or even worldwide, the quality of infrastructure is an important factor of attraction.

If we want our campuses to contribute to the attractiveness of our University and thereby enhance the recruitment of students and staff, we must adapt our built spaces and develop our unbuilt spaces. If our real-estate plan is to meet sustainability requirements while being in-line with our teaching and research strategy, support should be given to our ambitions to make our various sites convivial living and working spaces, where all those who frequent them can thrive.

2.10 The funding of universities is not on par with their missions

Universities in the Wallonia-Brussels Federation, as in many European countries, are essentially publicly funded, which guarantees their independence in research and teaching. Nearly 80% of our University's budget (excluding research contracts) is funded by the Wallonia-Brussels Federation and the federal government, while the rest comes mainly from student enrolment fees and real estate revenue (our total annual budget, excluding research contracts, is around €220M). Research contracts obtained by our researchers come mainly from Belgian and European public institutions (90%) and supplement this budget by around €80M, which is a far from negligible amount.

A comparative study of university public funding carried out by the Centre for Research in Regional Economics and Economic Policy (CERPE) at the Université de Namur (UNamur),³³ shows that public funding per student in the Wallonia-Brussels Federation is clearly below that of neighbouring regions. While public funding amounts to less than €8,000 per student in the Wallonia-Brussels Federation (in current euros), it amounts to around €10,000 per student in Flanders and in Germany and over €14,000 per student in the Netherlands. These figures are still below those of European front-runners such as Austria, Sweden and Norway.³⁴

Since 1997, there has been a huge drop in the public funding of higher education in the Wallonia-Brussels Federation: public funding has dropped by 22.3% per university student, and by 10.4% per non-university higher education student. In contrast, public funding for primary and secondary education increased during this period by almost 22% and 3% respectively.

The continued growth in the number of students in Wallonia-Brussels Federation universities, which has not been offset by increased public funding, explains this drop. Over the past decade, universities have seen an increase in the number of first-generation Belgian students, and also the arrival of a large number of European students, especially from France. Between 2006 and 2016, public funding of ULB, in constant euros, increased by 14% while the number of students rose by 28%.

As universities in the Wallonia-Brussels Federation share a fixed budget, the ratio of their operating allowance relative to the weighted number of students eligible for funding (at constant 2004 prices) dropped from €5,894 in 2006 to €4,512 in 2018. The refinancing of the universities, which was started during the 2014-2019 parliamentary term, has at most stabilized the situation but has by no means reversed the trend of the evolution of funding observed over several years.

This drop in funding also has a major impact on the management of our real estate. Reasonable management would require an annual investment of €15M (450,000 m² of buildings renovated every 30 years at a cost of €1,000/m²), whereas our budgets do not allow us to spend more than €4.5M per year on average.³⁵ This is without taking into account the shortage of study and work spaces resulting from the increase in our student population, and our needs and wishes regarding pedagogical developments, mobility and the sustainable transformation of our campuses.

In order to remain attractive, our University must be able to offer an ever improving and largely accessible environment. With the Wallonia-Brussels Federation's current system for funding universities, however, each new student enrolment increases our needs without actually increasing the universities' resources.

33 CRef memorandum in anticipation of the 2019 elections. http://www.cref.be/communication/20181204_Memorandum_CREF_2018.pdf.

34 <https://eua.eu/downloads/publications/eua-pfo-report-december-2017.pdf>.

35 We currently devote €1.9M of our non-allocated funding to the renovation of our buildings, plus €2.3M of Wallonia-Brussels Federation funding earmarked for 'major building maintenance'. The Wallonia-Brussels Federation grants us €2.2M per year for new buildings. Any additional money is obtained through occasional calls for projects (FEDER, regional, federal). According to our current estimates, our revenue over the next decade will be €45M, while we estimate our needs over the same period to be €150M.



Our current funding is clearly not on par with our missions. The report published in 2017 by a panel of external experts at the request of the ARES governing body concluded that to make up for the drop in funding recorded, the total Wallonia-Brussels Federation higher education budget would have to increase, on average and cumulatively, by around €50M per year until 2030.³⁶ Given the financial situation of the Wallonia-Brussels Federation, one can reasonably question the capacity, and the will, to achieve this goal. The CRef (Council of Rectors), in its memorandum for the 2019 elections, endorsed the recommendation made by the panel of external experts and requested an initial budget of €150M in favour of universities for the 2019-2024 parliamentary term, which would bring funding per student back to its 2006 level. This would also bring the Wallonia-Brussels Federation closer to its neighbours' average spending per student.

The CRef also highlights the lack of resources allocated to universities for maintaining and renovating existing buildings and making them comply with standards, and for investing in new infrastructures to accommodate the growth in student numbers, the development of research and the necessary alignment with technological and environmental standards. The forced use of financial resources normally devoted to teaching and research activities in order to partially mitigate the lack of resources for infrastructures exacerbates the under-funding of university operating budgets. For the 2019-2024 parliamentary term, the CRef has asked the Wallonia-Brussels Federation for an additional budget of around €20M per year in order to increase the current annual allowance from €11M to €33M. The CRef also demands an ambitious, long-term and negotiated investment plan concerning new university infrastructures.

The changes in our environment outlined so far, such as the growing number of students with increasingly heterogenous profiles, changes in modes of learning and the university community's expectations regarding infrastructures and services, inevitably lead to a greater need for investments.

In the light of these facts, it is therefore legitimate to wonder how we are going to be able to continue to fulfil our missions of teaching, research and service to society when we are under-funded. While the public funding of our University guarantees our survival in the long-term, we need to be realistic and not remain passive given our needs. We also need to develop other sources of funding in order to fulfil our missions and compare favourably with partner and competitor universities throughout Europe. Furthermore, we shall need to equip ourselves with tools to control and analyse costs and to optimize spaces.

³⁶ FINANCE J.-P., LEONHARD D. et al., L'enseignement supérieur en Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles à l'horizon 2030. Rapport du Collège d'experts extérieurs. Brussels: ARES, July 2017

3. Our University and its challenges

Throughout our history, we have succeeded in adapting to our environment while remaining true to our identity. In fifty years, we have gone from 10,000 to 30,000 students. Our researchers are nationally and internationally renowned, and our University is the top Belgian university in terms of international prizes awarded to its researchers and members of academic staff. Furthermore, our community engagement has never wavered. The vast majority of our graduates transition easily to the professional world, which testifies to the relevance of our education, characterized by its openness to complexity and to critical thinking. It is thus with legitimate pride that we embrace our heritage.

However, the developments identified in the previous chapter are a source of constraints to which our University will have to adapt. The extent and acceleration of societal changes now confront our University, and many others, with challenges on an unprecedented scale. These changes highlight both our contradictions and the limits of some of our internal organization models. Building the future means facing up to the problems of the present without burying our heads in the sand. The changes with which we are confronted are not just threats, however, they also constitute opportunities.

This array of constraints calls into question several aspects of our internal operations and our identity. The main challenges that ensue are addressed in this chapter.



3.1 Challenges relating to our philosophical principles

Free enquiry, which equates with scientific method and the tradition of democratic debate, is one of the cornerstones of our institution and has been inscribed in our organic statutes since the end of the 19th century. Even though democratic debate and scientific method are now the norm in most universities around the world, free enquiry remains a distinctive characteristic of ULB and underlies not only our scientific approach, but also our community engagement and tradition of internal debate.

Paradoxically, our philosophy of free enquiry has earned us a reputation for intolerance in certain circles. As unfair as this may seem to us, it is important to reflect on this criticism. Contrary to an idea that is too often conveyed, ULB is entirely open to all, regardless of their beliefs and origins.³⁷ Free enquiry implies respect for everyone's fundamental right to hold religious and spiritual beliefs.

Today, the exercise of free enquiry is as relevant as ever. Moreover, it is all the more important when it contributes to reaffirming our rejection of any kind of domination or control of the production of knowledge, our attachment to values of self-determination, free discussion and equal access to the public debate, our fierce opposition to extremism and fundamentalism and our fight for personal and social emancipation. Nonetheless, it is time to update this fundamental value, without renouncing any of our history.

The university has an essential role to play where the erosion of public debate is concerned. It must preserve the place of knowledge and the exercising of critical thinking in the forming of opinions, and embrace the complexity of the world against populist excesses and all forms of intolerance. The social and political upheavals of our democratic societies thus prompt us to:

- update our definition of free enquiry;
- teach critical thinking in all our curricula and foster free enquiry in our pedagogical practices;
- promote the learning of free discussion and argumentation among our students;
- embrace, in society as a whole, our attachment to the values of democracy and free enquiry as well as our commitment to defending these values.

³⁷ Auguste Baron, ULB's first secretary, said in his inaugural speech on 20 November 1834: 'We swear to inspire in our students...the practical love of men who are brothers, without any distinction of caste, opinion or nation; we swear to teach them how to devote their thoughts, their work, their talents to the happiness and improvement of their fellow citizens and of humanity.'



3.2 Challenges relating to research

Research occupies an increasingly central role in universities. Ever more collective, it is required to become more interdisciplinary in order to tackle major societal challenges, and is increasingly being conducted in national and international networks. Researchers, whatever their field of research and the size of the structure in which they work, must be able to find an intellectual environment and partners in networks that extend beyond the walls of the University.

Competition for research funding and F.R.S.-FNRS positions continues to grow, fuelled among other factors by rankings. The burden of accountability intrinsic to research (reports, evaluations, publications) is also becoming heavier to the point of becoming a deterrent.

Furthermore, universities no longer have the monopoly over the production of knowledge and have to face competition from private companies whose resources are often far higher than their own.

These trends generate several key challenges for our research mission, including:

- available time: researchers, whether members of academic or research staff, must be able to make sufficient time available for their research, whatever its nature;
- the dynamics and size of research teams: researchers must be able to work within motivating teams and, in certain fields, teams that are large enough to undertake large-scale projects;
- administrative efficiency: researchers must receive support with the administrative aspects of their research;
- coordination: interdisciplinary research and partnerships imply facilitating collaboration between disciplines, research centres and faculties;
- the need for an institutional strategy: while respecting academic independence and scientific creativity, the University must be able to launch incentives in areas it considers strategic, be it to develop a scientific field or interuniversity partnerships.



3.3 Challenges relating to teaching

ULB is committed to maintaining its high academic standards, whatever its students' educational backgrounds, and thereby foster upward social mobility. We are faced with an ever-growing number of students with very heterogeneous educational backgrounds and therefore need to pay particular attention to the transition between secondary school and university. We must also deal with greater individualization of student trajectories. In a context of chronic under-funding and relative inadequacy of our infrastructures, the difficulties of supporting students in their learning trajectory are multiplying.

We are facing both national and international competition where recruitment of students is concerned, mainly at Master and Advanced Master level. Teaching, like research, is subject to more and more accountability constraints (evaluations, benchmarking, accreditations and quality controls).

Teaching is also faced with changes in social and academic practices, resulting from the emergence of information and communication technologies, but also related to changing expectations regarding teaching methods, new learning time frames and the growing demand for lifelong learning. We also need to concern ourselves with the future professional integration of our students, even though our vocation is clearly not to provide purely professional training.

These trends generate several key challenges for our teaching mission, which concern in particular:

- pedagogical innovation: programmes and courses must be redesigned as a result of, *inter alia*, the growth in student numbers and their heterogeneous educational backgrounds, the requirements of the transition between secondary school and university, the change in modes of learning, the opportunities offered by digital technologies and students' future professional aspirations;
- adjusting of programmes: the University – and primarily its faculties – must be able to launch teaching initiatives in areas it considers strategic, in order to meet, *inter alia*, expectations regarding interdisciplinarity and the link between Master programmes and new fields of research;
- coordination: pedagogical innovation, quality and interdisciplinarity requirements place an additional burden on teaching staff and faculties in terms of coordination and cooperation;
- new learning time frames: the continuum between initial education and lifelong learning must be established given the accelerated obsolescence of knowledge and also the non-linear nature of life and professional paths;
- available time: teaching staff, whether members of academic or scientific staff, must have time to design innovative courses and develop new pedagogical practices;
- adapting of infrastructures and facilities: lecture halls, classrooms, study rooms and meeting rooms must be equipped and adapted to teaching formats and to the size of student cohorts.

3.4 The challenges of arbitrating between the demands of coordination and academic freedom

Quality and accountability requirements (in both research and teaching), new expectations regarding teaching methods, national and international competition, the proliferation of partnerships and the growing tension regarding the fair distribution of workloads, all call for the enhancing of coordination and collaboration between members of academic staff. In particular, the quality of teaching programmes and the efficient management of increasingly complex learning trajectories require a concerted adjusting of course content and teaching methods and the control of certain standards. This means, for example, that academic supervisors and programme supervisors must be able to respond more decisively to any shortcomings observed and have the power to make teaching staff adapt their course content and teaching methods. Coordination and collaboration between members of academic staff are also necessary with respect to research and optimal use of resources.

These constraints are sometimes wrongly interpreted as a threat to academic freedom. Academic freedom is not negotiable, and our institution is particularly committed to it. It even represents a factor of attraction for some of the international researchers and academics who choose to join us. Academic freedom is not, however, synonymous with total independence. As with all values, it is not absolute. It is not, for example, acceptable for certain members of academic staff give up doing research or systematically avoid coordination meetings that are essential to maintain programme consistency and quality. Nor is there any question of workspaces being exempt from the principle of fair allocation of resources. Both the rights and the duties intrinsic to academic freedom must be protected in order to ensure the proper functioning of the University and fairness between all, where both sharing of workloads and sharing of resources are concerned. This will make it necessary, should the need arise, to:

- clarify the social contract and missions of members of academic staff and other researchers who teach at our institution, while implementing measures to ensure that they are complied with;
- enhance collaboration between members of academic/research staff in both teaching and research;
- improve the management of logistical resources and workspaces, insofar as the evolution of academic activities makes it necessary to constantly be able to adapt the organization of the University.

3.5 Challenges relating to our community engagement and service to society

Given the demands of research and teaching, some members of academic staff and researchers are reluctant to accept obligations outside the University, whether they involve scientific outreach, promoting culture produced at the University, defending our values of democracy and emancipation in society as a whole, investing in development aid, providing expertise or lifelong learning or even participating in external advisory boards and examination panels. Academic excellence cannot be synonymous with social and economic isolation and must not weaken our tradition of community engagement and openness to the major challenges facing society.

Absorbed by their other missions, members of academic and research staff and also members of administrative, technical, managerial and specialized staff, have difficulty finding the time and motivation to get involved in ULB's community engagement missions.

Preserving, or enhancing, our community engagement involves, *inter alia*:

- promoting, and valuing, within the University, both community engagement and openness to the challenges facing society;
- promoting contractual research, the creation of spin-offs, lifelong education and missions involving expertise, outreach and knowledge dissemination;
- intensifying, renewing, professionalizing our relationships with all our stakeholders (social, cultural, political, economic) and in particular with our alumni;
- greater recognition of the contribution of external members of the University to our teaching and research programmes.



3.6 Challenges relating to the management of our institution and to participatory governance

The growing pressure on both research and teaching, in a context of limited resources, reduces the propensity of members of academic and scientific staff to participate in the management of the institution, which has, moreover, become more burdensome and complex (processing of an increasing number of admission files, management of increasingly individualized programmes, chairing of examination panels, etc).

At the same time, a drop in participation in central and faculty bodies has been observed across all university members. It is becoming difficult to find candidates for elections, and those who are elected have difficulty finding time to fulfil their obligations.

The internationalization of staff adds to the crisis regarding investment in management of the University and in democratic participation. Those who join us do not necessarily have a particular interest in these matters, and much less the intimate knowledge of the institution that would motivate them to take an active part in its governance.

In an institution like ours, which was historically founded on participation at all levels, such disinvestment inevitably leads to a destabilizing of its organization and management, and to changes in the way dossiers are handled by its participatory bodies. It is essential to revitalise our democratic governance, failing which it could be reduced to a mere formality stripped of meaning and the University's formal bodies would be deserted by the very people who were elected to sit on them. Our institution will have to take a stance with respect to the following potential solutions:

- raise awareness among staff of the importance of democratic participation in decision-making bodies and react more clearly in the event of structural absenteeism;
- refocus democratic participation on major strategic orientations and alleviate the authorities of the processing of more routine files – while guaranteeing administrative transparency – and at the same time reduce the number of meetings;
- reconsider the sharing of certain tasks between members of academic staff and members of administrative, technical, managerial and specialized staff (such as administrative management of programmes and processing of admission files);
- set up training programmes for those who take on positions of responsibility (dean, president of a programme, of a department, etc.).

3.7 Challenges relating to the administration of our University

International student mobility, the digital revolution, quality and accountability requirements, the increase in administrative workload related to the implementation of new decrees and the resulting bureaucracy, the administrative burden attached to national and international partnerships, the evolution of the university community's expectations regarding campuses and sustainable development: all these factors, coupled with funding constraints, have a growing impact on our administration and lead us to rethink the administration of our institution in a broader sense.

It is impossible to get members of academic and research staff to focus on their teaching and research missions if we do not, at the same time, give administrative and managerial staff increased prerogatives and simplify procedures. It is essential to consider the functioning of our institution as a coherent whole and to streamline processes between faculties and with the various departments of the general administration. The more specific challenges relating to the administration of our University include:

- administrative simplification: we need a true administrative simplification policy aimed at reducing the burden of administration and increasing its efficiency;
- professionalization: management of the University is increasingly complex and requires specialized skills in information technology, urban planning, legal affairs, sustainable development, finance, languages, etc.;
- quality control: as with teaching and research programmes, administrative processes are increasingly subject to qualitative evaluations;
- increased accountability: more members of staff must be able to take initiatives without having to systematically consult their supervisor;
- good coordination between the general administration and faculty administrations.

3.8 Challenges relating to the careers of academic staff

The strong pressure exerted simultaneously on research and teaching in a context where resources are limited (time, funding, administrative support) results in a growing tension between time allocated to research and that allocated to teaching. This forces members of academic staff – and also many members of research staff – into trade-offs that are all the more difficult because our institution has not clearly defined the rules of the game. It is becoming almost impossible to meet all expectations with respect to research (publications, supervision of doctoral candidates and researchers, grant applications) and at the same time meet pedagogical expectations (updating of courses, launching of new programmes, designing of new teaching materials, lifelong learning). For many, the system is generating feelings of failure or inadequacy, professional frustration and even suffering at work. It is important that we acknowledge this. As mentioned above, this also leads to lesser involvement in the management of and democratic participation in the institution, as well as in its community engagement activities.

If we acknowledge that it is essential to mitigate these tensions and that it is vital to preserve our research potential, our institution must necessarily clarify its position with respect to the following potential solutions:

- implement a proactive policy to recruit talent, while also promoting a policy of gender equality and diversity;
- offer attractive and rewarding careers (promotion, sabbaticals, mobility, etc.);
- offer the possibility to adapt career profiles by allowing members of academic staff to temporarily devote more time to either teaching or research;
- reduce teaching loads, by rethinking the number of teaching hours in study programmes;
- reduce the administrative load borne by members of academic (and research) staff, by rethinking the sharing of responsibilities with members of administrative, technical, managerial and specialized staff;
- entrust certain teaching missions to other categories of persons (from the professional world for certain specialized courses, Master students for supervision of Bachelor students, etc.).



3.9 Challenges relating to the careers of research staff

Most of the challenges outlined above also concern temporary research staff. The pressure of research exists for all, both doctoral candidates and postdoctoral researchers alike, but the volume of teaching and supervision duties is variable, with teaching assistants having the largest workload. It is often difficult for them to complete their thesis within the allotted time and, by the end of their contract, to have a scientific output that would enable them to obtain funding to pursue an academic career, should they so wish.

In addition, the increase in the number of postdoctoral positions relative to the number of permanent positions available in Belgium and the world in general, and the preference given to researchers eligible for mobility fellowships, lead to longer periods of job insecurity – in both time and space – for researchers. In the long run, this job insecurity risks weighing more heavily on women.

The challenges generated by this situation are:

- the conditions for successful completion of a doctorate: a significant number of doctoral candidates do not obtain their degree, in particular those who work as teaching assistants or who are not, or no longer, funded;
- valorisation of the doctorate: not all those who obtain a doctorate can aspire to an academic career;
- the balance between teaching assistants' supervisory duties and research duties, but also their equal recognition: throughout their contract, teaching assistants often take on important supervisory and coordination duties that are not always acknowledged;
- the job insecurity of young researchers: they often have one fixed term contract after another, funded by public or private funding bodies, with different constraints.

3.10 Challenges relating to the careers of members of administrative, technical, managerial and specialized staff

Many of the challenges already identified in this chapter, particularly those related to the welcoming and monitoring of students, the setting up of teaching programmes, the development of research activities and service to society, the development of services to the community, and of course the adapting of the University's administration and infrastructures, have a significant impact on members of ULB's administrative, technical, managerial and specialized staff. Whether they are attached to faculty departments or to departments in the general administration, our staff are an essential resource supporting the University's missions and activities. In addition, as a specific component of the university community, they have their own expectations that evolve over time.

Challenges more specific to members of administrative, technical, managerial and specialized staff concern:

- attractiveness and recognition of their careers: we must be able to attract and retain the best profiles while ensuring equitable workloads and recognition of each person's contribution to the missions of the University;
- skill development and adaptability: technological developments, new teaching methods, programme and process management as well as internationalization and multiculturalism make it necessary for staff to acquire new skills or refresh them over the course of a career;
- increased interdisciplinarity: all the changes in our environment, whether external or internal, increase the need for internal coordination and thus the need to decompartmentalize and promote mobility within the University.

3.11 Challenges relating to the evolution of student life

The attention given to the students we welcome into our University cannot be limited to their academic learning. Our institution has always strived to be open, inclusive and emancipatory. The trajectories our students choose – at a key point in their lives – cannot leave us indifferent. These trajectories, which are increasingly diversified and less and less linear, are often combined with a paid activity or some form of community engagement.

Our institution must ensure that it adapts to the student community of the 21st century – which is constantly growing and will certainly continue to grow in the coming years – and provides a living environment that meets its diverse needs.

Evolving lifestyles and student habits pose challenges not only for teaching, as mentioned earlier, but also where socio-emotional well-being is concerned. They prompt us to:

- provide the necessary social support for those who need it and develop activities to promote students' health and well-being;
- facilitate the personal development of students with special needs (students with disabilities, professional athletes, young entrepreneurs, etc.);
- offer an appropriate welcome for international students;
- provide convivial student accommodation and halls of residence;
- support cultural and/or sports initiatives and activities popular among the student community, both on campus and in the city;
- acknowledge, in students' trajectories, their engagement in the University and in society as a whole, and enhance civic education.

3.12 Challenges relating to the sustainability and conviviality of our campuses

The evolution of both pedagogical practices and work and research modes force us to rethink our campuses, including our infrastructures and equipment. Campuses are not only places to study and work, but also living spaces; we must therefore be able to meet the demand for convivial spaces, leisure and rest areas, places for cultural and sports activities and catering facilities.

We must also ensure that the various activities organized on our campuses, including those initiated by organizers from outside the University, coexist in harmony: teaching, scientific seminars and conferences, cultural exhibitions, sporting events, student festivals, etc. Everyone who frequents one of our campuses must feel at ease and safe.

Importantly, at a time when climate issues are a major concern for both citizens and politicians, it is our responsibility, as a University that has long been committed to sustainable development, to increase our efforts as much as our means permit and, as a trainer of future generations, to take a proactive approach in this area. This implies giving serious thought to the environmental footprint of our campuses (mobility, energy consumption, logistics, landscaping, etc.) and how we operate.

Increasing conviviality and our commitment to the sustainable development of our campuses requires us to:

- ensure that our infrastructures are in line with the latest pedagogical practices and the latest studying, research and work modes;
- ensure that our campuses are safe and attractive living environments and that socio-cultural activities (cultural and sports activities, leisure and rest areas, catering facilities, etc.) are available, with schedules adapted to the needs of the university community;
- promote an evolution towards more sustainable work modes in the broader sense and encourage everyone to be involved in this transition;
- integrate the issue of sustainable development into our teaching and research projects;
- ensure exemplary environmental management of our campuses, including where mobility is concerned;
- be able to rely on the expertise, analysis and scientific rigour of our own experts in order to make our campuses places of experimentation and innovation.





3.13 Challenges relating to the digital transition

The adaptation of teaching methods, the management of students' trajectories, the follow-up and implementation of research programmes, collaborations and international exchanges, the management of staff careers and administration of the University all require appropriate changes with respect to digitalization. In research, where numerical models play an increasingly important role, alongside theoretical design and experimentation, there is a growing need for access to supercomputing infrastructures. Efficient data management is also essential in the context of the current scientific approach based on big data and artificial intelligence, and also in order to join the open-science movement.

As a result, our institution is faced with the following imperatives:

- be able to keep up with the evolution of information and communication technologies used in teaching, and have the infrastructures necessary to accommodate them;
- ensure that all members of the university community, and students in particular, have access to these technologies;
- be able to meet the expectations of researchers who rely increasingly on ICTs;
- take advantage of the digitalization of administrative processes to professionalize and streamline them;
- train staff and allow them to adapt, throughout their career, to the evolution of information and communication technologies;
- prepare our graduates to face a world undergoing radical technological changes.



3.14 Challenges relating to funding

For years, universities in the Wallonia-Brussels Federation have been experiencing a massive drop in funding, with spending per student falling by almost 25% in 20 years. The public university model is thus in jeopardy. Our funding is now clearly not on par with our missions and is a source of concern, given the challenges facing us. This has a considerable impact on the management of our teaching and research programmes, on the attractiveness and recognition of the careers of all members of staff and on the adapting and upgrading of our infrastructures. Due to lack of funding for the latter, we do not have the necessary financial resources to respond to the growth in student population, to the evolution of learning and research modes, to the necessary alignment with environmental and technological standards, and to the university community's expectations with respect to services and quality of life.

Our institution will have to take a stance regarding the following potential solutions:

- actively urge politicians in both government and parliament to increase the funding of higher education, in particular by reopening the debate within the ARES;
- rationalise spaces, by exploring the possibility of teleworking and exercising greater control over how buildings are used;
- adapt the range of courses on offer, *inter alia* by leveraging synergies between programmes or with other universities, by taking advantage of digital technologies;
- develop alternative funding policies;
- develop targeted fundraising campaigns focussing, for example, on recognized societal issues;
- remain open to public-private partnerships within a controlled framework.

4. A vision for our University

The Université libre de Bruxelles is proud of its intellectual heritage and, since its very foundation, has advocated secularism, democracy and free enquiry. Free enquiry underpins our scientific approach as well as our teaching and community engagement.

It affirms our rejection of all forms of domination and control over the production of knowledge, our attachment to the values of self-determination, free discussion and equal access to the public debate, as well as our struggle for personal and social emancipation.

ULB's strength is that it is, at one and the same time, an internationally recognized research University committed to academic excellence, a University offering open, inclusive and emancipatory education and a civic University anchored in its environment and committed to progress.

The major changes in our environment are generating a series of structural tensions within our institution. In a context where resources are severely limited, these tensions – most of which were already present – are now tending to become exacerbated and lead to uncertainty, and sometimes even to stress and suffering at work.

Among these tensions, we should mention in particular:

- The tension between our core values of free enquiry, secularism, critical thinking and democratic debate and the social changes that encourage the denying, distorting or commodifying of knowledge;
- The tension between the time and energy devoted to our mission of social emancipation and the time and energy that must be devoted to scientific and academic output that is faced with growing competition;
- The tension between the need to preserve the University's role in fundamental research, and the growing demand for knowledge that can be used to solve practical problems;
- The tension between the time allocated to each of our missions of research, teaching and service to society, and the constraints intrinsic to the participatory management of an increasingly complex institution;
- The tension between the slow gestation of knowledge and the requirement that it be immediately available, which is linked to the explosion of information and communication technologies;
- The tension between the autonomy of individuals, research centres and faculties on the one hand, and the need for coordination intrinsic to interdisciplinarity, quality, accountability and optimal use of resources;
- The tension between the procedures and principles of formal equality that govern our administrative management, and individualization and flexibility constraints intrinsic to competition and internationalization;
- The more general tension between the efforts that we are used to devoting to our internal functioning and those that we now must devote to adapting to a Belgian and international context that is undergoing profound changes.

Our University has no choice but to rise to the challenges that these fundamental dynamics impose; otherwise, we shall gradually fail to meet our two-fold vocation of scientific excellence and social emancipation. We also might have to gradually give up our international ambitions and be reduced to a teaching institution confined to Brussels, seen as an administrative region rather than as the capital of Europe and a place of openness to the world. No one at our University would be content with such an outcome, neither its members, nor its stakeholders, nor the wider community close to ULB that shares its values. We must have the courage to rethink not only our three missions, but also our campuses, the way we operate and the management of our staff.

We must also acknowledge the change in scale of the academic landscape and increase our alliances and partnerships at national, European and international level. Moreover, we cannot completely ignore international rankings and must consider meeting the demands of those we consider relevant, but without letting them determine our strategy.

We want to instil a sense of responsibility in all members of our community with respect to the challenges stemming from these fundamental changes. This Strategic Plan concerns us all and everyone must contribute to it. The challenges we are facing are of great concern, but they also have the potential to bring about positive change.

It should be noted that these challenges also affect our hospital network, which is faced with unprecedented budget constraints and the need to cut costs and increase efficiency. Our hospitals are, among other challenges, faced with having to reconcile scientific excellence and equal access to health care, optimize the use of resources, embrace interdisciplinarity and adapt to the changing scale of networks. The strategic plan of our Erasme academic hospital will supplement the one drawn up for our institution.

The work conducted to draw up this plan and the overall reflection on the fundamental aspects of our identity and the changes in our environment have enabled us not only to identify the challenges awaiting us, but also to clarify the nature of our project and the scope of our ambitions and to construct our vision for our University.



Our vision for 2030

A **civic** University

- focussed on contributing, through its missions, to the defence and promotion of the values of free enquiry and democracy;
- involved in resolving major societal problems;
- an active participant in the public debate against disinformation, ideological regression and identitarian closure.

A University **focused on research**

- committed to excellence and freedom of research;
- guaranteeing a rigorous and rational approach to scientific questions;
- attentive to the relationship between research and teaching.

A University **open to its environment**

- playing an active role in society;
- anchored in its social, political, cultural and economic environment;
- eager to contribute to regional development;
- a driving force in networks of alliances and partnerships in Brussels and Wallonia.

An **inclusive** University

- eager to make students agents of their own learning and to provide them with support, guidance and an environment that will help them succeed;
- careful to promote equal opportunities and diversity in all its policies.

An **attractive and sustainable** University

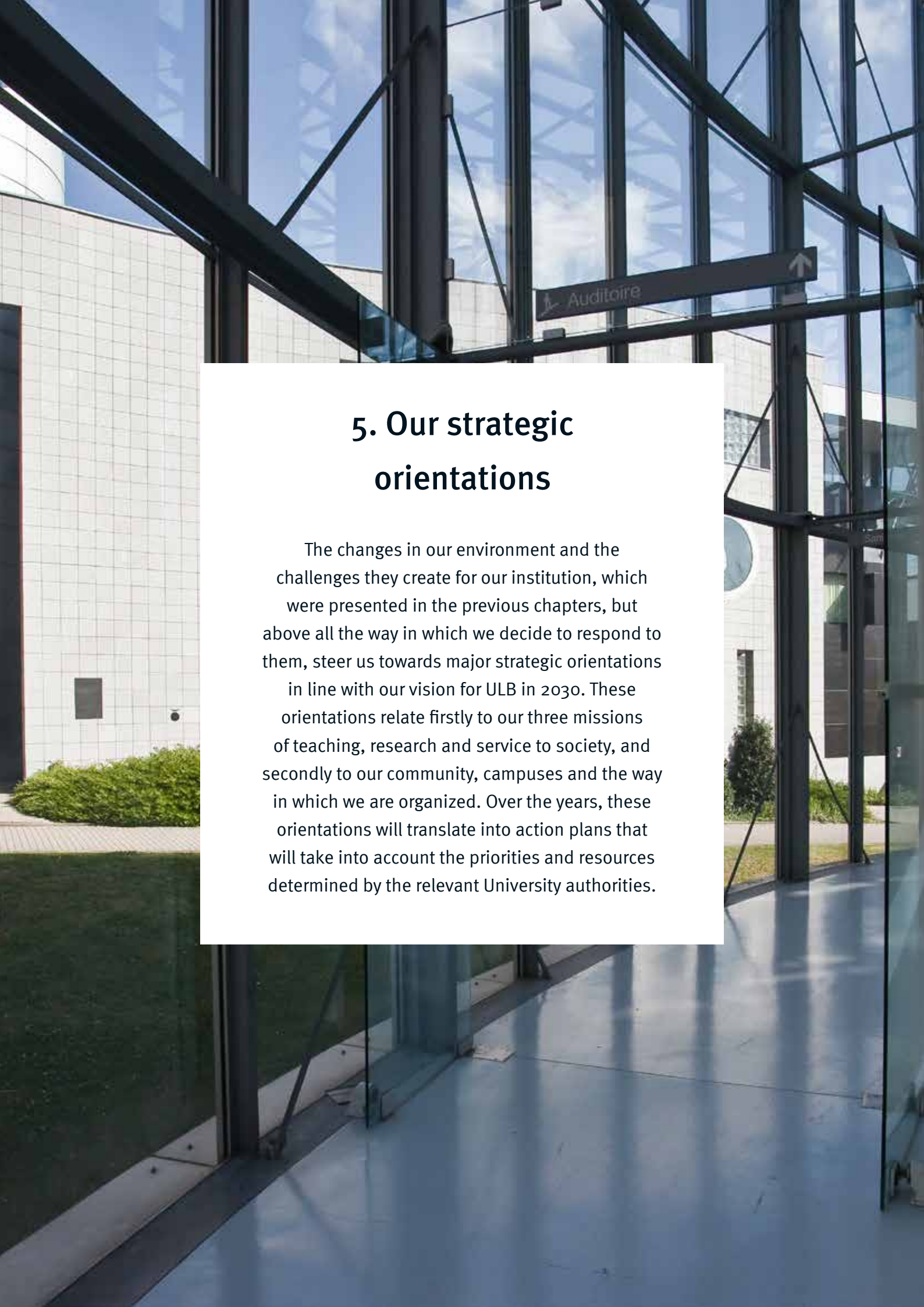
- recruiting the best talents and offering them an environment in which they can thrive;
- focused on innovative teaching methods and on providing a high-quality education to students at all stages of their lives;
- adhering to standards of environmental excellence in all its operations, especially in the management of its infrastructures;
- offering a convivial environment to all students, staff and visitors.

A **European and International** University

- embracing its European and international vocation in its three missions: research, teaching and service to society;
- active in a vast international network of alliances and partnerships.

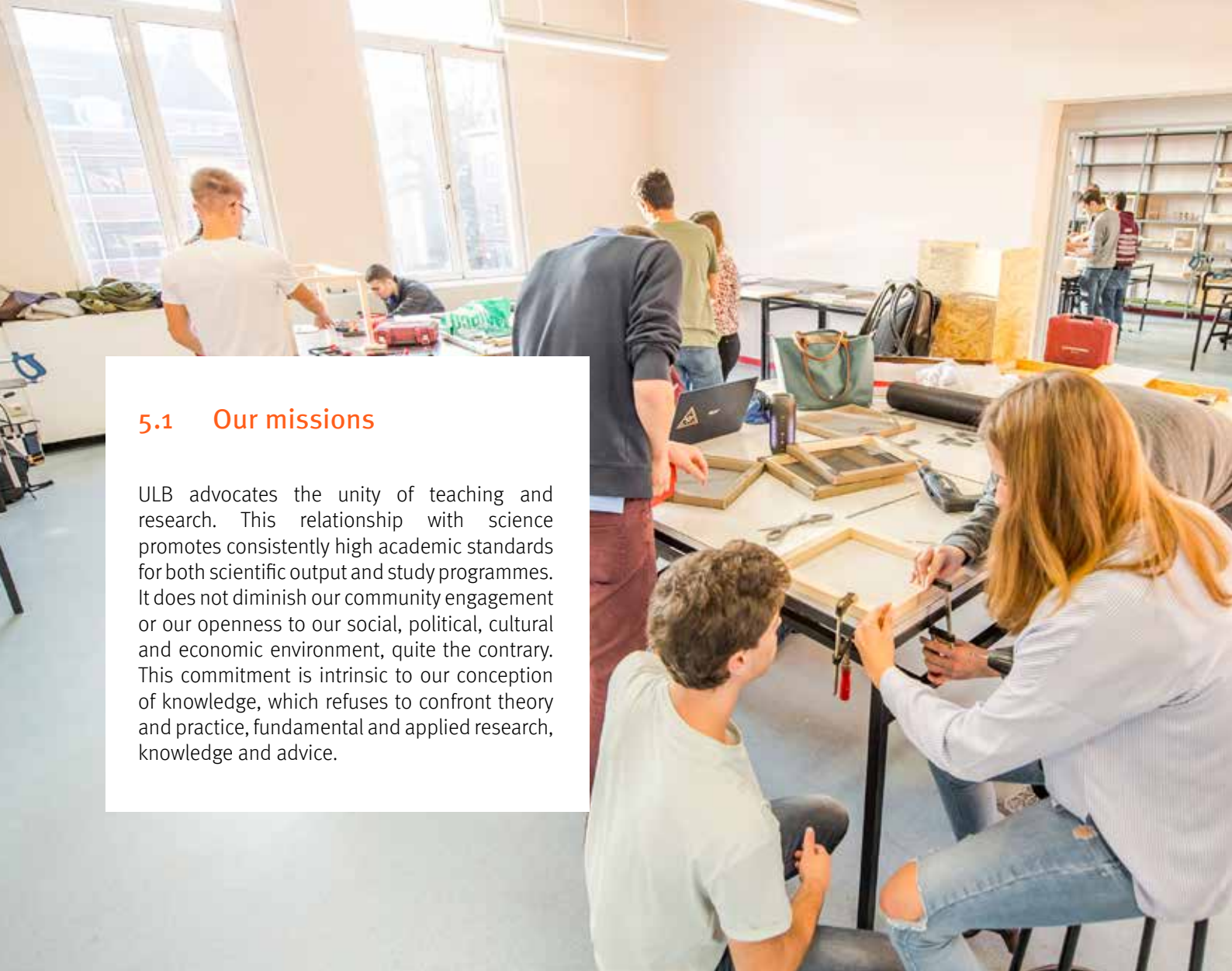
A major player in **health care**

- a driving force in its university hospital network in Brussels and Wallonia;
- a catalyst for innovation in the health care ecosystem;
- ensuring unrestricted access to quality health care services for all.



5. Our strategic orientations

The changes in our environment and the challenges they create for our institution, which were presented in the previous chapters, but above all the way in which we decide to respond to them, steer us towards major strategic orientations in line with our vision for ULB in 2030. These orientations relate firstly to our three missions of teaching, research and service to society, and secondly to our community, campuses and the way in which we are organized. Over the years, these orientations will translate into action plans that will take into account the priorities and resources determined by the relevant University authorities.



5.1 Our missions

ULB advocates the unity of teaching and research. This relationship with science promotes consistently high academic standards for both scientific output and study programmes. It does not diminish our community engagement or our openness to our social, political, cultural and economic environment, quite the contrary. This commitment is intrinsic to our conception of knowledge, which refuses to confront theory and practice, fundamental and applied research, knowledge and advice.

5.1.1 Research

Drive, Support, Innovate, Decentralize

While the university is the place *par excellence* where disinterested knowledge is produced, research at ULB forms a continuum, from fundamental research to applied research and to research driven by industrial and social needs. ULB also strives to tackle major societal issues and to play a part in the socio-economic development of its environment.

Excellence in research is largely founded on the freedom granted to researchers. ULB therefore aims to provide its researchers with an environment that fosters creativity and the emergence of new knowledge. This means we must operate in a stimulating intellectual environment that often reaches beyond the limits of traditional research silos and beyond the walls of the University.

Our decisions

- Support each researcher by ensuring they have sufficient resources (time, funding, equipment) to conduct their research
- Encourage our researchers to apply to international competitive calls for funding
- Adopt an 'open science' approach for our research
- Set up an institutional policy that drives and supports research topics regarded as strategic
- Encourage the emergence of evolving dynamic (inter)disciplinary research units
- Promote and support collaborative research at national and international level
- Provide institutional support for knowledge transfer



5.1.2 Teaching and student support

Learn, Accompany, Open, Emancipate

ULB wants its students to play an active role in their own learning and is convinced of the importance of high academic standards in helping them achieve full emancipation.

It makes sure that its programmes are designed to encourage critical thinking and open-mindedness, that students learn how to discuss freely and formulate arguments, and ensures a continuum between initial education and lifelong learning.

The attention given to students, whose number is constantly increasing, cannot be limited to their academic learning. The University also ensures that they are offered a fulfilling living environment that respects their specific needs and is in line with evolving lifestyles.

Our decisions

- Introduce innovative teaching and evaluation methods and formats that ensure our students play an active part in their own learning
- Strengthen the continuous assessment of the quality of our programmes
- Use digital tools to diversify the ways in which knowledge can be accessed and to offer learners individualized curricula
- Encourage the opening up of our curricula to other disciplines, without waiving the requirements specific to a chosen discipline
- Help students with their academic choices, learning processes and subsequent professional integration, through the coordination of resources devoted to guidance, learning and teaching support
- Provide psychosocial support to students who need it and ensure the integration of students with special needs, while facilitating their personal development
- Streamline teaching activities, possibly by leveraging synergies between different programmes within our University or between universities
- Encourage the internationalisation of our programmes, promote intercultural and international experiences for students as well as multilingualism
- Establish the University as a reference player in the area of continuing education, and ensure a continuum between initial education and lifelong learning



5.1.3 Community engagement and service to society

Defend, Act, Transform

As an agent for social and economic change, ULB fulfils its commitments to the outside world by defending the values of democracy and emancipation in society and by disseminating the knowledge, skills and expertise developed through its research and teaching activities. ULB's concern with sustainable development leads it to be a player in the resolution of major societal challenges.

The University also wishes to strengthen its interactions with compulsory education, whether by offering guidance to pupils, training teachers and directors or providing support to schools.

Our decisions

- Provide institutional support for activities that involve provision of expertise and diffusion of knowledge in society
- Encourage the community engagement of all members of our community, both in our own environment and worldwide
- Contribute to development aid by supporting university collaborations and our NGO *ULB-Coopération*
- Develop a true partnership with the compulsory education system and invest in the initial and continuous training of those working in compulsory education
- Develop international solidarity actions with academic institutions or colleagues at risk, in accordance with our values

 ULB 185
ANS / JAAR
50 VUB

5.2 Our community, our management methods and our campuses

To fulfil its missions in a changing environment, ULB needs an organization and resources – both human and material – in line with its ambitions. The change in scope of the academic landscape also requires it to position itself within university networks and to form partnerships and alliances with other higher education institutions and research centres.



Penser
librement
grenzen

5.2.1 Our networks and partnerships

Unite, Consolidate, Share

ULB can no longer be content with limiting itself to its original territory, as the key issues in research, teaching and service to society stretch beyond its historical borders. Through a series of alliances and partnerships, ULB wishes to bring together talents and share resources in order to achieve better results and performances. The University must also ensure that it is developing political strategies related to its missions.

Furthermore, ULB must seek to strengthen and professionalize its relationships with all stakeholders and to build closer ties with its alumni.

Our decisions

- Consolidate our foothold in Brussels, in synergy with VUB
- Strengthen our collaborations with higher education colleges and art schools, and take leadership of the Brussels academic hub
- Take full advantage of our location in Brussels, the capital of Europe
- Increase our foothold and commitment in Wallonia, in particular in collaboration with UMons, and first and foremost in Charleroi
- Strengthen our international partnership strategy, while at the same time ensuring it is consistent
- Successfully develop the CIVIS European University
- Fully acknowledge the contributions of non-academic experts to teaching, training and research
- In cooperation with other higher education institutions, have an impact on policies promoting support for quality education and research
- Strengthen relations and better structure our collaborations with our alumni network and other stakeholders

5.2.2 The University's staff

Attract, Motivate, Train

Members of the University's academic staff, research staff and administrative, technical, managerial and specialized staff are undoubtedly the driving force behind our University's development. ULB must be regarded as an attractive employer concerned with the well-being of all its staff. Conversely, the challenges facing the University require the collaboration, trust and equal respect of all parties.

Our decisions

- Proactively attract talents who can contribute to the development of our research and to the quality of our programmes, by promoting our policy of gender equality and diversity
- Offer members of academic staff attractive careers that reflect appreciation for their contribution to the University's three missions, and set up training and support programmes
- Pay particular attention to the specific situation of F.R.S.-FNRS staff
- Promote the mobility of teaching and research staff throughout their career
- Offer an attractive career policy to members of administrative, technical, managerial and specialized staff
- Provide members of administrative, technical, managerial and specialized staff with the training that enables them to acquire the skills that will help them adapt to the evolution of their profession and facilitate their mobility within the University
- Ensure that doctoral candidates have the conditions necessary to succeed, while taking into account their different statuses
- Facilitate the socio-professional integration of our doctoral candidates and postdoctoral researchers
- Enhance fairness and recognition with respect to everyone's contribution to the missions of the University and tackle all forms of disrespect
- Reconcile autonomy with the coordination necessary for the optimal fulfilment of our teaching and research missions

5.2.3 Management of the institution and participatory governance

Empower, Collaborate, Recognize

Management of the institution has become more complex and cumbersome over time. The University must therefore ensure that responsibilities are shared optimally and must support all those who shoulder these responsibilities on a daily basis, whether they concern teaching, research or the supervision of administrative, technical and logistics teams.

Given ULB's commitment to participatory and democratic governance, the participation of all members of the university community in the deliberative processes that underlie the functioning of the University's various institutional and faculty bodies should be facilitated and encouraged.

Our decisions

- Rethink the sharing of managerial tasks related to teaching and research between members of academic staff and members of administrative, technical, managerial and specialized staff
- Develop training, guidance and support programmes for members of staff who take on institutional responsibilities
- Reinvent democratic participation within the institution
- Recognize and value investment in the institution's management and governance by all categories of staff



5.2.4 Administration of the University

Simplify, Professionalize, Communicate

The University must function in such a way that it can fulfil its missions of teaching, research and service to society. The administrative processes essential for the proper functioning of the University require both increasingly specialized skills and flexible internal collaboration structures to ensure they are properly implemented.

Our decisions

- Simplify administrative processes, through digitalisation when appropriate, in order to accelerate processing of files
- Ensure the correct match between profiles and skills in order to handle increasingly complex files
- Ensure staff understand the importance of their contribution to the University's missions and delegate decision-making to the right level
- Strengthen synergies and collaborations between all members of administrative, technical, managerial and specialized staff, working both in the general administration and in the different faculties, so as to better serve the University's strategy and missions
- Improve the management of logistical resources and workspaces by encouraging pooling and preventing all logic of appropriation

5.2.5 Welcoming and sustainable campuses

Listen, Reshape, Adapt

Our campuses are not only places of learning, research and work, they must also be places of fulfilment, well-being and creativity. Sustainability must permeate all our missions and infrastructure.

Our decisions

- Build infrastructures that are suited to new teaching, study, research and work modes, and consider the possibility of promoting tele-working
- Ensure exemplary environmental management of our campuses and infrastructures, especially as regards energy and mobility, and encourage everyone's involvement in making our campuses convivial and sustainable
- Integrate sustainable development concerns into the management of all ULB activities (teaching, research, administration, service to the community)
- Draw on the expertise, scientific rigour and creativity of our internal experts in order to turn our campuses into places of experimentation and innovation
- Ensure that our campuses are safe and attractive living and working environments
- Ensure the socio-emotional well-being of our students and support their civic, cultural and sports initiatives and activities
- Provide convivial student accommodation and halls of residence
- Articulate our campuses with their external environments, while taking into account their socio-cultural dimensions



5.2.6 Information and communication technologies

Connect, Streamline, Automate

Participatory training programmes and the personalized monitoring of students' trajectories all rely on digital tools. Research increasingly uses digital models and scientific approaches based on big data and artificial intelligence. Fluid management of administrative processes requires a fluid sharing of information.

This means that none of the University's strategic objectives can be achieved without a critically deployed digital strategy and the provision of information and communication technologies that meet evolving teaching, research and management needs.

Our decisions

- Demonstrate a reflective critical culture with respect to information and communication technologies
- Follow the evolution of ICTs in the field of teaching and education, and develop the infrastructures required to implement them
- Meet researchers' expectations as regards supercomputing and the storage, accessing and analysis of research data
- Develop digital tools that offer all members of the university community fluid and efficient services and that permit better sharing of information
- Pay special attention to IT security issues and ensure our independence with regard to digital tools

5.2.7 Funding

Develop, Innovate, Encourage

The University must go beyond its current funding model if it wishes to maintain its reach and implement its strategies. It must also continue to actively urge politicians and other public funding bodies to increase the funding of higher education, while ensuring its autonomy is preserved.

Our decisions

- Advocate for public funding that is on par with our missions
- Convince public authorities to develop innovative mechanisms to increase the funding of universities and reduce their costs
- Foster dialogue within the Wallonia-Brussels Federation regarding different funding methods that have been successful in other countries or regions
- Develop a policy of public-private partnerships, fundraising and sponsorship in line with our identity, values and missions
- Encourage all colleagues in the faculties and general administration to respond to external calls for funding and support them in their applications
- Strengthen all mechanisms that anticipate, allocate and control the proper use of resources

The Université libre de Bruxelles is a European university devoted to research, innovation, teaching and training.

It generates, transmits and disseminates fundamental and applied scientific knowledge, and is actively involved in the public debate on major contemporary issues.

It offers its students, throughout their lives, a community of learning built on rigour, autonomy and critical thinking.

ULB is also at the heart of a university hospital network, and plays a key role in public health.

With its historical attachment to democratic culture, it promotes – both in society and within itself – values of free debate, equal opportunities and emancipation.



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