

**VUB.**

**A PIONEERING UNIVERSITY IN THE HEART OF EUROPE.**

**POLICY PLAN RECTOR ELECTION 2026**

## WITH TRUST INTO THE NEXT PHASE

The Vrije Universiteit Brussel has never been a given. . It was built by generations of individuals who took responsibility, even when circumstances were difficult.

When the university's very survival was at stake, Paul De Knop took up the torch. He ensured stability, fostered growth in education, research and innovation, and oversaw the expansion of the infrastructure upon which we continue to build today. That foundation was decisive for the VUB as we know it today.

Ten years ago, Caroline Pauwels gave direction to a new phase. She explicitly shaped the VUB into an urban engaged university, connected to the city and its surroundings. She coupled scientific rigour with social commitment and human warmth. Under her impetus, the university grew further, and our role in Brussels and beyond became more visibly prominent.

Over the past four years, I have sought to cherish and strengthen the essence of that dual legacy. We have reformed our research structures, professionalised innovation, renewed education, and made leadership more human-centred. We have once again made our secular humanist values tangible on our campuses and in our communications.

*This work was necessary.*

*And it is bearing fruit.*

However, the context in which we operate today has fundamentally changed. Internationally, science is under pressure. Polarisation makes nuance vulnerable. Artificial intelligence is changing how we learn, research and organise. Government cuts are limiting our financial room for manoeuvre, with a pronounced impact on Brussels and therefore on the VUB. At the same time, our university continues to grow, with generations of pioneer students counting on us.

In the coming years, we must save 20 million euros. That is painful. But saving is not a vision. The question is not whether circumstances are difficult; the question is how we respond to them.

I am convinced that the VUB becomes stronger when it combines rigour with trust. With fewer resources, we must not allow ourselves to be curtailed or rendered irrelevant. We must set clear priorities, protect quality, and continue to pioneer where it matters.

This policy plan is based on three convictions.

1. **Our secular humanist values remain our compass.** Free enquiry, critical thinking and respect for human dignity are not mere slogans. They determine how we make decisions and how we work together.
2. **Science and education are our core.** We continue to pioneer in research and to valorise where it creates social added value. We build education that not only attracts students but also enables them to succeed.
3. **Trust is the foundation of leadership.** The VUB is a democratic university. Here, giving direction does not mean imposing, but connecting; not avoiding decisions, but deciding with explanation and accountability.

The following pages describe how we enter the next phase: with clear priorities, with respect for our community, and with the ambition to remain relevant and future-oriented even under pressure.

I am standing for re-election as a candidate for Rector of the Vrije Universiteit Brussel because I am convinced that continuity and clarity are the best way for us to enter this next phase. The foundations have been laid. The direction is clear. Circumstances are more difficult, but our mission is no less important. I ask for the trust of the university community to continue taking up this responsibility. Not to keep everything the same, but to collectively safeguard what is strong and to strengthen with purpose what is necessary.

*With openness, with perseverance, and with respect for our community.*

The coming years will not be easy. But VUB has never had an easy path.

We continue to build a university that is relevant, that places quality at its heart and that does not abandon its values when things get difficult.

## WHAT WE HAVE ANCHORED

### STRUCTURAL CHOICES THAT MADE THE VUB STRONGER

#### FROM FRAGMENTED INITIATIVES TO A STRUCTURAL WELL-BEING AND LEADERSHIP POLICY

During the past policy period, we made a conscious choice to no longer approach well-being, recognition, and rewards as isolated initiatives, but as a coherent and organisation-wide policy framework. In a university that is growing and becoming more complex, attention to people is not an afterthought. It is a prerequisite for quality.

An important step was the reform of the ZAP (Senior Academic Staff) career policy. The previous promotion system, heavily based on quotas and periodic evaluations, was perceived by many as lacking transparency and being demotivating. We replaced that system with agreements of intent and a structural feedback cycle, emphasizing performance, team impact, and leadership. This reform has made the promotion policy fairer and more consistent in terms of content.

However, leadership and recognition are not limited to ZAP. Within the ATP (Administrative and Technical Staff), we have invested in clearer development pathways and feedback cycles, ensuring that expertise becomes visible and professional growth is supported. The professionalisation of processes and the clarification of responsibilities allow support services to more effectively take up their role as full partners in education and research.

With Engaged Leading, we developed a VUB-wide leadership framework applicable to all managers, regardless of their status. In this framework, leadership is not reduced to a formal position but is seen as a responsibility for team dynamics, transparent communication, and care for people. Through targeted training, the annual Engaged Leading Week, and the integration of this framework into career policies and feedback cycles, leadership development is now structurally embedded.

Wellbeing was also addressed more systematically. For staff and doctoral students, the psychosocial policy was strengthened, providing clearer access to support, an explicit prevention line, and sharper role definitions for managers. The approach to transgressive behaviour was embedded both in terms of content and procedure, ensuring that reports are handled carefully and professionally.

The next phase in this journey includes additional structural prerequisites: a periodic wellbeing survey to serve as a compass, an integrated Dynamic Risk Management System that includes psychosocial risks, and enhanced communication so that everyone knows where to turn when they have concerns. The introduction of an Employee Assistance Program (EAP) aims to give every employee access to specialised help whenever it is needed.

This all forms part of a broader vision for human-centred leadership. Sustainable academic excellence does not emerge in isolation. It is the result of collaboration between academic staff, support services, and students. A healthy university relies on mutual respect, clear expectations, and a culture of feedback and trust.

#### FROM FRAGMENTATION AND COMPLEXITY TO SCALE AND AGILITY

In recent years, we have made a conscious choice to make our organisation less fragmented and more strongly collaborative. This was not a technical exercise, but a strategic choice to increase our operational agility.

In research, we have transitioned from more than 150 research groups to a more structured approach comprising 42 Large Research Groups and 50 regular groups. Today, around 65 per cent of our ZAP members work within a Large Research Group. This ratio has proven to be healthy: large enough to create critical mass and international visibility, while leaving room for specialised niche expertise.

This scaling up has had several effects. Administrative support can be organised more efficiently. Interdisciplinary research is facilitated. Junior researchers find a strong embedding more easily. Externally, we have a more coherent front in national and European funding channels.

Parallel to this, we have also taken steps toward scale optimisation within faculties. Projects such as the pooling of departmental secretariats and front-office operations are now operational or under review. These allow us to bundle expertise, spread the workload, and guarantee continuity. The effects resulting from these measures will become even more clearly visible in the coming period.

Not all ambitions regarding scale and simplification have been realised. The proposal to reform the Organic Statute, which aimed for a significant simplification of central and decentralised governance, achieved a majority in the University Council but fell short of the required two-thirds majority. This was an important signal. Agility is necessary, but it must be supported by the community.

Aside from that structural reform, several process-related improvements have been achieved. A new policy and software were implemented for timetabling. This increases predictability for students and lecturers and reduces manual errors. The timetabling work continues with a view to further optimisations.

Within Education and Student Affairs, core processes were simplified: application and admission, the issuing of certificates, onboarding of PhD students, and the handling of internal appeals, where AI support is also being utilised. In financial processes, a new software environment will soon be rolled out, making reporting and monitoring more transparent and efficient.

These steps may seem technical, but they are essential. They ensure that education and research are supported by an organisation that functions more reliably and professionally.

## **FROM AMBITION TO INTERNATIONAL**

### **POSITIONING OF RESEARCH**

In recent years, we have purposefully strengthened our international research position. We chose to translate ambition into structure, support, and strategic focus.

Within the Vice-Rectorate for Research, we streamlined rules, instruments and budgets, and linked policy choices more explicitly to quality and impact. With the further development of the Large Research Groups, we created critical mass and positioned VUB teams more strongly in national and European competitions. At the same time, we developed a tailored support mechanism for regular research groups that recognises their unique dynamics; this will be rolled out structurally starting next year.

This approach translates into concrete results. Our researchers increased their success rates in competitive funding channels, both with the FWO (Research Foundation Flanders) and within Europe. We strengthened our ERC and MSCA support through targeted teaching exemptions to prepare ERC applications and via a specialised EU funding team. In 2024, the VUB became a top-20 recipient of EU project funding among more than a thousand European universities, accounting for 156.5 million euros in research income. This result is no coincidence. It is the consequence of internal scaling, targeted guidance, and strategic international positioning.

An important lever in this international positioning is our role within the European university alliance, EUTOPIA. We took on a pioneering role within it and anchored the alliance VUB-wide in education, research, and innovation. EUTOPIA has not remained a separate project but has grown into a structural pillar of our international strategy. Researchers utilise the network for joint project applications, joint PhD tracks, and strategic research agreements. Complementary projects concerning lifelong learning, research, and innovation further strengthen this collaboration.

By actively helping to shape EUTOPIA, we position the VUB as a co-determiner of the European university future. From Brussels, the heart of Europe, we connect academic cooperation with European policy dynamics. This strengthens our visibility, our influence, and our attractiveness to talent.

We have also created additional levers for young talent. With the 10 per cent OZR ZAP appointments, we offer promising postdocs prospects within the VUB. With FWO bridging mandates, we provide researchers with stability in a context of declining success rates. We updated the doctoral regulations, introduced clear agreements of intent between doctoral students and supervisors, and organise systematic consultations via the PhD survey. The Doctoral Schools expanded their training offer, thereby strengthening the academic and professional development of our predocs.

Regarding research infrastructure, we further developed the Core Facilities policy. We invested not only in biomedical and natural and applied sciences but also supported new initiatives within the humanities. With the Networks for Societal Impact through Science (NSIS) initiative, we encouraged interdisciplinary research with an explicit social purpose.

We also took substantive responsibility in new domains. As one of the first universities, we developed an integrated AI research policy, featuring clear guidelines on integrity and ethics alongside support for innovative applications. We embedded Open Science through a Green Open Access and FAIR data policy. Today, VUB researchers publish more research datasets than any other university in Flanders.

At the same time, we strengthened the normative foundations of our research. We updated charters on academic freedom and human rights and translated them into concrete guidelines for international cooperation. We protected researchers against academic intimidation and expanded our support for Scholars at Risk, including for scientists from the United States whose work is under pressure.

With these choices, we have converted international ambition into structural position. Not as an end in itself, but as a reinforcement of our core mission.

**INNOVATION AS A STRATEGIC PILLAR**

In recent years, innovation and valorisation have been firmly anchored as a strategic pillar of the university. We have systematically strengthened our position in applied research and innovation, while simultaneously expanding the professionalisation of our support services.

In Flanders, we significantly increased our resources for applied research. Funding via the FWO and VLAIO — including SBO projects, TBM, cluster projects, thematic ICON projects, Agriculture, TETRA, COOCK, Innovation and Baekeland mandates — rose from 15 million euros in 2022 to 24 million euros in 2025. This growth confirms that our researchers are competitive in channels that place economic and social valorisation at their centre.

### We also reinforced our position in Brussels.

Through Innoviris, we generated an average of 5 million euros per year in income, accounting for nearly half of the Brussels university budget envelope. In doing so, we position ourselves as a central innovation partner in the region.

At the European level, our innovation-driven research income grew from 14 million euros in 2022 to 24 million euros in 2025. The i-ISO approach — identifying, inform, stimulate and support — plays a key role in this. By actively guiding researchers in developing impactful project proposals, we have systematically increased their success rates. Through co-financing by the IOF, we made the MSCA Impact programme possible, supporting twenty postdoctoral fellowships with explicit societal and entrepreneurial impact.

The professionalisation of valorisation was further expanded. Over the past four years, we concluded 18 licensing and transfer agreements, worth 7.3 million euros, and established 14 spin-off companies. Today, our patent portfolio includes 228 active patent families. These figures demonstrate not only activity, but also quality and consistency. Together with Startlab.brussel, we developed a broad policy around (intra)entrepreneurship, aimed at both research-based spin-offs and student ventures. Alongside the QBIC partnership, we tapped into additional funds to facilitate access to start-up capital.

We also physically embedded innovation within our infrastructure. We further developed Researchpark Zellik as a cluster for energy technology, health technology, and deep tech, including robotics. The Nexus Data Centre, which also houses the Flemish supercomputer Sofia, serves as the flagship of this development. In 2026, we took over ownership of Researchpark Zellik from VLAIO, allowing us to provide more strategic, long-term direction.

On the Etterbeek campus, in collaboration with VIB, we inaugurated the Bio-Incubator Brussels (BIB), strengthening the bridge between biomedical research and entrepreneurship. Additionally, we pursued an active placemaking policy to increase the visibility and attractiveness of our campuses.

We did not limit the expansion of innovation to technological domains. In the Humanities and Social Sciences, we also stimulated social valorisation and alternative funding channels, including philanthropy. Partnerships such as the one with the Helios Foundation regarding sustainability research show that impact can take many forms.

Furthermore, we engaged in innovative collaborations within the social economy. We are working strategically with AMAB, a social enterprise, to offer new prospects for people who have been absent from the labour market for a long period. In this way, we connect innovation with social responsibility.

We also approach defence research from a clear normative framework. The Ethics Committee within the Board of Directors has established clear ethical principles for dual-use and defence-related projects. Within these boundaries, we can participate in new Flemish, Belgian, and European funding channels without losing sight of our values.

Finally, we strengthened our philanthropic operations. In 2024, the VUB Foundation received 5.1 million euros, of which 360,000 euros came from bequests earmarked for academic chairs. We built sustainable relationships with donors and strengthened the fellowship programme as a tool to attract talent and stimulate long-term engagement.

*By organising innovation and valorisation structurally, we have increased our social impact and strengthened our financial resilience. Today, innovation is an integrated part of our academic mission.*

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## **ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE**

### **AS A TRANSVERSAL LEVER**

During the past policy period, AI was deliberately embedded transversally: in education, research, administration, and sustainability. This approach — treating AI as a tool within each area rather than as an isolated project — ensured that the core of AI policy has already been addressed in the sections above. Nevertheless, several structural achievements merit separate mention.

VUB was one of the first Flemish universities to appoint a dedicated Commissioner for Artificial Intelligence and published a differentiated AI policy framework for education and research. The course unit scan (*OO-scan*), an automated AI analysis of all 4,684 course unit descriptions to assess fraud risk, was a first in Flanders; the proportion of high-risk courses dropped significantly following targeted guidance. Furthermore, €300,000 was allocated through curriculum renewal mandates to structurally embed AI literacy within the curricula. Lecturers and researchers received support through initiatives such as “AI for Education”, a knowledge platform, and a language model support team. In administration, AI now processes more than 730 appeal files annually to support the Central Internal Appeals Committee; legal oversight and final decision-making remain with the committee. A bottom-up implementation strategy through calls for inspiration activated internal ambassadors and avoided a top-down roll-out, as large language models do not lend themselves well to this approach.

AI is intentionally given a distinct place here to make these initial achievements visible, while remaining transversally embedded in all other policy areas. We will consistently maintain this in 2026–2030, ensuring that the essence of AI continues to be addressed structurally throughout.

### **A WELL-CONSIDERED EDUCATION AND STUDENT POLICY**

In recent years, we have also set a clear course in education. We have not merely reacted to changes but have consciously chosen a direction.

We designed a blended and hybrid education model. This combines physical presence with digital support and requires both didactic guidance and clear agreements. Investments in educational infrastructure are explicitly aligned with this hybrid reality, where facilities, technology, and pedagogical approaches reinforce one another.

At the same time, we have not ignored artificial intelligence but integrated it into a well-considered framework. We developed guidelines for the responsible AI use in education, for both students and lecturers. With the development of an AI-supported 'OO' course unit scan, we screened more than 4,500 course unit descriptions for risks regarding AI fraud. In doing so, we took on a pioneering role in Flanders.

We actively supported lecturers through lecture series such as "AI for Education" and via a specialised large language model support team. By approaching AI not as a threat but as a learning challenge, we strengthen didactic quality and academic integrity.

In parallel, we tackled study success rates more systematically. We analysed data on study progress and provided more intensive support to programmes with persistently low pass rates. We proactively reached out to students experiencing reduced study progress. We also coherently implemented the new legislation regarding study progress monitoring and remediation.

We reformed the internal quality cycle and reduced the administrative burden, with a sharper focus on strategic plans and continuous improvement.

Sustainability was given an explicit place in the curriculum and in lifelong learning. We introduced new course units, developed the "Sustainability" micro-credential, and organised targeted initiatives such as climate boot camps. VUB lecturers took the lead in various Connected Communities regarding sustainability within EUTOPIA.

Inclusion and student wellbeing also received structural attention. We developed a 'boundary-aware' policy on the prevention and handling of transgressive behaviour. We introduced a preferred name policy and designed a code of conduct for students as an anchor for inclusion. We strengthened procedures for crisis situations, organised training in care and peer support, and supported wellbeing actors with targeted awareness campaigns.

*By making these choices, we have not only adapted education to changing circumstances, but we have structurally strengthened it. We combine pedagogical innovation, digital maturity, manageable study programmes and inclusion into a single, coherent policy.*

## **WHAT WAS NOT ACHIEVED, AND WHAT WE LEARNED**

Not all ambitions from the past policy period were fully realised. This deserves to be acknowledged openly.

The reform of the Organic Statute, which aimed at a thorough simplification of our governance and a redesign of central and decentralised structures, achieved a majority in the University Council but not the required two-thirds majority. This made it clear that structural reforms in a democratically governed university can only be sustainable when they rest on a broad foundation of support.

We learned from that process that pace and involvement must be carefully balanced. Agility remains necessary but must not be perceived as acceleration without sufficient anchoring. Structural change requires not only substantive argumentation, but also time and trust.

In terms of scale optimisation and process simplification, we have also not fully achieved the desired pace everywhere. Some projects are progressing more slowly than anticipated. That is no reason to abandon them, but rather to phase them more realistically and communicate about them more effectively.

In education and study success rates, we see progress, but the gap with the other universities remains significant. This shows that structural improvement takes time and that we must continue to invest in guidance, orientation, and quality assurance.

What we learned above all is this:

change works when it is clearly framed, transparently explained, and consistently followed up.

Not by forcing it, but by ensuring direction and building trust.

### **ENTERING A NEW PHASE WITH THIS FOUNDATION**

In recent years, we have strengthened our university. We have simplified structures, expanded our international position, embedded innovation, and addressed well-being and leadership structurally. We have learned where change requires time and where broad support is crucial.

That foundation gives us confidence.

However, it does not mean that the next period will be any easier. On the contrary. We are entering a phase in which priorities must be set more sharply and in which financial room for manoeuvre is more limited.

What we have built, we must now safeguard and strengthen with purpose. This requires clarity, consistency, and responsibility.

# THE CHALLENGES OF TODAY

## A CHANGED ENVIRONMENT

The context in which universities operate today has fundamentally shifted.

Internationally, the position of science is under pressure. In several countries, academic expertise is openly contested, and universities are confronted with ideological attacks. Polarisation makes nuanced debate more difficult and erodes trust in knowledge institutions.

At the same time, technological developments are accelerating. Artificial intelligence is influencing research methods, publication practices, the organisation of education and assessment. Universities must simultaneously pioneer and safeguard integrity.

The financial framework has also become considerably tighter. Flemish budget cuts in higher education affect all institutions, but have a pronounced impact on Brussels. At the federal level, uncertainties regarding research incentives and pension schemes create additional tension.

The Brussels-Capital Region experienced a long period of political deadlock, which delayed key projects and reduced investment certainty. In the meantime, a new Brussels government has been formed, offering the prospect of renewed stability, yet budgetary reality remains constrained.

On top of this, the VUB continues to grow. Student intake remains high, and our appeal on the international stage is increasing. This growth does not automatically translate into proportional funding.

The combination of rising expectations and limited resources creates structural pressure on the organisation, staff, and investment capacity.

In the coming years, we must save 20 million euros. This requires discipline and clear priorities. It means we must more consciously weigh where we deploy resources and how we protect our core mission.

*This context forms the starting point for the choices that follow.*

# OUR COURSE

## VISION AND POLICY PRINCIPLES

### *Secular humanism remains our compass*

In a world where geopolitical balances are shifting and social tensions are rising, our values are not an optional extra. They are our compass.

Free enquiry, critical thinking, freedom, equality, and connectedness are not abstract concepts. They determine how we organise education, how we conduct research, and how we deal with social controversy. They help us keep technology human, place care at the centre, and protect the independence of science.

We are, and shall remain, a university of *Vrij Onderzoek* (Free Enquiry). This means we speak out when human dignity is violated. It means we distance ourselves from political movements that incite discrimination or legitimise violence. It means we deploy academic diplomacy wherever possible to contribute to dialogue and peaceful solutions.

Our distinctions — honorary doctorates and Difference Day Awards — are not merely ceremonial. They express what we stand for: human rights, international law, freedom of expression, and the protection of endangered scientists.

There is no place for hate, humiliation, or intimidation on our campuses. We welcome debate but we expect respect. “Speak freely, listen respectfully, different opinions matter” is not a slogan, but a practice. Protest is legitimate; vandalism and intimidation are not.

Secular humanism is not a thing of the past.  
It is a daily responsibility.

## EUROPE AS A STRATEGIC SPACE

The VUB is deeply anchored in Brussels and in Europe. A quarter of our student population is international. Our non-Dutch-language programmes are well developed without undermining our Dutch-language foundation. Our research is internationally embedded and visible.

Today, Europe reaffirms the importance of knowledge and innovation. Free enquiry is recognised as a necessary “fifth freedom”. In a world of geopolitical competition, European universities must collaborate to remain relevant.

Through EUTOPIA, we have taken an active role in building a European university alliance that goes beyond mobility. We connect curricula, develop micro-credentials, build joint research projects, and strengthen innovation ecosystems. We do this not for prestige, but out of the conviction that cooperation creates scale and impact.

Beyond Europe, we opt for targeted, selective partnerships in regions such as Canada and the Global South. In doing so, we apply clear ethical and legal assessment frameworks, with attention to human rights and knowledge security.

For us, internationalisation is not an end in itself; it strengthens education, research, and service to society. Those who do not collaborate today will lose international relevance.

## SCIENCE AS A FOUNDATION

Science is the foundation of social progress. It requires independence, space, and protection.

Today, scientists worldwide are under pressure. Ideological attacks, polarisation, and mistrust make their work more difficult. We take the responsibility to protecting our researchers and give them the space to work in a future-oriented way.

Science must be both excellent and relevant. Relevance means recognition by international peers as well as significance for society. Solutions to climate change, an ageing population, geopolitical instability, and social inequality will emerge from research. Fundamental, curiosity-driven research also remains essential in this regard.

Open Science, sustainability, and social impact are not additional obligations. They are an integral part of quality.

## FOCUS AS A PREREQUISITE FOR QUALITY

Growth has made us stronger, but also more complex. Not everything can remain as it is.

In a context of limited resources, we must simplify, reduce fragmentation, and set clear priorities. We do not do this arbitrarily, but on the basis of quality, strengths, and social relevance.

Focus does not mean impoverishment. It means strengthening what works. It means investing where we have impact. It means honestly evaluating where efforts yield insufficient returns.

*Our core remains clear: strong education, relevant research and social responsibility.*

## PIONEERING MEANS WORKING SMARTER

The VUB has grown into a medium-sized international university. This requires organisational maturity.

Today, pioneering does not necessarily mean getting bigger. It means organising smarter. It means utilising digital possibilities without losing the human dimension. It means making education clear and more accessible. It means sharing research infrastructure wherever possible. It means designing processes so that they support rather than delay.

Our most important assets are people and knowledge.  
That is where we continue to invest.

## TAKING RESPONSIBILITY TOGETHER

The coming years will not be easy. But the VUB is not a hierarchical institution that imposes top-down decisions. We are a democratic university with strong engagement.

Staff and students are not merely executors of policy, but co-builders. Budget cuts effort, but they must not lead to cynicism or mutual mistrust.

We become stronger when we look honestly at what is needed, set clear priorities, and share responsibility for their implementation.

# OUR PRIORITIES FOR 2026–2030

## CHOOSING CLEARLY,

## IMPLEMENTING TOGETHER

In the coming years, we will focus on a limited number of clear priorities. Not to do less, but to become stronger in what is essential.

### 1. PIONEERING IN SCIENCE

The VUB has grown by pioneering in science. Not by following, but by opening new lines of research, connecting disciplines, and tackling societal challenges with academic depth. I intend to preserve that pioneering role, and to strengthen it.

In a context where science is under pressure and financial room for manoeuvre is more limited, caution is understandable. Yet we must not allow ourselves to be narrowed down to mere management. It is precisely then that we must continue to create space for excellent and future-oriented research. Pioneering means investing in quality, giving opportunities to young generations of researchers, and actively protecting academic freedom.

It is therefore important to continue making targeted investments in high-impact levers. Even smaller, well-chosen investments can generate strong leverage, including in times of pressure on funding channels. Thus, we will safeguard and strengthen the 10 per cent OZR ZAP appointments. They offer promising postdocs prospects within the VUB and ensure continuity in our lines of research. We will maintain the BAS bonus for Large Research Groups and introduce targeted growth funding for excellent niche groups. Quality remains the decisive criterion.

We will continue to invest in research infrastructure. Through the Core Facilities policy, we share infrastructure sustainably and efficiently, including within the humanities. With the Networks for Societal Impact through Science initiative, we stimulate interdisciplinary research with a societal purpose.

We are strengthening the supervision of doctoral students through the updated doctoral regulations, clear agreements of intent, systematic monitoring via the PhD survey, and a robust range of programmes from the Doctoral Schools. Through FWO bridging mandates, we offer researchers with stability in a competitive environment.

We will provide research groups with more targeted support in the areas of administration, human resources policy, and project recruitment. Pioneering requires not only substantive excellence, but also professional support structures.

Internationally, we are developing a structural partner portfolio with at least ten preferential European and six global partners. EUTOPIA forms a strategic foundation for this regard. We are strengthening support for ERC and MSCA applications, including through the MSCA Impact programme with IOF co-financing.

We are facilitating data and research exchange with UZ Brussel, ensuring that clinical expertise and academic research reinforce each other more rapidly.

Academic freedom remains non-negotiable. We protect researchers against external pressure, support Scholars at Risk, and establish academic chairs for scholars whose work is under severe pressure.

We intend to continue pioneering artificial intelligence.. AI is both a research domain in its own right, and a catalyst for all disciplines. We will harness its potential while simultaneously safeguarding integrity and transparency. Through Green Open Access and FAIR data, we continue to build a culture of Open Science.

With a renewed system of science prizes, we recognise pioneering work by early- and mid-career researchers.

*By 2030, I want the VUB to be recognised as a university that continues to pioneer in science, even under pressure.*

## 2. VALORISING AND INNOVATING WITH IMPACT

Research gains its full meaning when it is valorised. Valorisation means translating knowledge into applications in healthcare, sustainability, technology, social innovation, and policy.

In recent years, we have demonstrated that growth in applied research remains possible, even when some predicted that we would reach our limits.

We are building further on our strong position in Flemish channels such as SBO, TBM, ICON, TETRA, COOCK, and Baekeland mandates. In Brussels, we are consolidating our role through Innoviris. At the European level, we are strengthening our innovation-driven research income through targeted support.

The i-ISO approach remains our key lever. By actively guiding researchers in drafting impact sections and developing valorisation strategies, we increase their chances of success.

Our patent portfolio of 228 active families forms a strong foundation. We are reorganising the IP & Licensing unit to generate more licensing income and are developing a clear VUB spin-off model with transparent agreements regarding equity and IP.

Together with Startlab.brussel, we support student entrepreneurship and spin-offs. Through QBIC and other funds, we improve access to start-up capital.

We are strengthening our connection with industry and the embedding of our spin-offs by further developing Researchpark Zellik (RPZ) with a clear focus on energy technology, health technology, and deep tech. The Nexus Data Centre, which also houses the Flemish supercomputer Sofia, reinforces our infrastructure. The transfer of ownership of RPZ from VLAIO to the VUB gives us strategic steering capacity.

Together with VIB, we are further developing the Bio-Incubator Brussels. Through active place-making, we strengthening the visibility of our campuses.

We are reinforcing regional anchoring in Halle-Pajottenland, Neder-Over-Heembeek, Aalst and Ostend.

Participation in defence research is only possible within the ethical framework established by the Ethics Committee of the Board of Directors and following assessment by the competent committee. We stimulate innovation in the Human and Social Sciences through alternative funding and collaborations, including with AMAB in the social economy.

Through the VUB Foundation, we are strengthening philanthropic fundraising and building sustainable relationships with donors and alumni.

### **3. EDUCATION AND STUDENT POLICY:**

#### **SUPPORT THAT HELPS STUDENTS SUCCEED**

Education is our primary social mission. It is through education that we shape generations of pioneer students, often the first in their families to pursue higher education. This is one of the VUBs core strengths and, at the same time, an important responsibility.

In recent years, our university has grown significantly. This growth confirms our appeal, but also confronts us with clear choices. Intake alone is not a measure of success. What matters is that students succeed, develop, and confidently take their place in Brussels, Europe, and the world.

Today, we see a structural imbalance in our student population: around 70% are enrolled in in the humanities. This is an important strength. At the same time, our social role, our European positioning, and our future-readiness demand a greater critical mass in STEM fields and health sciences. Therefore, in the coming years, we will make targeted investments in the recruitment and profiling of these programmes, without weakening the humanities. This is not about a shift at the expense of one area, but about restoring balance.

We review curricula systematically and critically. We do so not to follow passing trends, but to keep programmes relevant and coherent. Where new societal or technological developments require it, we introduce innovation. Where components no longer align with academic or professional realities, we are prepared to reconsider them. In doing so, we safeguard programme manageability, coherence, and clear expectations.

Transversal competences are anchored structurally within our programmes. Sustainability, intercultural skills, and social engagement are not “add-ons”, but an integral part of academic formation. We make this concrete within our course units. Within EUTOPIA, VUB lecturers actively participate in Connected Communities focused on sustainability and educational innovation, ensuring that international collaboration feeds directly into our curricula.

Study success rates remain a point of attention. In various programmes, pass rates are lower than those at other Flemish universities. This requires a collective effort. We use data to identify bottlenecks. Programmes with persistently low success rates receive targeted support. We proactively approach students experiencing study progress challenges with clear guidance alongside clear expectations. We consistently apply the new regulations on study progress and remediation, with an eye for fairness and proportionality.

The rise of artificial intelligence is fundamentally changing the educational landscape. We choose to pioneer in this field, rather than to banning or downplaying it. We have developed a clear AI framework with guidelines for responsible use by students and lecturers. Using AI-supported screening, we analysed more than 4,500 course unit descriptions for fraud risks. Simultaneously, we deploy AI to support learning processes, for example, through personalised feedback and tutoring. We are rethinking forms of assessment to ensure they remain academically robust in an AI context.

We embed hybrid and blended education on a solid pedagogically-driven basis. Investments in infrastructure are aligned with this reality. Digital possibilities must enrich education, not

replace it. Clear expectations, transparent communication, and a manageable course design remain essential.

The educational professionalisation of academic staff receives continued attention. We expect basic didactic competences from every lecturer and encourage educational leadership. Educational efforts are explicitly recognised and valued in our career policy and evaluations. A strong research university invests equally in education.

Student well-being is inextricably linked to study success. Stricter study progress requirements and cuts to student grants affect our students more than those at other universities. Therefore, we are redesigning student services strategically and purposefully, focusing on study progress within the reality of scarce resources. Through the 'boundary-aware' policy on transgressive behaviour, a clear code of conduct, and strengthened peer support, we continue to build safe and inclusive campuses.

We continue to build community campuses where encounter, debate, and engagement are central. A university shapes individuals not only through lectures, but also through experience, exchange and participation.

By 2030, I want the VUB to be recognised as a university that not only attracts students but effectively enables them to succeed. A university that combines education, ambition, and responsibility. Not more students as an end in itself, but more students who successfully complete their studies and feel a lasting connection to our community.

#### **4. INTERNATIONALISATION AND PARTNERSHIPS AS A LEVER**

The VUB is an international university. This is not a recent choice, but part of our DNA. We are located in Brussels, the political heart of Europe. A quarter of our student population is international. Our research is deeply anchored in international networks. Our non-Dutch-language programmes are among the strongest in our portfolio, without us neglecting our Dutch-language mission.

For me, internationalisation is not an end in itself. It is a lever to strengthen education, research, and innovation. In a world in which knowledge institutions increasingly compete and collaborate, it is those who position themselves strategically who matter.

Europe remains our primary focus. Within the European university alliance EUTOPIA, we play a leading role. For us, the alliance is not a label, but a platform for action. We connect curricula through the EUTOPIA label and micro-credentials. We stimulate joint PhD tracks and joint research applications. We strengthen innovation ecosystems across borders. At the same time, we ensure that these privileged relationships do not become a closed club. Where additional strategic collaborations strengthen our core, for example with other urban engaged universities in metropolitan contexts, we actively invest and pursue them.

The geopolitical context also demands selectivity. We organise international cooperation systematically. We evaluate the SIP (Strategic International Partnership) framework based on return-on-investment and on values. Partnerships are tested against human rights and knowledge security, following the principle "as open as possible, as secure as necessary". In the Global South, we are evolving from a traditional development logic toward International Equitable Cooperation: partnerships based on equality, reciprocity, and shared ownership. We

align research and education with local contexts, ensuring that collaboration is sustainable and mutually reinforcing.

Our location in Brussels offers a unique strategic advantage. As a research university in the heart of Europe, we have direct access to European institutions and international organisations. We intend to capitalise on this position more explicitly. We follow up on the resulting Memoranda of Understanding systematically, with clear matchmaking between international partners and our research groups. We are repositioning the Institute for European Studies / Brussels School of Governance (BSoG), strengthening our international public affairs operations, and further expanding academic diplomacy in collaboration with Flemish, Brussels and Belgian diplomatic representations. International missions are further aligned to our guiding priorities.

Internationalisation also requires attention to talent. The introduction of the 2% non-EEA rule has a direct impact on our intake. Therefore, we are developing a targeted European recruitment strategy based on clear indicators of study success and transparent advice to prospective students. We are optimising the CALI enrolment flow and refining onboarding processes, with particular attention to housing. International students are not temporary visitors, but future ambassadors of the VUB.

Through the Institute for Advanced Study BRIAS, we strengthen our international networking and position ourselves strategically within federations of similar institutes. In this way, we create space for intellectual growth and international visibility.

Our collaboration with the ULB is given shape through the non-profit association Andrée Geulen and joint projects such as Usquare, the Learning and Innovation Center, and FARI (AI for the common good). Within the Brussels educational space, we continue to collaborate strategically with EhB on language policy, student progression, the 'health valley', and infrastructure. We also seek synergies in marketing and communication, where collaboration can reduce costs.

*By 2030, I want the VUB to be an international university not just in terms of numbers, but in terms of stature and influence. A university that makes the most of its Brussels location, considers Europe its strategic space, and links international cooperation to quality, values, and reciprocity.*

## **5. ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE BUILT ON LEADERSHIP AND WELL-BEING**

A university is not a collection of structures. It is a community of people. The way we collaborate, lead, and interact with one another ultimately determines whether our ambitions become a reality.

In recent years, we have taken important steps to ensure that well-being, recognition, and reward are no longer treated as isolated initiatives, but as a coherent policy framework. That work is not finished. On the contrary: in a period of financial pressure and organisational change, it is essential that people feel supported, respected, and heard.

Leadership is central to this. Through Engaged Leading, we have developed a widely supported framework that defines leadership as responsibility for people, team impact, and culture. This framework has not remained theoretical. We have embedded it in the new ZAP career policy, in agreements of intent, and feedback cycles. Within the ATP career policy, we have also integrated more explicitly leadership and professional development. In the next policy period, I will roll out

targeted leadership programmes for various groups. I want leadership to be tangible in daily practice: from decisiveness in the face of complexity to ownership, role-model behaviour, and the consistent building of trust and connection within teams.

Well-being is not a peripheral theme. It must be the beating heart of our organisation. I want to continue building an inclusive community where respect for everyone's individuality, freedom, equality, and connectedness guide our daily actions. This is not a slogan, but a guiding framework that we have already developed and will continue to embed in policy, processes, and communication. Concretely, we translate this vision into six tracks: a warm welcome for everyone; healthy work with balance and clarity; connecting leadership; a safe and respectful workplace; research in a supportive environment; and human-centred policy in every sub-policy plan.

Consequently, we are introducing a periodic well-being survey as a baseline and a compass for policy. Psychosocial risks are being integrated into a Dynamic Risk Management System, ensuring that prevention is addressed structurally rather than purely reactively.

Furthermore, we are introducing an Employee Assistance Program, ensuring that staff have access to specialised and confidential support during difficult times. This is not a luxury, but a basic requirement in a complex working environment.

Psychological safety also requires cultural shift. By 2030, I want staff to be able to explicitly state that they can discuss difficult issues with their managers and that respect is the norm. We do not tolerate transgressive behaviour. Procedures are clear, and reports are handled with care.

A strong feedback culture is indispensable in this regard. Feedback should not be an administrative obligation, but a tool for growth. Regular, sincere, and constructive feedback increases engagement, prevents escalation, and supports professional development. By 2030, I want every staff member to receive feedback that is experienced as meaningful and development oriented.

Clarity in organisation is a form of care. Every staff member must know who their direct manager is. Managers are explicitly part of a hierarchical line with clear responsibilities regarding well-being, follow-up, and prevention. This line must be manageable in scale, so that leadership can be exercised effectively.

Leadership is also personal. Fulfilling the role of Rector is a continuous learning process. I have experienced how important it is to hear different perspectives, to ask for feedback, and to adjust my approach. This is an attitude I wish to continue modelling. Leadership means providing direction as well as listening.

By 2030, I want the VUB to be seen as a university where academic excellence goes hand in hand with human-centred policy. Where trust is not a slogan, but daily practice, and where people feel safe to speak, grow, and to take responsibility.

## 6. AN AGILE AND EFFECTIVE ORGANISATION

The VUB has grown significantly in recent years. Growth brings opportunities, but also complexity. As we grow larger, we risk becoming slower. We cannot let that happen.

Agility is not a management term; it is a necessary condition for fulfilling our academic mission in a rapidly changing context. The attempt at thorough governance reform in the previous period did not find the required support. That is a fact. We have learned from this that structural change is only sustainable when it is broadly supported.

But this does not mean we are abandoning the ambition to become more effective. On the contrary: in a context of financial pressure, we must organise ourselves more efficiently.

Our starting point is always our core mission: providing academic education, conducting scientific research, and ensuring innovation and societal services. Research groups and programmes are the fundamental building blocks of that mission. Organisation and administration must support them, not burden them.

Therefore, we will simplify decision-making and processes where possible. We will bring responsibilities closer to expertise and reduce redundant decision-making layers without hollowing out participation. Central and decentralised structures must be clear, not a patchwork of councils and reporting.

We will actively strengthen collaboration across services and faculties. Breaking down silos requires not just reorganisations on paper, but a culture of shared responsibility. Synergy is not a side issue; it is an engine for progress.

The use of artificial intelligence offers new opportunities here. While four years ago we could not have imagined how quickly AI would evolve, today we know that it can help us make processes more efficient, reduce repetitive tasks, and make information more accessible. We deploy AI purposefully to reduce administrative burdens and support staff in their core tasks.

We embed sustainable business operations structurally. Long-term risk management, compliance, operational efficiency, and stakeholder trust are not additional obligations, but conditions for stability. Sustainability is not a standalone aim, but a strategic engine.

Clear mandates are essential =. Decisions must be made where expertise and responsibility converge. Checks and balances remain important, but they must not lead to a standstill.

*By 2030, I want staff to experience that the organisation supports them rather than hinders them. That processes are logical, responsibilities are clear, and that the VUB, despite its growth, remains agile and effective.*

## 7. BRUSSELS HEALTH VALLEY

For me, the development of a Brussels Health Valley is not just an additional project, but a strategic choice for the future of the VUB. Health, care innovation, and biomedical research are among our greatest strengths. In and around Brussels, we possess a unique combination of university, a university hospital, an association partner, and an innovation ecosystem. We must organise and strengthen this proximity purposefully.

*I want to make the VUB Health Campus the beating heart of an integrated health ecosystem where education, research, and innovation reinforce each other structurally. Not in parallel, but in cohesion.*

The first pillar is education and talent development. We are redesigning medical education for the medicine of the future: interdisciplinary, digitally supported, and strongly connected to research and innovation. We will continue to develop the dentistry programme within the accreditation period, utilising the existing capacity of the University Dental Centre as an accelerator for internships and clinical collaboration. Education and research in physiotherapy will also be further expanded on the Health Campus. Together with EhB, we are further developing the interprofessional education offer, including lifelong learning and micro-credentials, so that healthcare professionals learn to collaborate across disciplines.

The second pillar is research and innovation. We are strengthening interdisciplinary research at the intersection of biomedical sciences, data sciences, engineering, and the humanities. The combination of clinical data from UZ Brussel, university research, and high-performance computing at the Green Energy Park creates opportunities for clinically relevant and ethically robust AI applications. Brussels Health Valley should grow into a reference ecosystem for CO<sub>2</sub>-neutral hospital processes, where energy and care innovation reinforce one another.

The third pillar is translation into practice. Research results must find their way to the clinical environment more quickly. Therefore, we are building structural translation platforms together with UZ Brussel and entering into preferential partnerships with industrial players, under clear agreements regarding academic independence and valorisation. We are investing in the secure unlocking of clinical data for research and in machine learning applications that support clinical decision-making.

This ambition also requires clear prerequisites. We prioritise targeted investments in shared infrastructure: simulation and skills labs, data capacity, sustainable campus facilities, and flexible learning and meeting spaces. The Health Campus must grow into a full-fledged “Health Valley Student District”, where education, research, care, and student life converge and attract talent.

We anchor this collaboration in a Health Valley Board with a clear charter, shared strategic objectives, and measurable indicators. This board safeguards and monitors the joint agenda, with respect for the autonomy of each partner. For external partners, we provide a transparent one-stop shop to streamline collaboration efficiently.

Brussels Health Valley is not a real estate project or a marketing concept. It is an integrated strategy that bundles together our strengths and increases our societal impact. By connecting care, science, and innovation in one coherent ecosystem, we strengthen not only our position in Brussels but also our international profile.

By 2030, I want Brussels Health Valley to be recognised as the integrated health ecosystem in and around Brussels, where pioneering in science and valorising innovation go hand in hand, and where education, research and care visibly reinforce one another.

# IN CONCLUSION

## TAKING RESPONSIBILITY TOGETHER

I pledge to report transparently on the progress of these priorities, not to delay difficult decisions when they are necessary, and to remain in dialogue with all stakeholders in our university community. Leadership means giving direction and taking responsibility.

A policy plan is more than a list of priorities. It is a choice for a way of working.

The coming years will not be simple. Financial pressure and social changes will demand tough choices. But throughout its history, the VUB has shown time and again that it becomes stronger when circumstances become more difficult.

I am convinced that we have laid the right foundations. We have strengthened science, deepened innovation, renewed education, and made leadership more human. Now is the moment to protect those foundations and build on them with a clear purpose.

This requires clarity in choices. It requires consistency in implementation. But above all, it requires trust.

The VUB is a democratic university. Here giving direction does not mean imposing, but connecting. It means not avoiding decisions, but doing so transparently and taking accountability. Staff and students are not implementers of policy, but co-builders of our future.

I ask for your trust to provide direction over the next four years. In return, I commit myself to openness, accessibility, and consistent follow-up, to leadership that connects, even when decisions are difficult.

Together, we can ensure that the VUB is not held back by budget cuts or uncertainty. Together, we can ensure that we continue to pioneer in science, valorise in innovation, and enable students to succeed in a changing world.

I am convinced that, with our values as our compass and with shared responsibility, we can enter the next phase with confidence.

**Jan Danckaert, Rector**

**27 February 2026**