

# 2025

# Activity report

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Academic year 2024-2025

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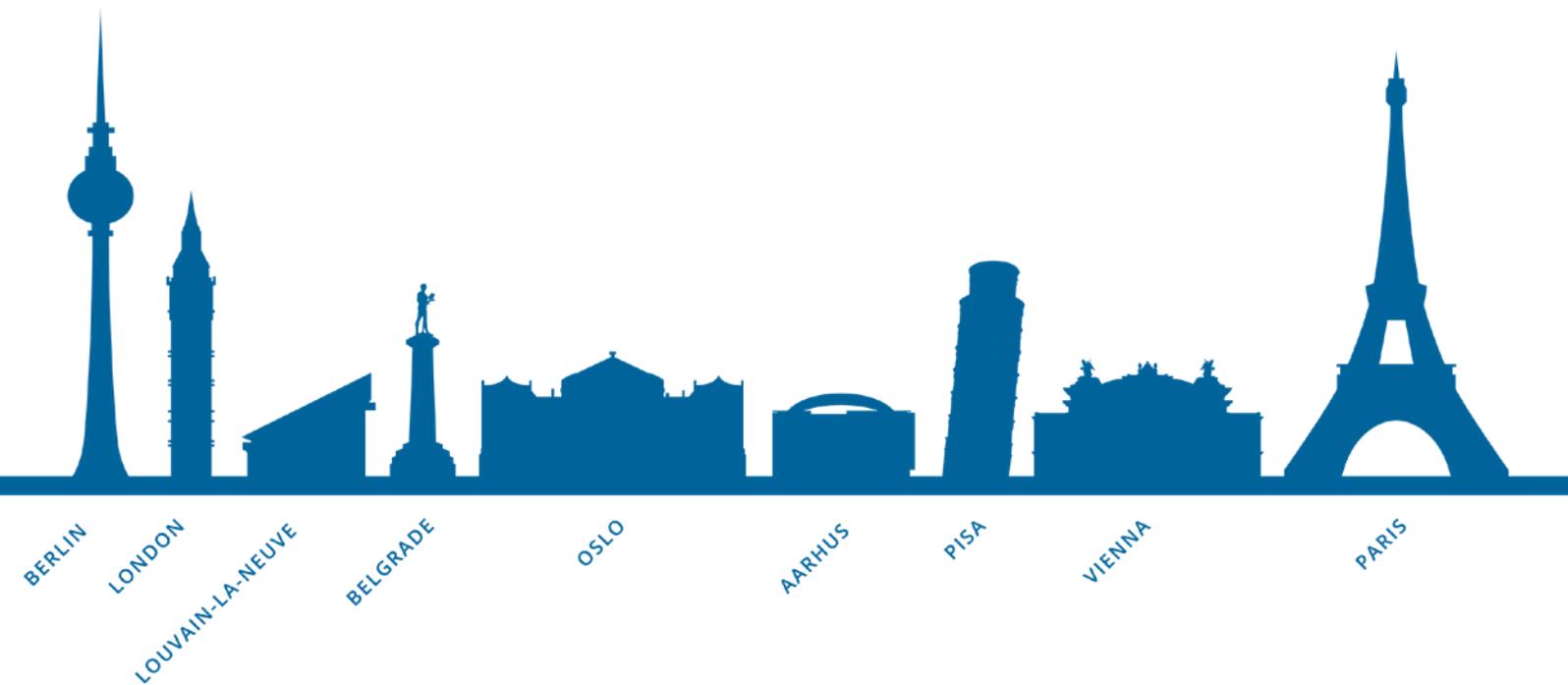
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# FOREWORD

*"As we celebrate five years of Circle U., we can be proud of how far we have come. Together, we have made great strides towards turning what started as a joint project into a permanent and deeply embedded alliance of nine high-profile universities. In this past year alone, we have significantly grown our cross-institutional network of academic chairs, research and student fellows as well as ambassadors. We have also gained the input of a great number of colleagues and partners. They have organised numerous high-quality and inclusive educational offers on our Open Campus, worked towards new Circle U. master's programmes and engaged in collaborative research. Their conviction and efforts are the driving forces behind our progress.*

*This five-year milestone is a very happy moment, from which we can look ahead with optimism. The European Commission's Multiannual Financial Framework sends a promising signal for European University Alliances as key actors in the advancement of the European Research Area and higher education sector. It is a signal that resonates strongly with our own continued commitment to this ambitious and important path forward, at the service of society at large."*

**Julia von Blumenthal,**

*President of Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin  
President of Circle U.*



Credit: Philipp Plum



*"From the beginning of the "Circle U. 2030" Erasmus+ project, the number of opportunities offered by the Circle U. Alliance increased in a sensible way. To the successful activities already offered in the pilot phase, like the summer schools and seed funding scheme, we have added for example several bachelor's modules on sustainability. One joint master's in public governance is going to start next academic year, and other joint master's are being developed. Several mobility and international exposure opportunities are offered to students beyond the ordinary Erasmus+ mobility: these are innovative educational offers, like the MUNs, COILs, challenges and hackathons. Moreover, a Circle U. Research Committee has been established, and we have applied to two COFUND MSCA proposals for early-career researchers (ECR). Among the opportunities for ECR, there are also the recent postdoc mobility and intersectoral mobility programs, the latter involving the non-academic sector too. All these activities show that the relations among the Circle U. universities are becoming more and more tied, and there is an increasing willingness to collaborate."*

**Giovanni Gronchi,**

*Vice-Rector for Cooperation and International Relations, Università di Pisa  
Chairman of the Management Board*

# PRESENTATION OF CIRCLE U.

Circle U. is an alliance of nine research-intensive European universities that are committed to combining their expertise and common interests to shape the university of the future.



## VISION & MISSION

The mission of the alliance - which was launched in 2020 - is to empower students, researchers, academics, staff and partners from civil society, businesses and the public sector to jointly develop competencies and solutions to keep Europe and our planet healthy, peaceful, democratic and prosperous.

Circle U. aims to act as a catalyst for change by providing high-quality, inclusive, shared and diverse in-

ternational teaching and learning experiences. We are committed to using our expertise in education, research and innovation to facilitate dialogues across disciplines, sectors and cultures, working towards long-term solutions that will make a difference in addressing major societal challenges.

## GOVERNANCE



Circle U. President  
**Julia von Blumenthal**  
*Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin*



Chair of the Management Board  
**Giovanni Federico Gronchi**  
*Università di Pisa*





Secretary General  
**Kevin Guillaume**  
*Circle U. Office*



Dean of the Open Campus  
**Eivind Engebretsen**  
*Universitetet i Oslo*



Vice-Dean for Academic Chairs  
**Viniciusde Carvalho**  
*(on sabbatical in 2024-2025)  
King's College London*



*Circle U. General Assembly at the University of Pisa, May 2025*



## PARTNER UNIVERSITIES



AARHUS UNIVERSITY



universität  
wien



UNIVERSITY  
OF OSLO



UNIVERSITY OF  
BELGRADE



UNIVERSITÀ  
DI PISA



Université  
Paris Cité



UCLouvain

HUMBOLDT-  
UNIVERSITÄT  
ZU BERLIN



## CIRCLE U. IN NUMBERS



**9 UNIVERSITIES**



**466,250 STUDENTS**

Aarhus Universitet: **36,000**  
Univerzitet u Beogradu: **89,827**  
Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin: **35,892**  
King's College London: **42,000**  
UCLouvain: **38,579**  
Universitetet i Oslo: **26,500**  
Université Paris Cité: **64,285**  
Università di Pisa: **47,967**  
Universität Wien: **85,200**



**59,832 STAFF**

Aarhus Universitet: **8,500**  
Univerzitet u Beogradu: **4,674**  
Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin: **4,456**  
King's College London: **10,000**  
UCLouvain: **7,618**  
Universitetet i Oslo: **7,200**  
Université Paris Cité: **7,204**  
Università di Pisa: **3,280**  
Universität Wien: **6,900**



**45 ASSOCIATED PARTNERS**



**85 ACADEMIC CHAIRS**



**19 FELLOWS**

(STUDENT, ASSOCIATED AND GLOBAL)



**8 KNOWLEDGE HUBS, PLATFORMS**



**51 SEED-FUNDED PROJECTS**

## ZOOM ON THE ACADEMIC YEAR 2024-2025

### EDUCATION

67 activities implemented including:

Circle U. Summer/ Winter schools: 5

Open Conversations: 6

Talks and Conversations: 21

Total Participants: ~ 3000

### RESEARCH

Calls launched for research support: 4

Total funds awarded for research  
support: 160,978.88€

### OUTREACH TO OUR COMMUNITIES

Communities of Practice: 10

Members in Communities of Practice: 72

Ambassadors: 38 across 8 universities

Staff weeks: 2

# HIGHLIGHTS OF THE ACADEMIC YEAR 2024-2025

The academic year 2024–2025 was marked by significant progress across Circle U.'s key initiatives, encompassing education, research, innovation and societal engagement. This section presents a selection of highlights that illustrate the alliance's achievements during the year. It covers developments within the Open Campus, the Knowledge Hubs, the Platforms and other

thematic initiatives such as multilingualism, teaching innovation, and challenge-based learning. Together, these activities reflect Circle U.'s growing capacity to create meaningful opportunities for students, staff, and researchers across partner universities, while strengthening the alliance's strategic position within the European Higher Education landscape.

## CONSOLIDATION OF THE OPEN CAMPUS

The Open Campus is Circle U.'s shared digital entry point to educational activities across the alliance. It gives students access to a growing catalogue of joint courses, challenge-based learning formats, and cross-university collaborations. As part of Circle U.'s long-term strategy, the Open Campus supports the creation of a more connected, flexible, and international learning environment.

In 2025, the Open Campus entered a new phase, moving from initial experimentation to the development of a structured course catalogue. The focus is now on im-

proving visibility, clarifying procedures, and helping institutions align their contributions and practices.

To support this transition, Circle U. hosted a two-day workshop in Brussels in January 2025. Over 40 participants (academics, staff, and students) came together to discuss upcoming courses and formats, share experiences, and coordinate next steps. Their input is helping shape how future offers are designed, presented, and integrated across universities.



## A Growing and Dynamic Learning Space

*"In the past academic year, we've seen a tremendous increase in the various educational offerings in the Open Campus, ranging from the Circle U. flagship summer*

*schools to innovative BA modules within sustainability to the Open Conversations lecture series. Through the short-term, EU-funded mobility programme Blended Intensive Programs (BIP), Circle U. students and staff have been able to combine a short period of physical mobility abroad with a virtual component, offering students and staff a flexible way to participate in international collaboration, networking, and learning. A pedagogical approach which Circle U. colleagues have explored successfully is the Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL), where students from dif-*

*ferent countries collaborate on projects or coursework through online platforms, facilitated by instructors from partner universities.*

*The Open Campus is continuously working on developing educational offerings which are innovative and attractive for students and staff to participate in. Through the increase of student numbers, as well as a notable increase in visits to the Circle U. Open Campus website, we believe we are on the right path".*

**Eivind Engebretsen,**

*Dean of the Open Campus, Universitetet i Oslo*



Academics brainstorming on new bachelor modules in Brussels, January 2025

## KNOWLEDGE HUB ON ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

The Knowledge Hub on AI addresses the challenge of human-centred, inclusive, and equitable AI, promoting the development and application of robust, ethical, safe, trustworthy, and sustainable AI systems. This will be achieved through a multidisciplinary approach, with each area of expertise playing a key role.

The Knowledge Hub serves as a convergence point for diverse disciplines, each approaching AI from unique perspectives. The strength of the hub will stem from this synergy, enabling the development and application of AI in a manner that upholds the fundamental rights of all human beings.

### In the spotlight

#### **Summer School:** “Towards Human-Centred, Inclusive, and Equitable Artificial Intelligence”

From 15-19 September 2025, the University of Pisa hosted the first summer school organised by the Knowledge Hub on AI. This summer school, open to PhD students, focused on human-centred AI, exploring how AI systems can be designed and implemented to uphold human values, inclusion, and equity across diverse social contexts.



**80 Applications received**



**50 participants**

The summer school is a flagship event of the AI Knowledge Hub, involving all academic chairs both as organisers and speakers. It combined lectures, workshops, case studies, and group projects, encouraging interdisciplinary exchange and critical reflection on the societal role of AI.

**Research** In May, the University of Belgrade organised the online symposium “AI in Circle U.: Connecting Minds, Shaping the Future.” The event highlighted AI research across Alliance universities and fostered synergies among research groups. The event was widely appreciated by participants.



**60 participants**

**Education** The Hub launched a call for joint master’s thesis topics, co-supervised by professors from two partner universities. The initiative aims to engage students directly in the Hub’s activities while fostering cross-institutional research connections. The call promotes long-term academic collaboration and gives students the opportunity to work across disciplines and institutions.



PhD students attending the summer school on human-centred AI at the University of Pisa.

*"It was an enriching experience that broadened my perspective on human-centred and trustworthy AI, thanks to the contributions of experts from diverse universities and backgrounds. Since AI is increasingly pervasive in daily life, exploring it from different angles is essential to improving our overall understanding. The event also helped me realise how*

*important it is to be part of a European alliance in facilitating connections between universities and international research groups."*

**Fabrizio Ruffini,**

*PhD student at the Università di Pisa – participant*

## KNOWLEDGE HUB ON CLIMATE

The Climate Hub connects researchers, professors and students to co-develop interdisciplinary learning and teaching offers, joint research projects and public events. Their aim is to contribute to the development of strategies and solutions for the pressing issues and challenges of the climate crisis.

### In the spotlight

**Summer School: “Empowering Climate Action”** For the fourth time in a row, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin hosted Circle U.’s Climate summer school that brought together 30 bachelor students from various disciplines to engage with key concepts in climate science and policies. During the two-week online phase, students learned about climate change science, challenges of climate policy and how to communicate with stakeholders. Moreover, they worked in local teams to research climate policies at their respective universities and in their home cities. During their one-week stay in Berlin, they worked in mixed interdisciplinary teams to prepare for their roles as delegates in a climate negotiation exercise, experiencing the process of negotiating complex issues and conflicting interests. The school wrapped up with a half-day workshop on climate agency, in which students discussed feasible solutions and key competencies for *sustainability*.



**96 Applications received**



**30 participants**

**Research** In 2025, the Academic Chairs of the Climate Hub published the results of a pilot study on climate change education across the member universities of Circle U. The study has shown that the provision of climate-related education “is unsystematic, unevenly distributed, and disconnected from strategic institutional priorities”. Based on these results, the Chairs are currently working on a proposal to lead coordinated and cross-institutional research into how European universities can better align climate change-related education with labour market needs and in support of the European Green Deal.

#### Education

Kerstin Krellenberg (University of Vienna) and Henning Nuissl (Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin) offered a joint course in summer 2025. “Democracy and Climate Change Adaptation in Berlin and Vienna” brought together master students from both universities to learn more about local democratic processes for climate change adaptation, which were examined jointly in both Berlin and Vienna from a comparative perspective. Students worked in inter-university teams on a selected subtopic related to local democratic processes for climate change adaptation. The local students also had the role of promoting exchange with local practice partners in their respective cities.

Students attending the summer school on climate at Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. Credits: Marie Buchholz



*"For me, attending and contributing to Circle U. was a true full "circle" moment: first as a PhD student at the Aarhus Summer School on climate change, now teaching for two consecutive years at the Circle U. Summer School in Berlin on Climate Action. I have learned so much and now had the chance to give back. The Climate Hub does amazing work, and I can say this from both sides, as a student and as a teacher; it's not only deeply interesting but truly rewarding to learn from and contribute to such a great team."*

**Lilli Rupprechter,**

PhD student at King's College London and part of Circle U.'s Summer School Teaching team in 2024 and 2025

*"Before the course, I had mainly learnt about participatory processes in Vienna, and the direct comparison with Berlin opened up a new perspective. Comparative learning helped me to critically analyse known structures, and to better understand complex social challenges"*

**Jakob Kühnberger,**

student at Universität Wien, translated quote.

## KNOWLEDGE HUB ON DEMOCRACY

The Knowledge Hub on Democracy examines the alarming trends in parts of Europe and elsewhere, where democratic values are undermined and discarded.

The hub serves as a platform for generating greater awareness of the challenges and opportunities related to strengthening democracy and civil engagement.

### In the spotlight

#### SummerSchool: “The Crossroads of Democracy and Development: Challenges and Innovations”

The Democracy Hub held its annual summer school at the University of Belgrade in June 2025. The programme brought together around 40 master’s students from across Europe and beyond. Seven academics from five Circle U. universities delivered lectures and led discussions on topics including democratic governance, trade wars, socialist models of development and the role of technology in democracy. Students worked in multidisciplinary teams to prepare presentations, strengthening cross-university collaboration. The programme also featured an Open Conversation on the role of student protests in shaping Serbia’s future, alongside cultural activities introducing participants to Belgrade’s history and context.



**130 Applications received**



**40 participants**

**Research** Collaborative research between the Democracy Hub and the AI Hub resulted in a co-authored book chapter, *Democracy in the Age of AI: Challenges and Opportunities*, by Dan Banik and Francesco Marcelloni. The chapter analyses AI’s dual role as both a tool for enhancing transparency, efficiency, and civic engagement, and as a potential threat through manipulation, surveillance, and systemic inequality. In addition, a proposal was submitted for a special journal issue based on the Circle U. seed-funded project *Confronting Poverty: Uniting Disciplines for Global Impact*. The special issue includes scholars from arts, humanities, and social sciences, including several Circle U. academic chairs and directors, to investigate the relationship between poverty discourses and poverty reduction policies.

**Education** The Democracy Hub contributed to teaching and public engagement through courses, guest lectures, workshops, and events across the Circle U. network, including the Sustainable Wine Course in Pisa and the Global Health summer school in Paris.

**Blended Intensive Course - The Politics of Sustainable Development (University of Oslo):** The course examined theoretical and empirical approaches to sustainable development, highlighting the contested nature of the concept at both global and national levels. Contributions from several Circle U. universities and from the business sector enriched the discussions and provided a range of perspectives on the politics of sustainable development.



**+200 Applications received**



**50 BA and MA students participants**



*"It was incredible to learn with students from all over the world," said Rumeysa Durmaz, a participant from Université Paris Cité. "We had different experiences and perspectives, but we found ways to really learn from each other."*

**Rumeysa Durmaz**

Student, Université Paris Cité

*Students attending the democracy summer school at the University of Belgrade*

## KNOWLEDGE HUB ON GLOBAL HEALTH

The Knowledge Hub on Global Health addresses the pressing issue of global and local health challenges and seeks to develop strategies for providing better healthcare and prevention for all.

### In the spotlight

**SummerSchool: “Rethinking Global Health”** This year’s summer school, hosted by Université Paris Cité, brought together 25 PhD students and young researchers to examine global health from multiple perspectives. Over an intensive week, participants engaged with experts on health metrics, economics and inequalities, antimicrobial resistance, environmental health, and the historical and political dimensions of global health.

Discussions encouraged participants to question assumptions, reflect on ethical dilemmas in resource allocation, and consider commercial, social and environmental factors influencing health. Key issues included digital colonisation, climate change, and the importance of addressing inequities at both local and global levels. The summer school combined academic learning with exchange among peers from diverse backgrounds, creating an enriching environment for reflection and collaboration.



**56 Applications received**



**25 participants**

**Research** The Hub launched a project on the balance between individual and system responsibility in health, which received dedicated funding. Over the past year, experts in prevention, democracy, health economics, and vulnerable populations collaborated on this topic, alongside a student from the summer school who carried out a three-month research stay in Oslo. This work led to a joint paper published in *The Lancet Public Health* in March 2025 (doi: 10.1016/S2468-2667(25)00013-1).

The Hub is currently preparing a European COST Action proposal on primordial prevention of cardiovascular diseases. This programme aims to prevent the onset of risk factors and promote “ideal cardiovascular health” through a multilevel and cross-sectoral approach. The consortium includes several Circle U. hubs, with Université Paris Cité as the lead institution. The proposal will be submitted in October 2025.

In addition, a survey of global health teaching in medical schools across the nine Circle U. universities was completed, supervised by Humboldt University. The study revealed a lack of structured global health education in most institutions, underlining the need for a harmonised approach within the alliance.

#### **Education**

In 2025, the Hub also launched a one-week intensive course on effective interventions in development, a cross-hub initiative led by the Democracy Hub in Oslo with contributions from the Knowledge Hub on Global Health and partners such as Institut Pasteur. This course, targeting bachelor students, highlights health-related interventions that have proven successful in low- and middle-income countries.

Finally, work is underway to establish a joint master’s programme in global health, coordinated by Université Paris Cité with four alliance universities already on board. The academic framework and administrative structure are being developed in parallel, with external funding opportunities such as Erasmus Mundus under consideration.

*"I think my favourite part so far was to exchange on so many disciplines and with colleagues from all over Europe or even other countries. This interdisciplinary point of view is very unique and important, especially in the field of global health."*

**Riccardo Pollifroni,**  
Università di Pisa



Students attending the global health summer school at Université Paris Cité. Credits: Université Paris Cité - Eric Descarpentri

## MULTILINGUALISM, INTERCULTURALITY AND LANGUAGE LAB (CU.MIL)

The CU.mil aims to foster multilingualism and interculturality across Circle U. It offers formal and informal learning opportunities in the fields of multilingualism, interculturality and language learning. The CU.mil aims to drive the research in these fields forward, to devel-

op multilingual and intercultural competences, and to enhance knowledge in these areas for all students and staff at Circle U. universities.

### In the spotlight

#### SummerSchool: "Narrative and discourse analytical approach to multilingualism and interculturality research"

Planned for 15-19 September, the summer school was designed for PhD and postdoctoral researchers interested in narrative analysis and its applications to multilingualism. The programme focused on linguistic and narrative development, language learning, attrition, and sociolinguistic factors. Due to the political situation in Belgrade, the event was postponed.



44 Applications received



25 participants

**Research** The project Language/s in Research investigates the role of languages in academic work at Circle U. universities. Academic chairs Ana de Medeiros (King's College London), Ute Smit (University of Vienna), and Mette Zølner (Aarhus University) surveyed 110 researchers across disciplines to map language use in activities such as publishing, reviewing, presenting, fundraising, research group discussions, data collection, and daily interactions.

While English dominated across all categories, researchers reported using a wide range of other languages in their work. This highlights the continued relevance of linguistic diversity in academic practice. The next phase will include in-depth interviews, detailed analysis, and dissemination of findings across the alliance.

**Education** The spring 2025 master's course on Language Policy and Planning (LPP), hosted by the University of Oslo's Department of Linguistics and Scandinavian Studies, ran from 4 February to 13 May. Led by Pia Lane with Circle U. professors, guest speakers, and a teaching assistant, the course consisted of ten 90-minute online seminars and study groups. It awarded 10 ECTS credits and assessed students through a term paper and oral presentation.

The course examined the evolution of LPP from post-World War II nation-building to its current role as a critical academic field. It emphasised multilingualism, decolonial perspectives, and sociolinguistic dynamics. Students applied theoretical frameworks to case studies, analysing policy impacts, implementation, and unintended consequences. Learning outcomes included a stronger command of approaches to multilingualism and their relevance for thesis research.

Fifteen students from five Circle U. universities completed the course, although participation was affected by protests in Belgrade. Feedback highlighted the value of tailored guidance, multilingual engagement, and cross-institutional collaboration. While only five students responded to the survey, most reported increased confidence and academic clarity.

## TEACHING INNOVATION LAB (CU.TIL)

The Circle U. Teaching and Innovation Lab (CU.til) is an arena for knowledge-based pedagogical innovation and the development of evidence-based educational practices, gathering both academic and technical expertise. Promoting student-centred learning, quality

assurance and a learning outcomes approach, the key missions of the CU.til are to improve the educational status quo, to enhance student learning and to contribute to the professional development of academic staff.

### In the spotlight

Organised in September 2024, the CU.til week was a series of training workshops in Circle U. flagship pedagogies and pedagogical innovation aimed at faculty primarily, but also at educational developers and senior students (including early career researchers) seeking to develop their teaching skills with various formats and lengths. Participants were able to attend 90-minute-long workshops on Learning Design Methodology, Generative AI tools for teaching and Learning, Research-based Learning and Inclusivity in Higher Education, and those willing to co-create new modules were invited into a design-thinking-based 2-day boot-camp, whereas the CU.til team collaborated with the InCUBator on a semester-long training module for entrepreneurial coaches, with its first 2-day step happening during the CU.til week. The event has been a great success and is to be repeated every year.

#### To quote one of our participants:

*"The experience honed my ability to coach, mentor, and lead a diverse group of individuals—all essential skills for an academic career...it has been a pivotal chapter in my journey, shaping not only my professional aspirations but also my personal values and perspectives."*

**Teaching** The Brussels Matchmaking event co-organised in January 2025 with the Open Campus was a collaborative event allowing participating faculty to co-create interdisciplinary BA modules on sustainability using a design-based methodology. Matchmaking events are vibrant, strategic, pedagogical and intellectual melting pots, destined to allow academic (and administrative) staff from Circle U. universities to meet, create new connections and pedagogical collaborations, to help boost the integration of Circle U. into our local institutions and create innovative new modules for Circle U.

#### Education

The Circle U. MUN, "Model United Nations" is the simulation of a conference at the United Nations. This year's edition, held in December 2024, dealt with the societal, ethical and regulatory challenges of AI. The programme was composed of a longitudinal component over the semester with webinars that provided students with methodological tools and topic-based knowledge and prepared them for the residential week during which they simulated a United Nations session along with debatable issues concerning the main topic.



98 Applications received



76 participants



The CU.MUN brought students to the European Parliament, December 2024

## INCU.BATOR

The InCU.bator is an arena for challenge-based learning and support for students to develop innovation skills and entrepreneurship projects. The InCU.bator fosters collective learning opportunities, in collaboration with associate partners, and public, private and civic actors.

It offers a range of challenge-based and co-creative formats, including hackathons, games, etc., in authentic work-life relevant settings where students take centre stage in the social innovation process.

### In the spotlight

The InCU.bator offers a variety of challenge-based and co-creative formats, such as hackathons, bootcamps, and design sprints. To align Circle U. staff with these learning objectives and to inspire the adoption of similar initiatives that enhance innovative and entrepreneurial skills, the InCU.bator hosted its first staff week at Aarhus University on 28-29 April 2025.

A key obstacle to boosting innovation remains the lack of equity, diversity, and inclusion (ED&I). For this reason, ED&I was chosen as the central theme of the staff week. The programme was intentionally designed to integrate diverse entrepreneurial elements to showcase different challenge-based and co-creative approaches. The staff week was bundled with a hackathon for women founders, where staff members had the opportunity to engage directly in the hackathon activities. The hackathon pitch presentations were an integral part of the programme, with the participation of external partners. Three women founders from Aarhus presented their start-ups, and the staff week was enriched by a Circle U. Open Conversation focused on equitable funding for women founders – an event open to the broader community. Staff also took part in a joint workshop with students from the Women Founders Network, addressing entrepreneurial wellbeing, which offered valuable insights for all participants. Additionally, joint social activities were organised to foster student-staff interaction and co-creation. Finally, the programme actively addressed bias awareness, both by exploring the potential of AI in identifying biases and through the application of specific tools and exercises aimed at increasing individual and collective bias consciousness.

In essence, the staff week was designed to bring together a diverse set of innovation-driven activities within a coherent framework, where these elements could interact and complement each other to provide a meaningful, hands-on environment for addressing ED&I in entrepreneurship education.



**59 Applications received**



**50 participants**

*"I met amazing people doing impactful things - and I'm taking home a backpack full of best practices, new ideas and renewed energy. I am grateful to be part of a community that champions inclusion, innovation, and entrepreneurial thinking. I believe that all these new connections and insights will help us refresh and further shape our educational and support activities for students in the field of entrepreneurial education."*

**Participant of the staff week**

*Participants of the Staff Week at Aarhus University,  
April 2025*





## FROM THE GROUND UP: SUPPORTING BOTTOM-UP COLLABORATION

Circle U. supports initiatives that originate from its academic and student communities, recognising that meaningful cooperation often begins at the grassroots level. Through seed funding, mobility schemes, and dedicated calls for inclusion-focused projects, the alliance provides practical support to smaller-scale, short-

term efforts with the potential to grow into lasting collaborations. These bottom-up initiatives complement Circle U.'s broader strategic activities, helping embed the alliance more deeply in its member institutions while advancing shared goals around research, teaching innovation, inclusion, and mobility.

### Seed-Funding Scheme 2024

As part of its mission to strengthen collaboration across partner universities, Circle U. continues to support new academic, research, and student-led initiatives through its seed-funding scheme managed by the Circle U. Office and funded by the member universities of the alliance. By supporting 13 projects, the 2024 call reinforced Circle U.'s commitment to building a lasting joint ecosystem that supports innovation in education and research, deepens cooperation, and encourages cross-institutional exchange.

Designed to initiate smaller-scale, time-limited projects, the seed-funding scheme provides opportunities for staff and students to explore shared interests, co-develop new activities, and test ideas that may evolve into longer-term collaborations. These initiatives go beyond the alliance's formal deliverables and help embed Circle U. more deeply within partner institutions.

The scheme contributes to multiple strategic goals of the alliance, including:

- ☒ Supporting interdisciplinary and multilingual teaching and research activities;
- ☒ Enhancing student involvement and innovation;
- ☒ Strengthening the alliance's core platforms, such as the Open Campus and Knowledge Hubs;
- ☒ Increasing mobility and international exposure for students, staff, and researchers;
- ☒ Connecting with external partners to ensure broader societal relevance and visibility;
- ☒ Promoting sustainability, equity, and inclusion.

With a total budget of €110,000 for the 2024 call, the scheme supports a broad range of formats: from joint courses and workshops to research preparation and student-led cultural projects. It plays a key role in advancing Circle U.'s vision of a connected, inclusive, and dynamic European university alliance.

#### Key Numbers



**53** applicants



**13** Selected projects  
(out of which 9 are led by women)



**110,000.00€** Total budget

## ED&I Call for Flagship Initiatives

In December 2024, Circle U. launched the first round of its Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (ED&I) Flagship Initiatives to support locally rooted projects that contribute to more inclusive academic environments across the alliance. The initiative is part of Circle U.'s broader ED&I strategy and reflects a commitment to enabling students, staff, and faculty to take an active role in shaping institutional change.

The call aims to:

- ☒ Address ED&I-related challenges within and between member institutions through practical, on-the-ground projects;
- ☒ Strengthen collaboration across universities by encouraging joint efforts and shared expertise;
- ☒ Increase awareness and participation through creative and engaging activities;

- ☒ Support changes in teaching practices, mobility access, leadership structures, and other areas central to inclusion and equal opportunity.
- ☒ With an annual budget of €12,000, the call funded three projects this year. The programme will run again in 2026 and 2027, allowing for continued support of locally developed ED&I initiatives within the Circle U. community.

### Key Numbers



**18 applicants**



**3 Selected projects**



**12,000.00€ Total budget**

## Mobility Schemes for Early Career Researchers

As part of its support for academic collaboration and research development, Circle U. has implemented two tailored mobility schemes for early-career researchers: the Postdoc Mobility Programme and the Intersectoral Mobility Programme. Both are designed as seed-funding instruments, helping researchers establish new partnerships and prepare proposals for future collaborative projects, including applications for third-party funding.

These programmes are a continuation of the work carried out during the ERIA (Empowering Research and Innovation Actions) project and have been adapted based on experience gained in that earlier phase. Both schemes reflect Circle U.'s aim to support practical cooperation and strengthen academic links across borders and sectors. By focusing on early-career researchers, the schemes also contribute to building a more integrated and responsive research environment within the European university landscape.

### Key Numbers



**57 applicants**



**23 Selected projects**



**38,240.00€ Total budget**

**Inter-Sectoral Mobility Programme** This programme offers doctoral and postdoctoral researchers the opportunity to spend time at external organisations, such as Circle U. associated partners or other non-academic institutions. These short stays are intended to set a basis for joint projects and new forms of cooperation, encouraging researchers to engage with perspectives and practices outside the university setting. Up to 10 applicants can be funded per call, amounting to 30 mobilities during the project's timeframe.

### Postdoc Mobility Programme

This biannual scheme supports postdoctoral researchers in organising short research visits (ranging from 5 to 20 working days) at another Circle U. university. It is aimed at postdoctoral researchers who are preparing future collaborative projects or seeking to strengthen ties with new research groups in the alliance. Up to 18 participants can be supported per call, with a total of around 90 mobilities planned over the full duration of the project.

## ENGAGING OUR COMMUNITIES

Building a European University is as much about people as it is about structures. In 2024-2025, Circle U. intensified its efforts to connect more closely with its communities (students, academics, researchers, staff and other partners) across all member universities. Through a stronger local presence, the launch of the Ambassadors' Programme, new communities of prac-

tice, dynamic staff weeks, enhanced communication channels, and participation in FOREU4ALL, the alliance created new spaces for exchange, visibility, and belonging. These initiatives are laying the groundwork for a vibrant, engaged community at the heart of Circle U.'s long-term vision.



*Student ambassadors at the University of Pisa: Susanna, Anna and Agata.*

## A stronger local presence

In 2024–2025, Circle U. partners placed a strong emphasis on strengthening the alliance’s visibility and engagement at the local level. Across our campuses, universities have integrated Circle U. more firmly into student life and academic activities, helping the alliance become a recognisable and accessible part of the university experience.

Highlights include:

1. **Univerzitet u Beogradu:** Development of a Mobility Handbook and launch of a Circle U. podcast.
2. **Universitetet i Oslo:** Presence at orientation week with an information stand and distribution of flyers at the Conference of Education.
3. **Université Paris Cité:** Activities during Erasmus Days and a Climate Day photo exhibition.

4. **Università di Pisa:** “Circle U. on Tour” initiative across teaching hubs.

5. **Universität Wien:** Participation in the Study Fair, Erasmus Days, the Climate Day, and hosting the Circle U.

6. **UCLouvain:** Activities during Erasmus Days, Presence at Welcome Days for International Students

7. **Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin:** Presence at orientation events for local and incoming students, invitation of staff to biannual open community meetings

Through these activities, Circle U. has been brought closer to students, staff, and local communities, building recognition and laying the foundation for deeper engagement in the years to come.

## The Ambassador Programme

In 2024, Circle U. launched its first call for the Ambassadors’ programme to strengthen its presence on campus. The programme helps build community across the alliance by encouraging participation in activities, creating a sense of belonging, and supporting new student-led initiatives.

**38 ambassadors** were recruited across the alliance in its first year. Ambassadors include students, academics and administrative staff. They engaged in a wide variety of activities, from peer-to-peer information sessions and class presentations to social media campaigns and participation in fairs.

Examples of local initiatives include:

- ☒ **Universitetet i Oslo:** the Ambassador created social media content to promote Circle U. courses and liaised with student associations in Oslo.
- ☒ **Université Paris Cité:** Ambassadors met monthly, presented Circle U. activities during classes, devel-

oped a learning game about the alliance, and produced videos for social media.

☒ **Universität Wien:** Ambassadors supported outreach at student fairs and contributed to content for university and alliance communication channels.

☒ **UCLouvain:** one Ambassador created social media content to promote Circle U. through a student-led summer school; the other one helped creating a reel for social media explaining Circle U. and its advantages for students.

☒ **Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin:** creation of social media content and posters advertising opportunities for students, organisation of a Circle U. Café, presence at information events and preparation of a tour around departments and faculties

Thanks to the ambassadors’ creativity and dedication, Circle U. has established a stronger presence within local student communities, creating a sense of belonging and inspiring greater participation in the alliance.



## Academic Chair Retreat

In October 2024, the Academic Chair Retreat in Tuscany strengthened the Circle U. community by bringing together Academic Chairs to deepen connections, exchange perspectives, and collaborate on the Alliance's key initiatives. Through interactive sessions and discussions, participants explored how to build a dynamic research culture while staying true to Circle U.'s values. As Vice-Dean for Academic Chairs Vinicius de Carvalho noted, "This retreat proved we're on the right path in building a vibrant Circle U. community." The event reinforced trust and collaboration among Chairs and introduced new initiatives (such as the Knowledge Hub on Artificial Intelligence), showing how joint efforts across member universities can engage both students and staff, and contribute to a stronger, more integrated academic network.



## Staff Weeks

Staffweeks provide space for colleagues from different partner universities to meet in person, exchange experiences, and strengthen a shared sense of purpose. In Spring 2025, Circle U. organised two such events that highlighted the diversity and strength of our alliance. From 27 to 29 April, Aarhus University hosted the Staff Week on Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (ED&I) in Innovation and Entrepreneurship through our InCU.bator, bringing together academics and administrative staff to explore how inclusive practices can shape innovation.

Just a few weeks later, from 19 to 21 May, University of Vienna welcomed colleagues from 8 partner universities across 9 countries for the third Circle U. Staff Days. This gathering included thematic meetings on communica-

tion, student engagement, and educational activities, as well as the first joint in-person meeting of staff in study administration, mobility, and communication. As Siina Karbin, Deputy Head of the Student Mobility Team at Vienna, put it: "The Staff Days offered an excellent opportunity to exchange ideas, share best practices, and build collaboration across the alliance." Alongside the working sessions, a social programme including a traditional evening in a Viennese wine tavern created space for informal exchanges and new friendships. Together, the two staff weeks showed how in-person exchanges strengthen collaboration, spark new ideas, and deepen the sense of community within Circle U.



Academic Chair Retreat, October 2024

## Communities of Practice

In March 2025, Circle U. launched a call for the creation of Communities of Practice (CoPs) to strengthen collaboration and exchange across our universities. A Community of Practice is a group of colleagues who share a common interest or discipline and who meet regularly to exchange insights, solve problems together, and explore new approaches. By joining a CoP, members broaden their professional networks, develop new skills, and contribute to the advancement of our alliance.

The call generated a strong response, with 60 proposals submitted and 10 CoPs created, each bringing together between 5 and 15 members. While the initiative was primarily aimed at administrative staff, it also attracted academic staff, opening new opportunities for cross-collaboration within Circle U. The communities are supported by a dedicated contact person and are expected to work together for at least one year, with the possibility to continue as long as members find value in the collaboration.

The first year will culminate in a joint staff week planned for 2026, where all CoPs will meet in person for training, exchange, and evaluation. This event will provide each community with dedicated time to focus on its theme, while also fostering dialogue across the different groups.

By creating and supporting these communities, Circle U. is building dynamic networks that can evolve into new partnerships, projects, and training opportunities—further anchoring the alliance in the daily life of its universities.

### Focus on a Community of Practice: the CU. Language Teachers' Nexus (CU.LTN)

The Circle U. Language Teachers' Nexus (CU.LTN) is a Community of Practice bringing together language teachers to collaborate, share expertise and engage in continuous learning. It was launched during a three-day event at UCLouvain in January 2025, which gathered teachers, researchers, professors, lecturers and students from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. The event showcased innovative teaching and research practices and underlined the value of collaboration. Since then, coordinators and participants across partner universities have been developing the network. A follow-up event at King's College London in June 2025 enabled colleagues to share knowledge and present projects, creating opportunities for meaningful exchange.

*"The closing keynote on Communities of Practice, along with the audience rotation through demonstrations of innovative teaching methods and techniques [...] made it a singular experience among the many conferences I have attended. I left the event with new insights and a deepened sense of the possibilities that emerge through collegial sharing and the co-construction of knowledge."*

**Prof. Steven Thorne,**  
CU.mil Global Fellow.



## Maximising the impact of our communication

Engagement with our communities often begins online. Over the past academic year, Circle U. centralised the management of its social media, newsletter, and website to strengthen consistency and visibility across its communication channels.

### Social media

In autumn 2024, a dedicated content strategy was introduced. Between September 2024 and September 2025, the number of followers grew significantly: Instagram from 375 to 1,682, and LinkedIn from 4,078 to 6,175. A Facebook account was created, while the X account was discontinued in favour of a new Bluesky account. More efforts will be made in the coming academic year to strengthen Circle U.'s presence on these platforms.

### Newsletter

The management of the Circle U. newsletter was centralised in January 2025. The alliance adopted Rapidmail,

a European and GDPR-compliant platform, to distribute the renewed Circle U. Gazette. The newsletter was redesigned with a new content structure, highlighting opportunities, news, and a spotlight on partners and people. It now reaches more than 2,500 subscribers.

### Website

Since 2020, the Circle U. website has played a central role in building the alliance's identity, ensuring consistent branding, and providing accessible information to students, academics, and staff across partner universities. As Circle U.'s needs evolved, the existing platform showed limitations, particularly for new features such as the Open Campus catalogue and interactive tools. In June 2025, website management was transferred to the Circle U. Office to ensure future development aligns with the alliance's communication strategy.

## FOREU4ALL

Through its participation in FOREU4ALL, Circle U. is actively engaging with the wider community of European University Alliances. Funded by the European Commission, FOREU4ALL brings together all current and future alliances (65 in total, representing more than 550 universities) to exchange experiences, address common challenges, and contribute to shaping the future of European higher education. Building on the informal FOR-EU networks, the project provides a structured platform where alliances can connect with each other, stakeholders, and policymakers at regional, national, and European levels.

With Una Europa, Circle U. is co-leading the policy dialogue, supporting the alliances to pro-actively engage with European, national and regional policy makers but also to inform them on the actual contributions and potentials of the alliances in shaping the future of higher education and research in Europe and beyond. On these joint efforts focusing on policy, Circle U. Secretary Gen-

eral, Kevin Guillaume, underlines: "We want to make sure that alliances' experiences on the ground can also shape what is happening at the regional, national, and European levels. We want not only to make alliances aware that they have that potential, but also that they should use that potential."

Some 20 colleagues of the alliances are also involved in the topical groups where they can exchange, learn, share their experience and expertise in topics of relevance for Circle U. and the alliance, such as quality assurance, mobility, Open Science and libraries, diversity and inclusion, community engagement, impact, project management, etc.

By taking part in FOREU4ALL, Circle U. ensures that its voice, and the experiences of its partner universities, contribute to overcoming obstacles to transnational collaboration and to strengthening the role of European Universities in transforming higher education.

# 5 YEARS OF CIRCLE U. IN 10 MILESTONES



## Circle U.

European University Alliance

5 years!

From the very first idea of the alliance back in November 2018, the official launch of the Erasmus+ pilot project on 1 November 2020 to the upcoming celebrations of our fifth anniversary, Circle U. has grown from a visionary – but still unclear – concept into a transformative and impactful journey across nine European leading universities and their communities' members, working together to shape the future of higher education and research in Europe and beyond. Since its inception, Circle U. leaders, academics, researchers, staff members, students and partners have been building the foundations of a joint ecosystem that actually connects students, academics, and staff across borders and disciplines by offering unique opportunities.

This journey has been marked by key developments: the creation of shared governance structures, including the Circle U. Student Union; the establishment of flagship initiatives such as the

seed-funding scheme and the Academic Chair programme; and the expansion of the alliance to welcome new partners. With the launch of "Circle U. 2030", the Open Campus, new platforms on multilingualism and teaching innovation, and the AI Knowledge Hub, the alliance has entered a new phase of growth, deepening its impact and setting a clear course for the future.

The ten milestones presented in this section highlight some of the pivotal moments, achievements, and collective efforts that have shaped Circle U. since its inception. It is also an occasion to shed lights on these individuals who have played – and might still play – a key role in making our alliance a relevant reality for all. Obviously, many other colleagues have been involved over the last years. And this section is also a way to pay tribute to their contributions.

## MILESTONE 1. THE ORIGINS OF CIRCLE U.

Although the official birth date of Circle U. comes at a later stage, in November 2020, its origins started a few years before, with the launch of the Commission's European University Initiative (EUI) in 2018. Inspired by President Macron's Sorbonne speech in 2017, who had called for the creation of at least 20 European universities by 2040, seven research-intensive universities began exploring the (vague) idea of forming a new alliance. In the following months, the group agreed on the name "Circle U." and successfully secured Erasmus+ pilot funding, marking the formal launch of the alliance.

## Finding the right partners on the “European Dance Floor”

“P resident Macron’s speech at the Sorbonne in September 2017, in which he proposed creating at least 20 European universities by 2040, unleashed a wave of positive energy. The combination of a strong political vision - supporting European values and competitiveness - with an open call from the European Commission, spurred institutional creativity. It created what I like to call a “European dance floor”, where rectors invited each other to take the floor.

Vincent Blondel (former Rector of UCLouvain)

called

me in late spring 2018, and we decided to approach Aarhus University (AU). We met trilaterally in Oslo

in

August 2018. AU was eager to join and strongly advocated for including King’s College London, which quickly pointed us towards Université Paris Cité. Paris was keen to deepen its ties with Humboldt-

University

in Berlin. The alliance grew organically from there. We also quickly realised that we didn’t want to rush

into

forming an alliance; building trust and ownership within each institution was essential. For this reason,

we

decided not to apply to the first EUI call in March 2019.

### Getting a Name... and Funding!

We also saw the need to expand towards the east and south. The universities of Lisbon (winter 2019) and Belgrade (summer 2019) were approached and rapidly integrated into the work. There came a temporary initial discussions with rectors of our future

partner universities, the university in Lisbon stronger in

June and September 2019 with all fantastic gathering

and other of administrative staff, students, professors, and

alliance. As a result, seven universities applied to

the draft the full proposal, agree on a name and logo,

and finally achieve the official launch of Circle U, with

the Erasmus+ pilot project in November 2020. We received funding,

still felt the importance of careful expansion.

The choice of a name for the alliance was already on

the agenda of the Vienna meeting in 2018. We discussed it at length and considered a long list of ac-

ronyms, constellation names, geometrical figures, and

famous university figures. Despite lengthy discus-

sions, we couldn’t reach a consensus. It was only a

few months later that “Circle U.” was chosen. Some

people had noticed that the distribution of the univer-

sities on the map resembled a circle. Not exactly, per-

haps, but the idea resonated. “Circle U.” sounded right.

Everyone agreed. The name was born.”

The University of Vienna and the University of Pisa joined during the pilot phase and took part in the second successful application. Other strong universities have since expressed interest in joining. However, the complexity of creating meaningful cross-institutional educational offers increases with size. For this reason, the alliance has remained at nine members to this day.”



**Svein Stølen,**  
Former Rector of Universitetet i Oslo



**Vincent Blondel,**  
Former Rector of UCLouvain



## MILESTONE 2. ESTABLISHING THE CIRCLE U. STUDENT UNION (CUSU)

In 2021, Circle U. students took a decisive step in shaping the alliance's future with the creation of the Circle U. Student Union (CUSU). Gathering student representatives from all partner universities, CUSU became the official voice of over 330,000 students across Europe at the time of the creation of this unique student body (today, they represent more than half a million students). As an autonomous and democratic body, it plays a key role in

ensuring that student perspectives are heard at every level of the alliance's governance.

By signing its Terms of Reference and establishing representation in all work packages and decision-making structures, CUSU set the foundations for meaningful student participation. It champions inclusivity, dialogue, and mobility, working to make Circle U. an accessible, innovative, and student-centred European University.

### Amplifying the students' voice

*"Looking back at the foundation of CUSU, I can't help but feel proud of what we achieved together. While student representation in Europe isn't exactly a new thing, what made CUSU special was the trans-institutional collaboration we built. We brought together student representatives from seven (and later nine) diverse and research-intensive European universities to discuss how we could collectively amplify our voices. Importantly, we achieved this without compromising the local student democracy at each university.*

*At the seminar in freezing Oslo in March 2021, we laid the groundwork for our union and created a space for collaboration. It was more than just political discussions; it was a chance to bond socially too, making sure student perspectives took center stage within our alliance. CUSU truly empowered us to advocate for our shared interests, fostering solidarity and hopefully shaping the future of higher education in Europe for the better."*



**Erlend Aag,**

*Former Student Representative, Universitetet i Oslo*

## MILESTONE 3. LAUNCH OF THE ACADEMIC CHAIR PROGRAMME

Launched in 2021 to build lasting connections across Circle U.'s universities and disciplines, the Academic Chair Programme is the core of the alliance's academic vision. Designed to bridge education, research and innovation, the programme enables selected academics, known as Academic Chairs, to dedicate part of their time to developing joint activities.

Each partner university appoints its own Chairs, creating a dynamic network of scholars committed to collabora-

tion and societal engagement. Together, they drive interdisciplinary projects, engage students in research, and represent Circle U. within and beyond their institutions.

Through this programme, Circle U. is building an interconnected academic community that reflects the alliance's values of openness, diversity and collective innovation.

### Building a community and giving Circle U. a face

*"I joined Circle U. almost a year after the alliance began its activities, when I was asked to lead the team at King's responsible for developing and consolidating the Academic Chair Programme, launched in 2021. Working with Circle U. has been one of the most exciting experiences I've had in the field of internationalisation in recent years.*

*The greatest challenge was bringing together scholars from nine different countries, each with their own academic traditions and practices. For me, the most memorable moments were during our retreats, when we gathered with the Chairs and truly began building a community - giving Circle U. both an identity and a face."*

**Vinicius de Carvalho,**

Vice-Dean for Academic Chairs, King's College London.





## MILESTONE 4. INTEGRATING THE UNIVERSITY OF PISA AND THE UNIVERSITY OF VIENNA

Very quickly after being launched, Circle U. was approached by various universities which had a strong interest in joining the alliance and contributing to this remarkable dynamic. While Circle U. leadership was initially keen to focus on establishing strong foundations for the alliance, in 2021, two prestigious institutions - the University of Pisa and the University of Vienna - knocked on Circle U. doors. Because of the similarities, convergences, complementarities, but above all a strong willingness to build the university of the future, it was quite obvious that both universities would join the alliance.

The University of Pisa and the University of Vienna officially became members in January 2022, following a

unanimous vote by the Circle U. General Assembly, and the formal signing ceremony took place in Brussels on 25 March 2022. It is worth noting that if the universities were not beneficiaries of the ongoing Erasmus+ project, they were full members of Circle U. and the legal entity. The new members were thus in full capacity to participate in the strategic development of the alliance. Their inclusion brought new perspectives, expertise, and momentum to the alliance, reinforcing Circle U.'s mission to build an innovative and inclusive European university.

### Proud New Partners

*"I look back fondly on my five years as Vice-Rector for Research and International Affairs, which ended in autumn 2022. Those years brought many exciting projects, challenges to overcome, and fresh perspectives on science and society. One highlight I will always remember is joining Circle U.*

*When the European University Alliances were first launched in 2020, the University of Vienna was initially hesitant to join. However, the energy, enthusiasm, and remarkable progress of Circle U. quickly convinced us. By March 2022, we were proud and delighted to become part of the alliance and to contribute to its success.*

*It was a real privilege to lead the University of Vienna into Circle U. and to help shape such an ambitious and forward-looking project for European universities. Happy birthday, Circle U.!"*

**Jean-Robert Tyran,**

*Former Vice-Rector for Research and International*

*Affairs, Universität Wien*



## MILESTONE 5. A SEED-FUNDING SCHEME OPEN TO THE ENTIRE COMMUNITY

Since the launch of the alliance, the Circle U. leadership recognised the need for a tool to support bottom-up initiatives and give academics, researchers and students a real role in shaping the alliance. Initially funded by Oslo and then collectively by all member universities, the Circle U. seed-funding scheme is a tool aiming to stimulate bottom-up collaborations.

First tested in 2021 and open exclusively to the Circle U. academic chairs, the scheme was fully opened to the en-

tire Circle U. community in 2022, significantly expanding opportunities for academics, researchers, and students to develop joint initiatives across institutions. By supporting small-scale, time-limited projects in education, research, and student engagement, the scheme encourages new collaborations that go beyond the formal EU-funded deliverables, helping to anchor Circle U. more deeply within its member institutions.

### From Testing to Fully Designing the Call

*"When we started this initiative, we didn't quite know what to expect. As a coordinator, you are usually on the other side of the table, preparing project proposals – not designing the call itself. This time, it was different. There were many uncertainties and numerous stakeholders involved, but after lengthy preparations, we managed to shape the call."*

*We also learned from our mistakes: the second call was already improved, and since then, only minor adjustments have been needed. In 2025, we proudly launched the fourth call and we look forward to the new ideas that will emerge and be supported through the Circle U. seed funding."*

**Nikola Savic,**

Circle U. Coordinator at the Univerzitet u Beogradu



## MILESTONE 6. CIRCLE U. 2030 - A NEW CHAPTER

In 2023, Circle U. entered a new phase with the successful selection of its "Circle U. 2030" proposal under the new Erasmus+ European Universities call. With a €12.8 million grant for four years, this new funding phase is building on the achievements of the pilot projects to deepen and scale up cooperation in education, research, innovation, and mobility. "Circle U. 2030" lays the foundations for a long-term joint ecosystem, introducing new structures such as the Open Campus, a fourth Knowledge Hub, and several support platforms, while increasing the number of opportunities for students and staff across the alliance.



### Rome was not built in a day, and neither is a European University Alliance

*"Since 2020, Circle U. has been built brick by brick through testing, piloting, and creating the foundations of a shared ecosystem for education, research, and innovation.*

*While the pilot projects (Erasmus+ and Horizon 2020 "SwafS") were still being implemented, preparations began in late 2022 to secure long-term funding for the next phase. A task force with representatives from all partners was set up to develop the Circle U. 2030 proposal. Through intensive consultations with the Management Board, CUSU, university coordinators, and colleagues, a shared vision took shape - including the creation of the Open Campus, new support platforms such as CU.til, CU.mil, CU.ecr and the InCU.bator, and a clear structure for flagship educational formats.*

*The vision for an Open School, later becoming the Circle U. Open Campus, was unfolding during several online workshops and ultimately at the joint Management Board/CUSU workshop in Paris in September 2022. CUSU representatives were encouraging this education platform to become a "go to" place for all student to pick attractive and easily accessible courses and mobility options.*

*Despite a tight timeline, the proposal was successfully submitted by the 31 January 2023 deadline. In June, the European Commission awarded Circle U. an excellent evaluation score and confirmed its funding. With this strong endorsement, we launched the new phase in November 2023, ready to scale up, broaden our scope, and make Circle U. a lasting reality."*



**Mette Oftebro,**  
Circle U. Coordinator at the Universitetet i Oslo

## MILESTONE 7. A NEW GATEWAY FOR LEARNING: THE OPEN CAMPUS

In late 2023, Circle U. officially launched the Open Campus, a digital entry point bringing together the alliance's growing portfolio of educational opportunities. Designed as a shared space where students can easily access joint courses, programmes, and learning formats, the Open Campus represents an important milestone towards creating a truly integrated European university. To guide its academic development, Professor Eivind Engebretsen (University of Oslo) was appointed as the first Dean of the Open Campus, taking on responsibility for shaping its educational profile and ensuring its successful implementation.

### Open Campus: a Simple and Flexible Portal

*"For the Management Board having the responsibility to make the basic design decisions for the Open Campus, the choice was obvious: make it as simple as possible! This was the logic leading up to the premises that it was enough to have two out of nine partners collaborating to provide a specific offer; that one partner has to take on the role as an administrative coordinator for any study offers provided; and that the digital infrastructure behind the Open Campus should be as "light" as possible and based on the existing learning management platforms at each partner.*

*The Management Board also realised that the build-up and further development of the Open Campus needed both hands-on academic coordination and some quality control. Deciding on hiring an academic dean for Open Campus thus became the natural next step, and with Prof. Eivind Engebretsen taking on the role, the alliance suddenly found out that it is indeed possible to combine being an enthusiastic promotor of the Open Campus, having an eye for working around administrative bottlenecks, and providing academic and pedagogical insights that inspires colleagues to be creative when new study offers are to be created.*

*As the Open Campus is further developed in the years to come, I believe the future success is found in the flexibility of the study offers developed by Circle U. Our alliance counts over 500.000 students. Not all students can be mobile, not all students want to be mobile, not all students need ECTS-credits, and far from all students want to enrol in a full Circle U. bachelor's or master's programme. But all students need international exposure, impulses and inspiration! Adding a European dimension to whatever they are studying can make a difference for*

*them, and with a scaled-up Open Campus ahead, I am sure that all interested students can find something they want to sign up for. Hopefully, the Open Campus can, in this way, also be a site for experimentation and renewal of our existing modes and ways of organising study offers - inspiring teachers as well as students!"*

**Bjørn Stensaker,**

*Former Chairman of Circle U. Management Board, Universitetet i Oslo*





## MILESTONE 8. NEW PLATFORMS DRIVING INNOVATION AND MULTILINGUALISM

In early 2024, Circle U. expanded its joint ecosystem with the launch of two new flagship platforms: CU.mil (Multilingualism, Interculturality and Language Lab) and CU.til (Teaching Innovation Lab). Bringing together experts, teachers, researchers, and students from all nine partner universities, these platforms strengthen the alliance's

capacity to enhance multilingualism, interculturality, and pedagogical innovation and support the various components of our ecosystem to embrace and achieve these ambitions. Their creation represents an important development in making Circle U.'s educational opportunities more inclusive, innovative, and collaborative.

### CU.mil: a windMIL at our backs

*"When CU.mil came into existence, we didn't know each other yet, but we were all eager to contribute to a European dynamic and mission we truly believed in: bringing more linguistic and cultural diversity into our alliance. Our name had been decided before we came together, but—oh, don't we love it! We quickly became 'MILlers', building mini-MILs of ideas and grinding out creative solutions together.*

*There were, of course, a few project deliverables and 'MILestones' to meet, but the carte blanche spirit we felt was like a windmill at our backs. We milled through challenges, sprinkled in a bit of humour, and discovered that trust and shared purpose can turn any small spark into a big movement. Those first days set the scene for what CU.mil is today: collaborative, dynamic, and always turning."*

**Fanny Meunier,**

Academic Director CU.mil, UCLouvain



## MILESTONE 9. A CENTRAL OFFICE TO SUPPORT THE ALLIANCE

The creation of the Circle U. Office in Brussels marked a turning point in the alliance's institutional development. Building on the decision to establish Circle U. as a legal entity under Belgian law in 2021, the office was set up to provide a permanent and strategic backbone for the alliance's operations.

Led by the Secretary General, the Circle U. Office plays a central role in coordinating the day-to-day management of the alliance, supporting its governance bodies, and en-

suring that its activities align with long-term objectives. It also represents Circle U. in Brussels, facilitating dialogue with the European Commission, other alliances, and key higher education stakeholders.

By 2024, the office had expanded into a small but effective team, combining expertise in communication, monitoring and evaluation, and operations. Together, they support the universities in implementing their shared vision and maintaining the alliance's momentum.

### It felt like launching a start-up

*"The official launch of the Circle U. Office has undoubtedly been a transformative moment, not only for me as Secretary General, but for the alliance as a whole. When I took up the position in September 2021, the office (essentially the result of establishing the legal entity) was little more than an empty shell. There was no dedicated staff, no operational budget, and no fixed premises.*

*With the strong support of the Management Board, we began planning how to turn the concept into a functioning structure focused on supporting the alliance's long-term strategic development. I vividly recall the excitement of those early days—it felt like launching a start-up: identifying our needs, preparing a budget, ensuring compliance with Belgian law, and defining new roles.*

*In April 2024, the Circle U. Office officially came into being. Three new colleagues joined me: Audrey Sullivan*

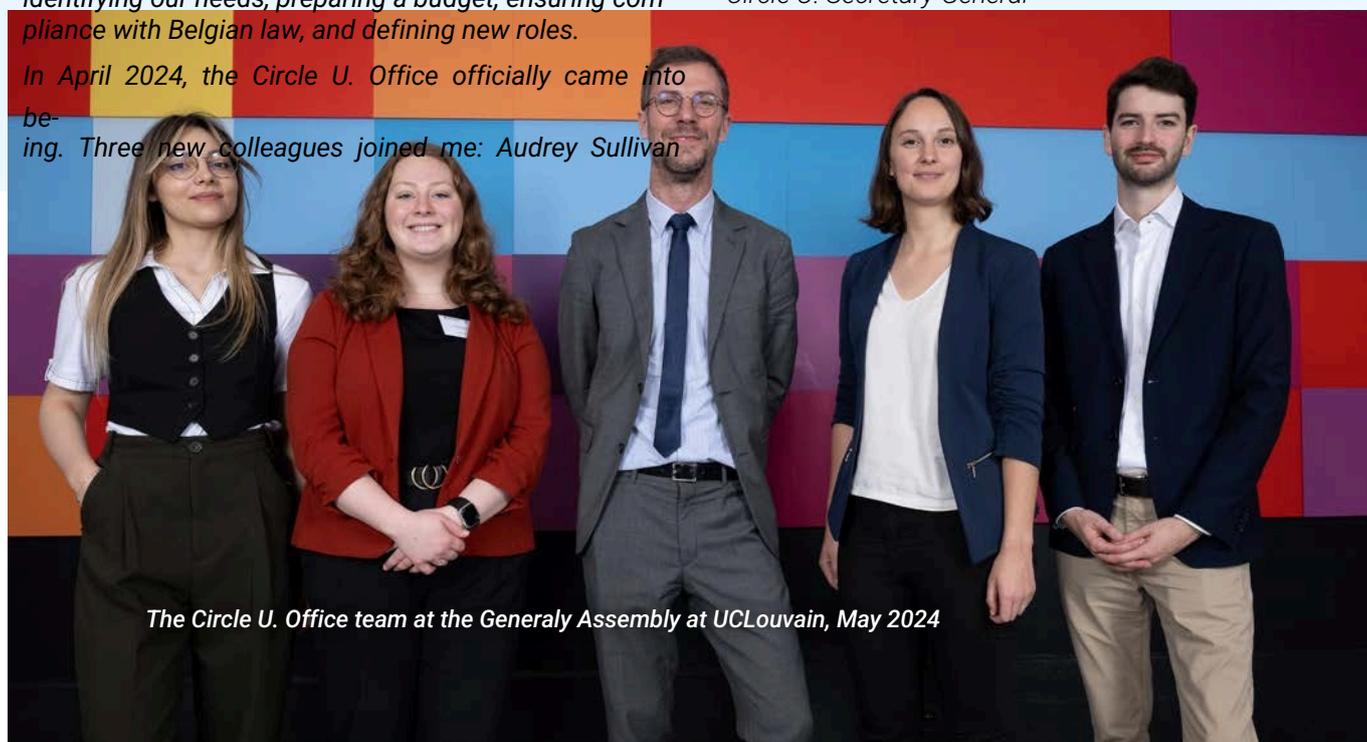
*as Senior MEL Officer, Margo D'Heygere as Communications Officer, and Giacomo Musicco as Operations Assistant, a veritable Swiss Army knife overseeing daily management, decision-making processes, and support schemes.*

*A month later, in May 2024, our leadership—rectors, presidents, vice-rectors, project coordinators, academics, and students—gathered in Brussels to*

*symbolically inaugurate the Circle U. Office. Since then, the office has worked tirelessly to strengthen cooperation, enhance visibility, support evidence-based decisions, and represent the alliance effectively in the European higher education landscape."*

**Kevin Guillaume,**

*Circle U. Secretary General*



The Circle U. Office team at the General Assembly at UCLouvain, May 2024

## MILESTONE 10. CIRCLE U. AT THE FOREFRONT OF AI

In 2024, Circle U. took a major step forward with the creation of its fourth Knowledge Hub, dedicated to Artificial Intelligence (AI). Led jointly by the University of Pisa and the University of Belgrade, this new hub positions the alliance at the forefront of one of the most transformative fields of our time. Its aim is to bring together researchers, educators, and students from diverse disciplines to explore the opportunities and challenges of AI in education, research, and society.

The launch was marked by a workshop at Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin and by discussions at the General Assembly in London, where AI featured prominently on the agenda. With its strong interdisciplinary approach, the AI Knowledge Hub will contribute to developing joint research initiatives, new educational formats such as double degrees and summer schools, and public discussions on the ethical, legal, and societal dimensions of AI.

### A Multidisciplinary Journey to Shape the Future

*“AI is becoming increasingly pervasive and represents a breakthrough not only in science and technology, but also in society and education. The creation of the Knowledge Hub on AI has positioned the Alliance at the forefront of societal and educational transformation. What made this moment key was the recognition that AI is not just a technological advance, but a multidisciplinary journey where experts from diverse fields work together to design systems that enhance, rather than replace, human intelligence - fostering a beneficial co-evolution with humanity.”*

**Francesco Marcelloni,**

*Academic Director, Knowledge Hub on Artificial Intelligence, Università di Pisa*





Students at UCLouvain, credit Jacky Delorme

## LOOKING FORWARD: 2025 AND BEYOND

The activity report offers a comprehensive overview of our achievements, progress and challenges over the past academic year. As we prepare to celebrate the fifth anniversary of Circle U. this November, it is also an excellent moment to reflect on the remarkable journey we have undertaken over the past five years.

From the outset, all nine universities have been committed to a dynamic that goes far beyond a “simple” EU collaborative project. They are engaged in a process that they believe will bring significant changes to their core missions in education, research and innovation, as well as societal engagement. This requires a long-term, strategic and sustainable vision for Circle U. and its future, in a context that presents both internal and external opportunities and challenges. In the months ahead, several key developments are expected, which will likely influence, shape and even steer the alliance’s trajectory.

We are now approaching the mid-point of the Circle U. 2030 Erasmus+ project. In November 2023, we entered a new phase of our alliance with the launch of this project. It is now time to take stock of our progress, report to the European Commission, and begin preparing for the next phase beyond 2027. Many colleagues are actively engaged in this demanding reporting exercise, which will continue until the end of December.

This exercise once again underlines that Circle U. will only succeed if it becomes embedded within our universities - across faculties, departments, research institutes, laboratories, and professional and administrative services. Circle U. may not directly reach the half million students and 60,000 staff who make up our nine universities, but the opportunities it offers must be well known and accessible to all. Beyond opportunities, Circle U. should drive systemic change within institutions, creating a snowball effect that strengthens other collaborations, partnerships, projects and initiatives. Joint efforts to embed Circle U. will remain essential in the months and years ahead, and we are already seeing many promising local initiatives to support this integration.

As our universities work to secure the financial sustainability of Circle U., the continued support of the European Union remains vital. In July, the European Commission, through its President Ursula von der Leyen, launched discussions on the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) for 2028-2034. With an ambitious budget proposal, the Commission has reaffirmed its commitment to supporting universities, alliances, and the wider higher education and research sector to ensure the capacity to respond to current and future challenges. It has proposed doubling the budget for the next Horizon Europe programme to nearly EUR 150 billion, and increasing the Erasmus+ budget by 50% to EUR 48 billion. In addition, the proposed European Competitiveness Fund would play a key role in boosting

EU competitiveness by facilitating access to multiple funding opportunities through a single gateway.

Despite these very positive signals, the road to finalising the budget remains long. Intense discussions and negotiations between the Council, Member States and the European Parliament are expected through to the end of 2026 and the start of 2027. While Circle U. does not primarily engage in policy advocacy, we will continue to work closely with other alliances through FOREU4ALL and with key university networks such as The Guild, the Coimbra Group and EUA to ensure the continuity of EU support for the alliances. This is essential, especially as many European countries face challenging financial situations with significant cuts to higher education and research budgets.

Looking ahead, the strong foundations laid over the past five years and the many achievements of the past academic year give us every reason to be confident and optimistic. Circle U. has evolved from an ambitious idea into a vibrant alliance, fuelled by the commitment and shared vision of our communities. With the continued engagement of our member universities and the support of the EU, we can build on these five years to advance our transformative journey and shape the university of the future: an inclusive, open, innovative, agile, research-intensive and interdisciplinary alliance, ready to meet the challenges of today and tomorrow.





**Circle U.**  
European University Alliance