



**Circle U.**  
European University Alliance

# **Vision and mission statement of Circle U.**

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**Towards 2030 and beyond**





**“[...]A new vision for education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is taking shape.**

**Above all, quality education must support the development of the individual learner throughout his or her life.**

**It must help people learn how to learn, with a focus on problem-solving and collaboration.**

**It must provide the foundations for learning, from reading, writing and mathematics to scientific, digital, social and emotional skills.**

**It must also develop students' capacity to adapt to the rapidly changing world of work.**

**It must be accessible to all from the earliest stages and throughout their lives.**

**And it must help us learn to live and work together, and to understand ourselves and our responsibilities to each other and to our planet.**

**At a time of rampant misinformation, climate denial and attacks on human rights, we need education systems that distinguish fact from conspiracy, instil respect for science, and celebrate humanity in all its diversity.”**

António Guterres  
Secretary General's opening remarks at  
the Transforming Education Summit,  
19. September 2022

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# Our vision

**We,**

Aarhus Universitet (Denmark), Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin (Germany), King's College London (United Kingdom), Università di Pisa (Italy), Universität Wien (Austria), Université catholique de Louvain (Belgium), Université Paris Cité (France), Universitetet i Oslo (Norway) and Univerzitet u Beogradu (Serbia),

**are Circle U.**

**A research-intensive and interdisciplinary alliance working to provide outstanding education, research and innovation to contribute to more sustainable, democratic and healthier societies.**

Our academic institutions have a long tradition of achieving societal impact by linking education, research and innovation. We are joining forces to achieve a common goal: our students, researchers, staff, and network of partners from civil society, businesses and the public sector will jointly develop competencies, skills, knowledge, and initiatives to tackle global challenges and reinforce our academic and scientific cooperation.

**We share the same values.**

We are like-minded, comprehensive and research-intensive universities representing a variety of cultures, historical contexts, languages, and geographical areas. Our alliance consists of universities from European countries within and outside the European Union, contributing to shaping a multifaceted identity rooted in the same European democratic values. Circle U. is based on the following principles, which we apply both in our governance and in the development of our initiatives. We are committed to **inclusivity**, providing equal access to opportunities for our diverse student and academic communities. We value **diversity**, promoting dialogue and encouraging a plurality of views and approaches throughout the alliance, and respecting institutional autonomy. We foster an environment of **co-creation**: students, researchers, staff and non-academic partners all play a crucial role in the process of shaping Circle U. Our alliance is built on **academic freedom, integrity, responsibility and sustainability**. Each university plays a key role in relevant national and regional higher education and research landscapes and strives to guarantee open access to its scientific contributions and resources.

# Unfolding our vision

As the world around us becomes more fractured, unsettled and unsustainable, never has protecting the planet and furthering the European project been so important. The central challenges Europe and the world face – poverty, inequality, climate change and the need for a green transition, conflicts and war, migration, a growing digital divide, health inequity, and challenges to democracy – can only be resolved through inclusive collective action.

Circle U. aims to be a key contributor to resolving these challenges by jointly producing and sharing knowledge, as well as by ensuring that:

- Students and staff have the skillset, mindset and values to use their knowledge to contribute to society, and to cooperate across divides, disciplines, sectors and national borders.
- Students and staff are able to interact meaningfully with public, private and civil society actors to mobilize knowledge into transformative actions for a sustainable society.

We want to join forces to develop a new model where education, research, innovation and service to society are better connected. We have worked closely with students, staff, academics and external stakeholders during the pilot project to test and identify new challenge-based educational formats and ways of working together to make Circle U. an international, inclusive, innovative and agile university ecosystem. We are jointly committed to bringing about this transformational change to create a truly flagship European university. Whilst continuously testing out new concepts in higher education and research cooperation, we will also scale up and offer a range of flexible learning opportunities in line with the continuous reskilling and lifelong learning agenda:

- We will provide a new learning platform that offers opportunities for formal and informal learning in flexible ways.
- We will ensure that all Circle U. educational offers are linked to and based on state-of-the-art research developments, benefitting learners and society.

- We will encourage and engage in co-creation, driving innovations in learning and in the application of knowledge to solve societal challenges.
- We will serve as convenors for open and inclusive multi-stakeholder conversations, disseminating and reflecting on ideas and solutions to build a better future.

In these ways, we will continue working to empower our alliance's 500,000 students

and 65,000 staff to make a powerful contribution to a sustainable society.

Our vision is based on common values and ambitions: that Circle U. will be an inclusive, research-intensive and interdisciplinary European university where students, staff and partners from civil society, businesses and the public sector collaborate to jointly develop competencies and solutions for a healthier, more democratic and prosperous world.

# Achieving our vision

By 2030, Circle U. will have become a truly integrated European University, where students and staff across Europe work seamlessly together on the basis of a joint framework of policies, procedures and infrastructures.

Being able to see the world through the eyes of others is a fundamental skill that we seek to develop in our students and staff. International learning experiences are of paramount importance to allow students and staff to work and communicate effectively in a multicultural environment. Not everyone is able to take part in these kinds of learning experiences today, due to personal, financial, physical and other obstacles. However, more than ever, international collaboration is needed to tackle the major challenges that Europe and the world face, since these challenges are all transnational.

We will ensure that Circle U. is an **inclusive** alliance offering international experience for as many students and staff as possible. This will be based on joint policies, initiatives to support underrepresented

groups, new administrative procedures, and IT infrastructures that will enable and simplify physical and/or virtual mobility. Physical mobility will therefore be complemented by well-developed infrastructure for blended learning, digital learning cooperation and virtual mobility, thus broadening access to learning opportunities. Such inclusive educational opportunities will contribute to Europe's democracy, social cohesion, competitiveness and innovative capacity. No potential should be wasted, regardless of ethnic or social background, gender or geography.

Respecting the various needs of learners and teachers in a more complex world requires more **diverse** learning processes and opportunities. To be able to realize our aim of being inclusive, we will develop more flexible educational offers – including both formal education and informal opportunities for lifelong learners. We will develop integrated, interdisciplinary programmes; shorter and more intensive courses at all tertiary educational levels; as well as open courses and

challenge-based learning opportunities that are accessible across institutional and national borders. This will lead to a significant increase in opportunities for our students and staff to gain international exposure, moving towards our longer-term vision of securing an international experience for everyone.

We have created Circle U. for our students, and our students have been central in developing the alliance in the pilot phase. Through the establishment of CUSU – the Circle U. Student Union – our students have been involved and engaged in the strategic development of the alliance and in numerous initiatives. This emphasis on **co-creation** is a central characteristic of Circle U., and goes beyond our partnership with the students. By continuing to work together – staff, students and associated partners – we will develop new learning opportunities benefitting society at large and involving public, private and civic stakeholders. In working

towards this goal, we will enlarge the network of students formally involved in Circle U. initiatives, and continue creating new opportunities for collaboration with associate partners and external stakeholders.

Circle U. is an alliance built by like-minded universities, driven by our strong traditions in research that have fuelled our successful contributions to society for centuries: fostering the highest quality standards in research, teaching critical thinking and scientific methods, gaining new insights by crossing disciplinary boundaries, bridging the past and the present, and reaching out to external partners to transfer our knowledge to the regional, national and international levels. We share the foundations of **academic freedom, integrity, responsibility and sustainability**, and we are committed to bringing our communities together around these values.

# Our mission

**Circle U. aims to act as a catalyst for change by providing high-quality, inclusive, shared and diverse international teaching and learning experiences.**

Together, we want to take internationalisation to a new level. We want to further diversify the educational opportunities we offer by developing innovative teaching and learning formats that foster research-based learning, interdisciplinary approaches and societal engagement. We are committed to providing varied opportunities for mobility, including virtual, blended and short-term mobility, and for networking within and outside academia. We aspire to develop joint teaching structures, as well as ensuring the accessibility of research infrastructure and resources for our academic and wider communities.

By building links between our campuses and networks, we aim to create a unique learning and research environment that fosters transferable knowledge for societal change.

Circle U. consists of equally dedicated universities. We all embrace the transformative power of our alliance. Our alliance is grounded in principles that contribute to shaping a sustainable society: inclusivity, diversity, co-creation, academic freedom, integrity and responsibility. 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.

# Visualising our mission

The long-term success of Circle U. will hinge on our ability to integrate education, research and innovation in service to society, and on our ambitions to connect our regional ecosystems to deepen our connections with society in the years to come. Our three key interdisciplinary platforms – Knowledge Hubs – focusing on **Climate, Democracy** and **Global Health** will be further strengthened with educational opportunities and dedicated staff, and we will add another Knowledge Hub in the next period – based on a consultative and academically driven process within Circle U.

Together with other key platforms of Circle U. – the Teaching Innovation Lab, the Multilingualism, Interculturality and Languages Lab, the InCU.bator and the Early-Career Researchers Community of Practice – we will have an infrastructure that builds closer links between education, research, innovation and service to society.

To fulfil our mission, we have linked our various platforms in a joint ecosystem – an Open Campus (see figure 1):

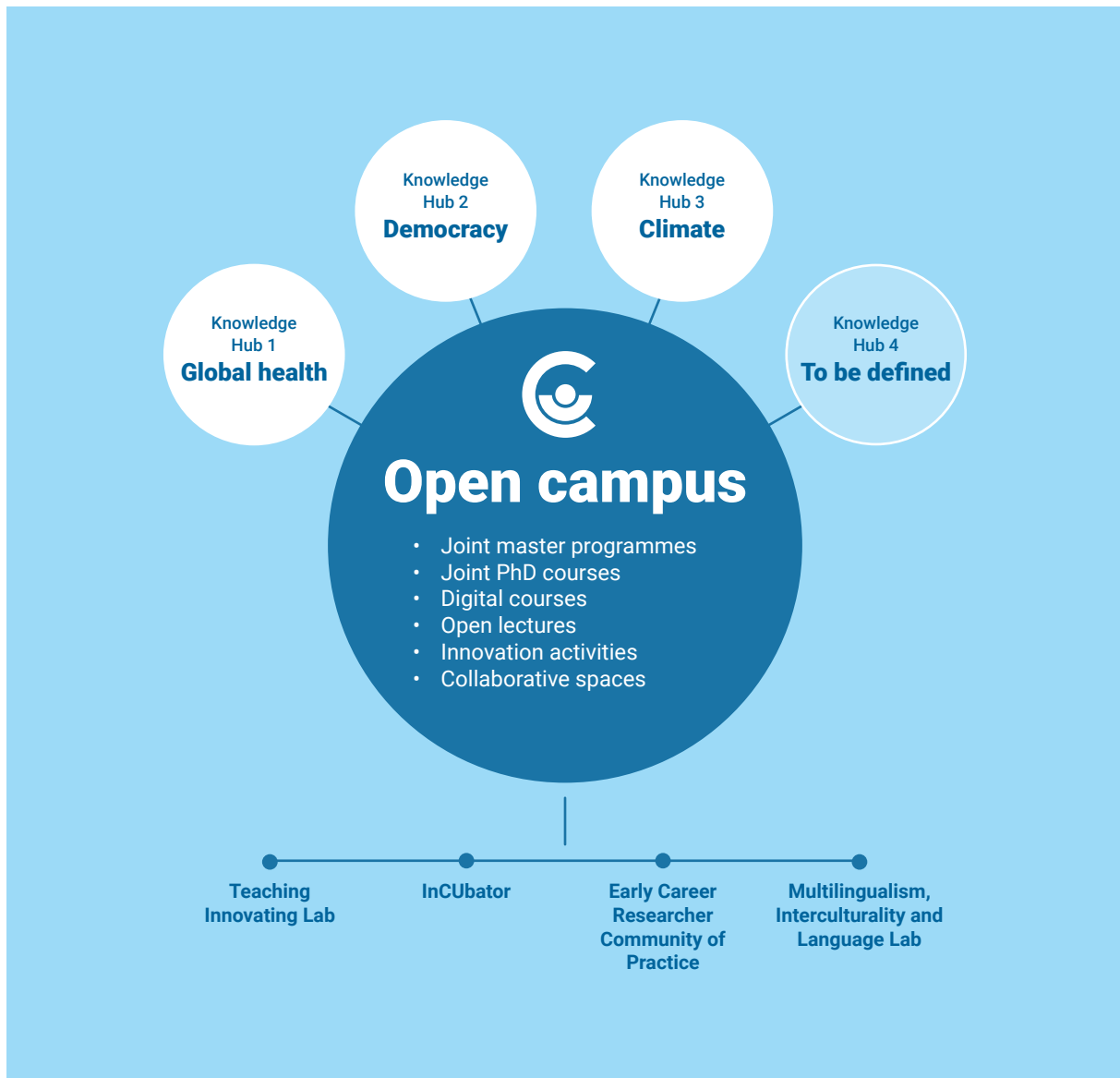


Figure 1: Circle U. Open Campus and related platforms

# Implementing our mission

## The Circle U. Open Campus

Circle U. is home to almost 500,000 students with different needs and ambitions. It is also an alliance that attracts and embeds other learners, and has numerous connections to policy-making, the economy, civil society and culture. This complex web of actors and interests requires varied, open and flexible learning and knowledge development opportunities – offered through our **Circle U. Open Campus**, which serves as the entry point for all educational opportunities in Circle U. This digital, integrated learning platform will showcase joint learning opportunities for all our learners and stakeholders, as well as designing learning content and accelerating the uptake of innovative pedagogies in formal and informal educational opportunities. The Open Campus will be at the heart of Circle U., linking together the various other platforms, including services to support mobility and aid administrative and technical implementation (see figure 1). When building the platform, our administrative and technical staff will draw on best practices from the pilot phase and ensure solid and agile cross-institutional operations in support of our vision and mission.

Different types of learning opportunities have been tested in the pilot phase

or proposed during the consultation phase. While there should be flexibility as to the content of the Open Campus, it will contain selected **flagship learning experiences**:

- At least **three joint degrees** across and beyond the themes of the Knowledge Hubs
- A **set of bachelor modules on sustainability** across and beyond the Knowledge Hubs which can be integrated into various study programs
- A range of **short-term and blended flagship learning formats** such as the Circle U. summer and winter schools, Circle U. conversations, Circle U. Open Courses, Circle U. Challenges, and Circle U. language and intercultural skills modules – offering formal and informal learning opportunities.

Besides the flagships, the Open Campus will also provide space for bottom-up initiatives, and will be the platform for facilitating **Circle U. Exchange Programs** (for early career researchers), and **“traditional” Erasmus+ activities**: student mobility for study abroad; student mobility for traineeships; staff mobility for teaching; staff mobility for training and blended intensive programmes.

## The Circle U. Platforms

We will build on and strengthen our three existing **Knowledge Hubs** on **Global Health, Climate and Democracy**, pursuing their overarching mission to tackle big societal challenges through research-based, inter- and transdisciplinary activities. The Hubs host activities created with and for various stakeholders (academics, researchers, students, global partners, associated partners) in order to empower them to make big societal impact. These are spaces shared across the 9 universities that take an inter- and transdisciplinary approach to their topics, going beyond what is possible within every single university. The Hubs will be reinforced with more academic chairs (see below) and more educational content, and we will initiate a process that would lead to the creation of **a fourth Knowledge Hub**. More emphasis will be given to actions needed to create impact, including developing a disciplinary/transdisciplinary mindset, incubation of projects, support for project development, dissemination, implementation of solutions in natural environments and policy development. The Hubs also play an essential role in developing new innovative teaching and learning methods.

### **The Teaching Innovation Lab (CU.til)**

is an arena for knowledge-based innovation and development in teaching and learning, which gathers both academic and technical expertise. In collaboration with other academic initiatives in Circle U., the CU.til will develop and implement new modes and formats in teaching and learning. The CU.til will connect existing institutional Teaching and Learning Centres at Circle U. universities, and build competence among teachers and students, together with tools and solutions for innovative pedagogies.

### **The Multilingualism, Interculturality and Language Lab (CU.mil)**

will develop a diverse range of courses and language activities within the Circle U. Open Campus, including preparatory training for physical, blended and virtual mobility. The CU.mil will also develop smaller pilot projects to foster a multilingual working environment within Circle U., while adapting to existing and novel technologies in teaching and learning.

**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 will contain 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.

**The Community of Practice for Early Career Researchers (CU.ecr)** is a support service that provides early-career researchers with opportunities for networking, exchange, competence-building, mobility and for developing and maturing their research interests in close collaboration with colleagues from Circle U. The activities will be characterised by co-creative modes and the needs defined by participants.

## The Circle U. Chairs and Fellows Programme

The Circle U. Chairs and Fellows programme is the backbone of our alliance ecosystem, ensuring strong, sustainable and concrete connections between academics, researchers, students, and associated and global partners. It is our academic chairs and fellows who are the enablers of our vision, mission and building blocks. They drive collaborations across the alliance to ensure that

the alliance reaches its full potential, as well as helping embed Circle U. in our communities and involving other stakeholders. In the next phase, the number of academic chairs will be expanded to 54, and new types of chairs and fellows will be added:

- The **Academic Chairs**: their main mission is to initiate, support, facilitate or coordinate new collaborations in our various platforms.
- The **Student Fellows**: their main mission is to initiate, support, facilitate or coordinate joint student activities, and to foster student participation in the Circle U. initiatives.
- The **Associate Partner Fellows**: their main mission is to initiate, support, facilitate or coordinate new collaborations involving non-academic stakeholders.
- The **Global Fellows**: their main mission is to bring a global perspective in the Circle U. initiatives and to contribute to the implementation of the global strategy of the alliance.

The programme and its new components (student fellows, associate partner fellows and global fellows) will be developed gradually, in order to ensure that we can meet the expected objectives while maintaining high quality. The Circle U. Academy will consist of current and former chairs and fellows, providing continuity and creativity to the programme as members take on roles as mentors and contribute to the programme's development.

### The Circle U. Funding Schemes

Circle U. will provide some financial support to individuals or projects to stimulate new collaborations and activities across the alliance. Different funding schemes will be developed, including:

- Travel bursaries for students and staff
- Seed funding schemes encouraging collaborations across the university community
- Circle U. summer/winter school support
- Circle U. internships
- Mobility schemes for Early Career Researchers

### The Circle U. Office

The Circle U. Office will be strengthened to support the Secretary General and to support all aspects of governance, including: legal matters related to the Circle U. legal entity (established as an international not-for-profit association under Belgian law, AISBL), liaison with the EU entities, liaison with other alliances, communication and dissemination. The office ensures the long-term and sustainable development of the alliance, beyond the ongoing and future EU-funded projects. A membership fee will be introduced in Circle U., partly to support the office function and partly to support the proposed funding schemes.

# From project to permanence

Over the last years, Circle U. has enlarged to nine universities, has recruited a Secretary General, established a governance framework, and built trust and mutual understanding despite pandemic and post-pandemic challenges. Rectors, Presidents, academic leaders, students and administrative staff have come together across institutions, discussing new ideas to overcome obstacles and find solutions, on many occasions and in various formats. Our students are at the heart of our alliance, and have been involved since the beginning in the development of the Circle U. concept – and through the Circle U. Student Union (CUSU), they have participated in developing our new vision and mission, and the opportunities that will emerge in our Open Campus. They will continue to have active roles in the governance and the implementation of the alliance.

We have received renewed commitments from our associated public and private partners: enthusiastic civil society organisations, hospitals, city administrations and other public authorities, businesses and entrepreneurial initiatives are committed to increasing their role in Circle U. These stakeholders provide us with new and relevant ideas and insights we are eager to take forward in realizing our ambitions. Along with our committed staff and our students, we have evaluated and learned from the pilot project – and we are sure that our practices of sharing and

co-creation are the best way forward and hallmarks of the alliance.

During the past decades, EU Research and Innovation programmes have fostered transnational research collaborations in an unprecedented way, and Erasmus programmes have secured lively student and staff exchanges. However successful, these collaborations have been moving on separate tracks. The European Universities Initiative and the pilot phase have demonstrated that the alliances are a game changer in the European Higher Education and Research Area.

But the pilot phase has also shown that, as an alliance, we are definitely moving from shorter-term, project-based collaboration to longer-term, sustainable and integrated collaboration directly and effectively linked to European ideas and values. This collaboration is embedded in all dimensions and missions of our universities and has an impact for our communities and beyond.

With this updated vision and mission statement, we reiterate our commitment to this long-term transformational process that goes far beyond any EU-funded project. As we learn from the pilot phase, we will now further develop, scale up and realize our joint ambition.

**The future is now  
– The future is Circle U.**



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