Circle U.
European University Alliance

2026 Activity Report

Academic Year 2025-2026

Circle U. AISBL
Boulevard Pachéco, 34
1000 Bruxelles

www.circle-u.eu
Info@circle-u.eu

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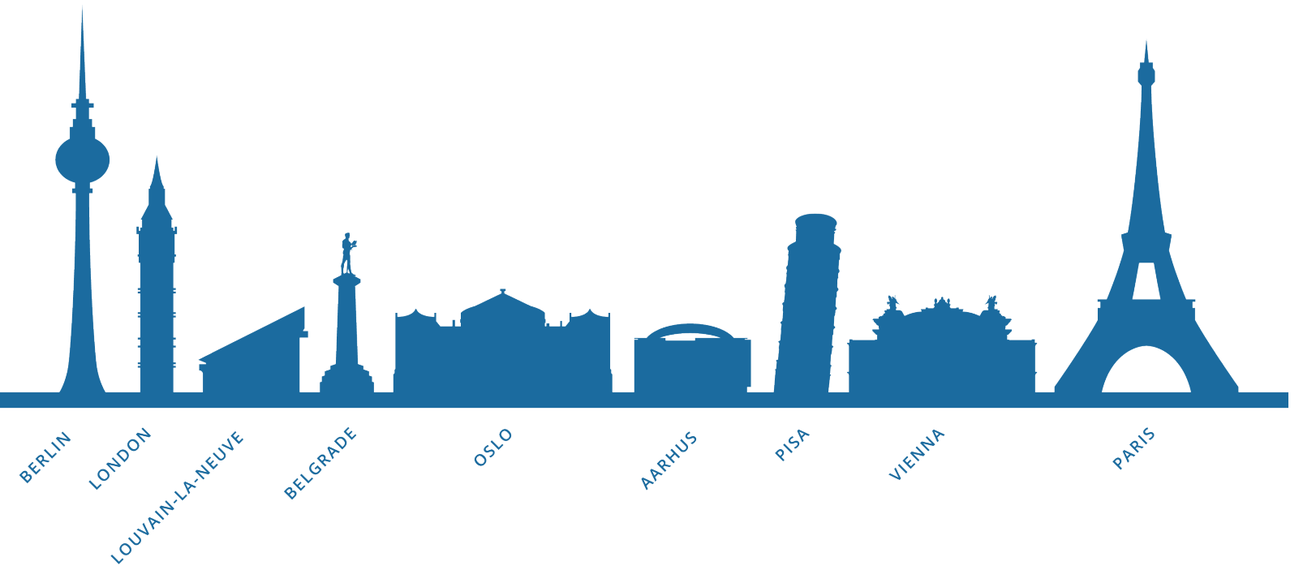


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FOREWORD

"Looking back at yet another year of collaboration between our nine Circle U. universities, it more than ever feels appropriate to reflect on what it is that sustains our alliance. For two years, we have witnessed the dramatic developments in Serbia. What started as student protests against corruption was met with government repression, severely threatening, in the process, the institutional integrity of the University of Belgrade. The situation has reminded us of the vulnerability of academic freedom and the necessity to stand together in its defence.

Circle U.'s mission is to provide European higher education, equipping our academic and local communities to productively engage with the challenges of our time. Our ability to do so is fundamentally based on the European freedoms and values we stand for: the freedom of teaching and research, cooperation, non-discrimination and democratic governance. With this report, we are proud to present numerous activities and achievements which reflect our shared commitment to these principles, today and for the years ahead."

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


Credit: Philipp Plum

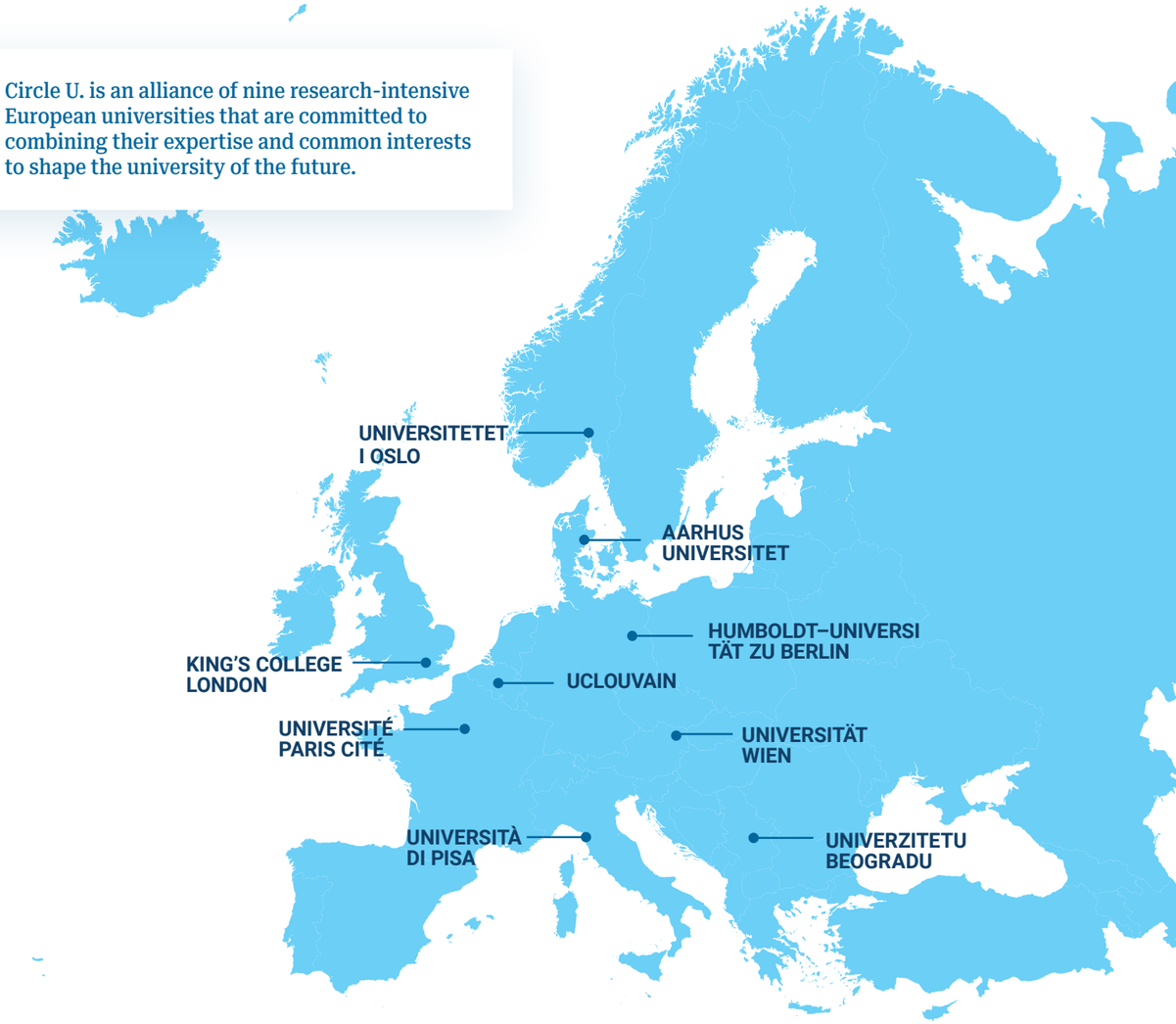


"This year marked the mid-term of Circle U.'s current funding period, providing an important opportunity to take stock of our progress and assess the results achieved so far. The positive outcome of Circle U.'s mid-term review by the European Commission is both a recognition of how far we have come and a valuable guide for the next stage of our work. The reviewers highlighted our very good progress, our potential to serve as a role model in European higher education, and important strengths in our governance, sustainability structures, Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning framework, and digital platforms. Just as importantly, their recommendations give us a clear agenda: to sharpen our strategic narrative, strengthen how we measure and demonstrate impact, clarify key concepts and responsibilities, and communicate our achievements more convincingly. We will use this feedback to make Circle U. stronger, more focused and more demonstrably impactful, and to ensure that we are well positioned for the alliance's next phase, including future funding opportunities."

Giovanni Federico 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 international 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
University of Pisa



Secretary General

Kevin Guillaume
Circle U. Office



Dean of the Open Campus

Eivind Engebretsen
University of Oslo



Vice-Dean for Academic Chairs

Vinicius de Carvalho
King's College London



Circle U. General Assembly at the University of Vienna, November 2025.
Credits: Felix Fischbacher

PARTNER UNIVERSITIES

AARHUS UNIVERSITY

universität wien

KING'S College LONDON

UNIVERSITY OF OSLO

UNIVERSITY OF BELGRADE

UNIVERSITÀ DI PISA

Université Paris Cité

UCLouvain

HUMBOLDT-UNIVERSITÄT ZU BERLIN

ECOSYSTEM

The Circle U. Ecosystem encompasses the core structures enabling our alliance to create offers and activities. At its centre, the Open Campus connects students to opportunities, while the Knowledge Hubs and Platforms support innovation, collaboration, and new teaching and learning methods on specific topics.

At its centre, the Circle U. Open Campus serves as a digital university campus and a gateway for students seeking diverse educational opportunities within Circle U.

The Knowledge Hubs Platforms

AI KNOWLEDGE HUB

The AI Hub 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.

Lead: University of Pisa and University of Belgrade

CLIMATE KNOWLEDGE HUB

The Climate Hub connects researchers, lecturers 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.

Lead: Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin

DEMOCRACY KNOWLEDGE HUB

The Democracy hub 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 civic engagement.

Lead: University of Oslo

GLOBAL HEALTH KNOWLEDGE HUB

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

Lead: Université Paris Cité

Platforms

CIRCLE U. MULTILINGUALISM, INTERCULTURALITY & LANGUAGE LAB (CU.MIL)

The CU.mil aims to promote linguistic and cultural diversity across Circle U. It offers formal and informal learning opportunities in the fields of multilingualism, interculturality and language learning. In addition, it seeks to drive research in these fields, to develop multilingual and intercultural competences and to enhance knowledge for all students and staff at Circle U. universities.

Lead: UCLouvain

INCU.BATOR

The InCU.bator is a platform 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.

Lead: Aarhus University

CIRCLE U. TEACHING INNOVATION LAB (CU.TIL)

The CU.til is an arena for knowledge-based pedagogical innovation and the development of evidence-based educational practices (EBE), 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.

Lead: UCLouvain

CIRCLE U. EARLY-CAREER RESEARCHERS (CU.ECR)

The CU.ecr offers a unique platform for sharing best practices and addressing challenges related to the training, mobility, and career development of Early-Career Researchers (ECRs) within our universities.

Lead: University of Vienna

CIRCLE U. IN NUMBERS

9 UNIVERSITIES

478,467 STUDENTS

- Aarhus University: **37,000**
- University of Belgrade: **90,000**
- Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin: **36,991**
- King's College London: **42,000**
- UCLouvain: **42,617**
- University of Oslo: **27,400**
- Université Paris Cité: **68,000**
- University of Pisa: **47,459**
- University of Vienna: **87,000**

70,999 STAFF

- Aarhus University: **8,700**
- University of Belgrade: **10,000**
- Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin: **5,816**
- King's College London: **10,000**
- UCLouvain: **7,689**
- University of Oslo: **6,900**
- Université Paris Cité: **7,632**
- University of Pisa: **3,262**
- University of Vienna: **11,000**

45 ASSOCIATED PARTNERS

76 ACADEMIC CHAIRS

8 KNOWLEDGE HUBS, PLATFORMS

62 SEED-FUNDED PROJECTS



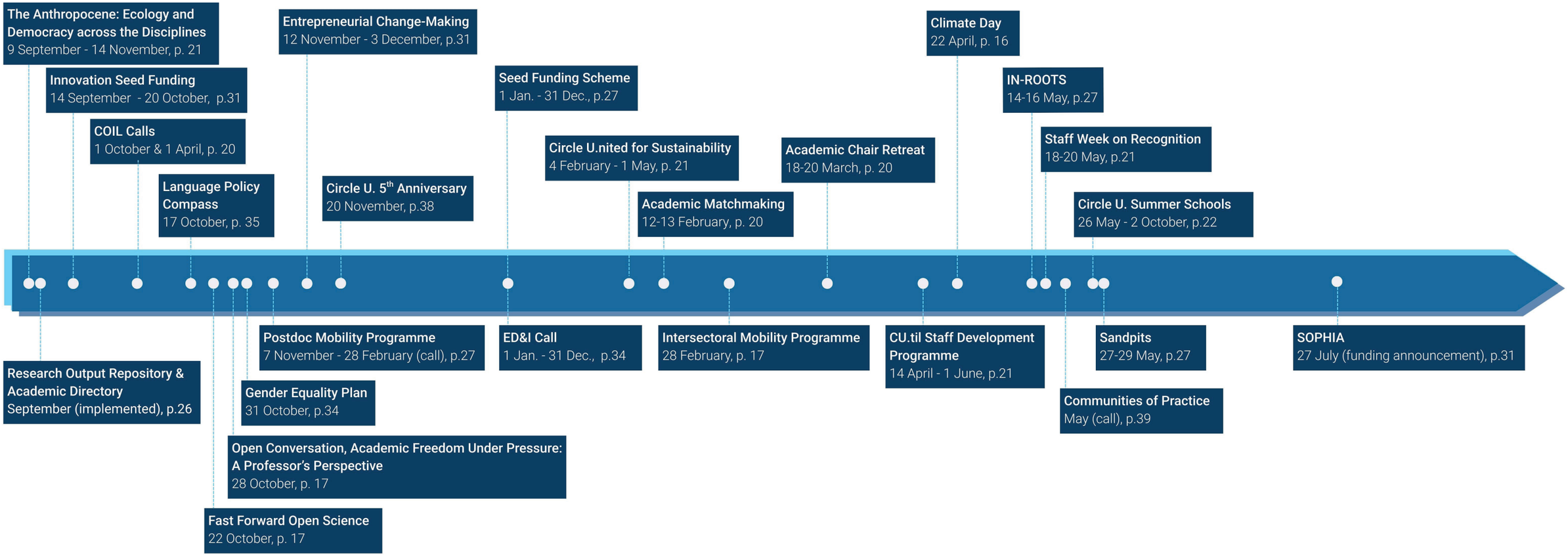
Students at UCLouvain.
Credits: Jacky Delorme

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE ACADEMIC YEAR 2025-2026

Over the past academic year, students, academics and professional staff across Circle U. have worked together across institutions, disciplines and borders. Their work has created new opportunities to learn, research and develop ideas together, while connecting universities with the societies they serve.

This report looks at what these collaborations mean for the future of European higher education. Across education, research, innovation and entrepreneurship, and inclusion, Circle U. is opening up new opportunities for universities to learn from one another, work with external partners and engage with the challenges facing society. The timeline below highlights some of the key activities that have contributed to this work, offering a snapshot of the year and a starting point to explore individual initiatives in more detail.

The chapter that follows looks beyond these activities to the people, programmes and collaborations shaping Circle U. Together, they show how a European University Alliance can turn cooperation between institutions into opportunities that reach beyond any one university: strengthening education and research, building connections across Europe, and helping universities respond to society's challenges.



TRANSFORMING UNIVERSITIES FOR STRONGER EUROPEAN SOCIETIES

Universities have a role to play beyond teaching and research. They can help address societal challenges by working with the communities around them, listening to their needs and connecting academic knowledge with practical experience. Circle U. supports this role by creating opportunities for students, researchers, public authorities, businesses, civil society and citizens to exchange ideas and develop responses to shared challenges.

This section explores how the Alliance connects universities with society. This year, Climate Day in Pisa linked research with local climate action, while Open Conversations created space to discuss issues ranging from academic freedom to democracy and global health. The Open Science initiative examined how knowledge can be made more accessible, and the Intersectoral Mobility Programme enabled early-career researchers to learn from organisations beyond academia.



Students working on a group project.
Credits: University of Pisa

Making Universities More Responsive to Society

Alessio Cavecchi is a Full Professor of Agribusiness, Rural Development and Branding at the Department of Agriculture, Food and Environment of the University of Pisa. He also works as Delegate for the promotion and organisation of Circle U. activities at the University of Pisa. Within Circle U., Alessio is in charge of the work package on societal engagement.

As an expert on innovation in agri-food and rural areas and on the collaboration between universities and territorial stakeholders, Alessio tells us more about the role of European University Alliances in strengthening societies.

How is Circle U. strengthening universities' impact on society?

Circle U. helps us rethink the university not simply as a place where knowledge is produced and transferred, but as an institution that actively contributes to society. In line with the European Strategy for Universities, European Universities Alliances can accelerate this transformation by connecting institutions across borders while making them more open and responsive to their local communities.

How does stakeholder engagement help universities respond to societal needs?

Societal engagement starts with listening. Universities need spaces where researchers, students, public authorities, businesses, associations and citizens can meet, identify challenges and develop solutions together. Within Circle U., our experience has shown that real change occurs when stakeholders are not simply invited to participate in university activities but become partners in defining problems and co-creating responses.

How can this contribute to stronger European societies?

European alliances can build bridges between territories and Europe. Challenges such as sustainability, inequalities, demographic change, digital transformation and democratic participation are experienced locally, but shared across Europe. Universities can connect knowledge, experiences and solutions emerging from different territories. Strengthening European societies therefore also means enabling universities to engage more deeply with the communities around them and to bring these experiences into a wider European context.

Could you share a concrete example of how Circle U. brings different stakeholders together?

A particularly meaningful example is Tenuta Lab, an initiative organised in a farm located in a rural area of Tuscany and confiscated from the Mafia. The Lab brought the university into a very concrete territorial context, involving students, researchers and local stakeholders in working on real challenges. The aim was not simply to discuss problems, but to co-create practical and applicable solutions that could be directly considered and implemented by the regional government. For me, this illustrates what societal engagement can become: universities acting as facilitators between knowledge, communities and policymaking, while contributing to the social and economic development of rural areas.

From your perspective, what makes this kind of collaboration important?

For me, this is perhaps the most important potential of Circle U.: making Europe tangible in our territories while bringing our territories into Europe. A university becomes truly European not only through mobility or institutional cooperation, but when students, staff and local communities recognise that the challenges they face are connected to those of other European communities. Transformation begins with relationships: listening, connecting people and creating spaces where knowledge can become collective action.

Universities can connect knowledge, experiences and solutions emerging from different territories. Strengthening European societies therefore also means enabling universities to engage more deeply with the communities around them.



Credits: University of Pisa

A Climate Day for More Resilient Societies

The Circle U. *Climate Day*, held each year around Earth Day (22 April), brings the alliance's universities and communities together to explore climate challenges and possible responses. Organised with Circle U.'s Knowledge Hub on Climate, the initiative combines events and activities across our partner universities, creating opportunities to connect research with wider society.

Connecting Research with Local Climate Action

At the University of Pisa, *Climate Day* 2026 focused on the particular challenges facing inland and vulnerable areas. Hosted at the Museum of Natural History, the event brought together researchers with mayors, local administrators, technical staff and other local stakeholders to discuss how these areas can adapt to climate change and reduce its impacts.

The aim was to move from analysing climate change to discussing practical responses. Researchers shared knowledge, innovation and technologies, while local stakeholders brought the concrete challenges faced by their communities. This allowed for direct exchange between academic expertise and the needs of local administrations such as adaptation, mitigation and prevention.

By opening the university to local stakeholders and connecting research with the realities of surrounding communities, the Pisa event illustrated how Circle U. can help universities contribute to healthier and more resilient societies. *Climate Day* turns a shared European commitment into opportunities for dialogue and action at local level.



Picture shown at the exhibition The Climate from Every Angle. Credits: Université Paris Cité

Conversations Shaping Europe's Future

Circle U.'s Open Conversations create spaces where students, academics, staff, external partners and the wider public can discuss some of the major challenges facing Europe and the world. As a flagship Open Campus format, these hybrid events bring together perspectives from across disciplines and Circle U.'s thematic areas, encouraging critical reflection on global challenges, European values and the role of universities in a changing world.

The conversations also look beyond academia. Speakers can include representatives from civil society and other sectors, alongside researchers and students, bringing different experiences and perspectives into the discussion. This transdisciplinary approach reflects Circle U.'s ambition to make universities places where knowledge and society can meet and complex issues can be considered from more than one angle.

Academic Freedom: a Key Conversation

This year, Circle U. organised 10 Open Conversations, all addressing key topics (as listed on the right). One example was the Open Conversation *Academic Freedom Under Pressure: A Professor's Perspective*, held at the University of Belgrade in October 2025.

The event brought together professors and researchers from several European universities, with an online audience spanning the Alliance. The international panel explored the risks of public engagement, the boundaries of academic freedom, and how scholars can maintain integrity, credibility and resilience under pressure. Speakers included former University of Belgrade Rector and European University Association Vice-President Ivanka Popović, alongside academics from Belgrade, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin and UCLouvain. The discussion showed how Circle U. can create space for open European dialogue on issues that affect universities and society alike.

This Year's Conversations

From Recognition to Inclusion: Rethinking European Languages in Education

September 2025 | Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin

Global Health: What's Next?

October 2025 | Université Paris Cité

Academic Freedom Under Pressure: A Professor's Perspective

October 2025 | University of Belgrade

Becoming a Teacher in Times of Democracies Under Pressure

November 2025 | UCLouvain

How Deep is the Ecological Crisis? How Urgent?

November 2025 | University of Oslo

From Global Convergence to Multipolar Conflict

April 2026 | University of Belgrade

One Planet–One Health? New Challenges for Medical Thinking in times of Climate Change

April 2026 | UCLouvain

Democracy in the Balance

May 2026 | University of Oslo

Navigating Power in International Interactions: a View Across Languages and Cultures

May 2026 | UCLouvain

What Works, When, How and Why: Promising Practices for a More Hopeful Future

May 2026 | University of Oslo

Making Research Accessible for All

Open Science is becoming increasingly important to ensure that research is accessible to everyone in inclusive, equitable, and sustainable ways. Understanding how we can commit to these practices within our universities and beyond is essential for shaping the future of knowledge sharing.

On 22 October 2025, Circle U. joined International Open Access Week with *Fast Forward Open Science*, a new event led by Université Paris Cité. Experts shared practices and explored challenges and solutions in open access, research data, open source software and open education.

Connecting Researchers Beyond Academia

In February Circle U. launched its annual call for the Intersectoral Mobility Programme. This programme supports PhD students and postdocs in spending 5–30 days with organisations outside academia, from industry and NGOs to museums and research organisations. The short stays help early-career researchers build skills and professional networks across Europe.

By connecting researchers with organisations beyond universities, the programme creates opportunities to exchange knowledge, understand different perspectives and bring research closer to the needs of society.

REIMAGINING EDUCATION ACROSS BORDERS

Education is where Circle U. becomes most tangible for students and staff. The partner universities making Circle U. are convinced that learning is richer when it crosses borders, disciplines and perspectives. This year, long-standing partnerships have grown into new double and joint degrees, while academics have found the support and the networks to co-design courses that no single university could offer alone. Students have explored the Anthropocene in Oslo, built sustainability projects in Berlin and tackled societal challenges at summer schools, moving from learners to changemakers. Staff have also learned from one another, from inclusive teaching to smoother course recognition. In the pages that follow, an interview with the Dean of the Open Campus and a closer look at these initiatives show how international cooperation is becoming a natural part of university life and prepares people for a more inclusive and sustainable European society.



Student discussing with a professor at the climate summer school in Berlin. Credits: Isabelle Mensching

International Learning as a Natural Part of the Student Experience

Eivind Engebretsen works as a professor of interdisciplinary health at the University of Oslo. Since 2023, he is the Dean of the Open Campus, a digital entry point to educational activities across the alliance. As a key actor in the development of Circle U. offers, Eivind tells us more about how Circle U. reimagines education across borders.

What is innovative in the opportunities Circle U. creates?

The Open Campus grew out of a simple insight: internationalisation must be embedded in students' everyday lives, wherever they are. A semester abroad can be a fantastic experience, but it remains out of reach for many students, who must balance studies with jobs, family responsibilities and tightly structured degree programmes.

Rather than relying on a single model, we have developed a menu of formats, offering different levels of engagement—from short, accessible activities to more intensive and sustained international learning experiences. An Open Conversation that any student in the alliance can join online for an afternoon. A COIL activity, where two teachers link their existing classrooms without any new accreditation. A five-day blended intensive programme. A co-taught course embedded in degree programmes at several universities. And now, at the top, joint programmes and degrees. Over five years this has grown into well over a hundred credit-bearing offerings.

The other innovation is in how these courses are taught. In our courses students are partners and initiators, the local context is used as a living laboratory, where e.g. a city, a region or the Tenuta Lab in Pisa becomes the classroom, and real-world challenges are developed with external partners, through hackathons and case studies.

What are the benefits for students?

Thanks to Circle U., a student at any of our universities has access to nine leading universities at once. Our ambition is to make Europe their campus, and to make international opportunities accessible to all students, whatever their interests, needs or circumstances are.

The first benefit is flexibility. There is no single way to take part. A student might spend a whole semester abroad, join an intensive course for a week, or have an international learning experience without leaving home through our online offerings. Whichever route they choose, the host university awards the ECTS, and the student receives a Circle U. certificate.

The second is the network. Students who take part gain peers at eight other universities, learn to know some of the best researchers across Europe, and in many cases get the chance to initiate something themselves: student-led summer schools, Open Conversations with student panellists, seed-funded student projects.

What would you like to see become a normal part of the European university experience?

That every student, at some point during their degree, has the opportunity to learn alongside students and teachers from another European university - and that this becomes such a natural part of the student experience that it no longer feels exceptional, but simply part of what going to university means. Today, international experience is still an exception for the few. I would like it to be an ordinary part of the curriculum, in the same way that a seminar or a lab course is.

What is your advice to professors on how to create a course?

Start small. Host an Open Conversation on a theme you care about with a colleague at a partner university, link your existing course to theirs through a COIL activity, or invite a colleague to teach at your course. Then see whether you can do more.

Agree on recognition in advance. The single most common reason a good course fails to recruit is that students cannot see whether it counts. Settle that with your partners before you advertise.

> *Today, international experience is still an exception for the few. I would like it to be an ordinary part of the curriculum, in the same way that a seminar or a lab course is.*



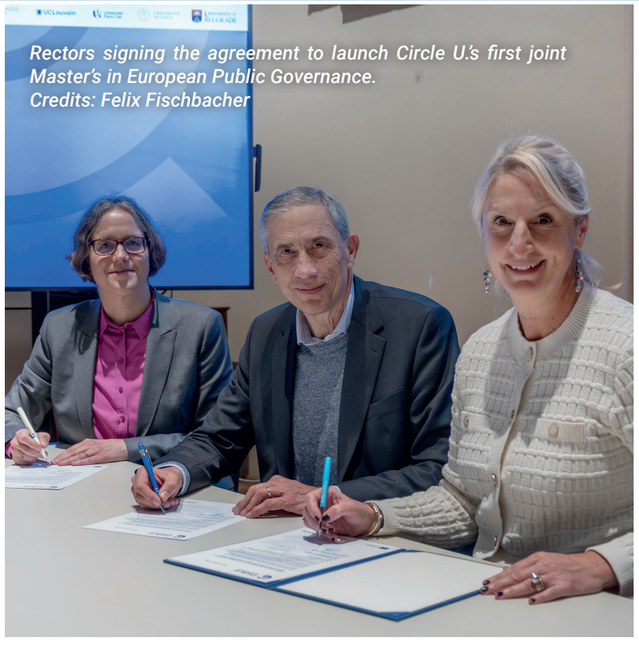
Credits: Øystein Horgmo, UiO

Launching New Degrees

Circle U. is turning long-standing academic connections into more opportunities for students to study across partner universities. This year, new agreements between our partner universities are paving the way for new international degree pathways.

UCLouvain and the University of Pisa will launch a double degree in Digital Intelligence and Change Management in 2027, while UCLouvain and Belgrade have established a joint Master's pathway in Quantitative Finance, with the first cohort starting in 2026/27. A new Joint Master's in European Public Governance, organised by UCLouvain, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin and the University of Pisa, will also enable students to study at several partner institutions.

These programmes turn cooperation within Circle U. into concrete, long-term educational opportunities. By studying across universities and national contexts, students gain deeper international exposure and learn to work across academic and cultural perspectives. For the universities, they show how sustained collaboration can grow into new educational offers that would be harder to create alone.



Rectors signing the agreement to launch Circle U.'s first joint Master's in European Public Governance.
Credits: Felix Fischbacher

Supporting the Creation of New Courses

Reimagining education across borders starts with making it easier for academics to create opportunities. Through Circle U. initiatives, educators can connect to develop new courses and international learning experiences.

In February, the Teaching Innovation Lab (CU.til) organised an *Academic Matchmaking* event in Vienna, connecting colleagues with shared interests and guiding them through the co-design of new international courses, from learning outcomes to delivery formats. The Academic Chair Retreat, held in Berlin in March, gave academics and professional staff space to exchange practices, explore blended and hybrid formats, and develop ideas across faculties and universities.

Partner universities are also developing their own support systems. This year, Université Paris Cité launched PAcIForm to help academics develop internationalisation projects and identify partners and funding opportunities. Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, meanwhile, uses annual Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) calls to financially support new international learning opportunities involving its academics.

Together, these initiatives show how Circle U. can turn international cooperation into concrete educational offers. By connecting educators, supporting experimentation and bringing different perspectives into course design, the Alliance is expanding international and interdisciplinary learning opportunities while helping students and staff develop the skills and values to engage across borders.

"It is inspiring to work with people from different fields who share a passion for innovative teaching. From a teacher's perspective, collaborating and learning to question one's own approaches is a valuable opportunity."

Ute Smit,
Academic Chair (University of Vienna) on the Chair Retreat

Learning, Teaching and Shaping Education

From innovative teaching to student-led learning and staff development, Circle U. creates opportunities for everyone to learn, teach and shape education across borders.

ANTHROPOCENE

In autumn 2025, around 70 Circle U. students explored the links between climate, ecology and democracy through a 10 ECTS course led by the University of Oslo (UiO) and partners in Berlin, Vienna and Aarhus. Following online seminars, students spent a week in Oslo combining lectures, group work and fieldwork in the Oslofjord. Professor Marius T. Mjaaland received UiO's Education Award for the course's innovative, interdisciplinary teaching.

172 Applicants
64 Participants

CIRCLE U.NITED

Circle U.nited for Sustainability is a course created by students, for students, by the student-led sustainability office at Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. From February to May 2026, participants joined four online sessions with experts from across Europe, then a week of workshops and site visits in Berlin: a first for Circle U. at HU. Bringing together disciplines and perspectives, it empowered students from all over Europe to reflect on how to build a sustainable society.

185 Registered
~100 Participants

STAFF WEEKS

Education continues for professionals, too. From April to June, CU.til's online *Staff Development Programme* offered six workshops on research-based, inclusive, sustainable and international teaching. In May, the *Staff Week on Recognition* brought colleagues to Oslo to exchange challenges, good practices and practical solutions for making mobility and course recognition more seamless. These offers give colleagues space to learn from peers across the Alliance, exchange practices and develop the skills needed to create more accessible, innovative and international learning experiences for students.

"The course has been amazing. It's not only classroom-based learning; we had a mix of lectures, group work and field visits. It has been intensive, with a blend of experiential learning and theoretical learning"

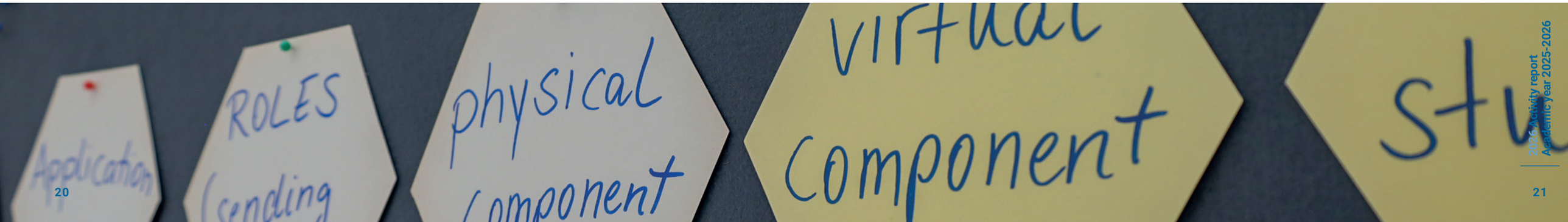
Ansha Henna Nazeer,
Master's student in Cultural Differences and Transnational Processes at the University of Vienna.

"We tend to talk a lot about big topics, big issues, but it was really great to have a first-hand experience on what a local NGO does."

Mathis Favre,
Master's student in Natural Resource Management at Humboldt-Université zu Berlin.



Ansha and Mathis, students at the Anthropocene course.
Credits: Henrik Eidberg



Summer Schools: Beyond Disciplinary Boundaries

Circle U. summer schools give students an opportunity to learn with peers and academics from across Europe while exploring complex questions that extend beyond the boundaries of individual disciplines. Organised by the alliance's Knowledge Hubs and Platforms, and recurring each year, they are a flagship format for international and interdisciplinary learning within Circle U.

The summer schools address challenges that are central to our societies and require different forms of knowledge to understand and address. Topics range from sustainability and climate change to AI, democracy, health, languages, entrepreneurship and digital transformation. Students bring together perspectives from different academic fields and countries, while engaging with practical cases, discussions, workshops and, where relevant, actors and organisations beyond the university.

From Learners to Actors

This approach changes the role of students from recipients of knowledge to active participants in exploring possible responses to societal challenges. By working with people who have different academic backgrounds, experiences and perspectives, students develop the ability to question assumptions, approach problems from different angles and collaborate across disciplinary and national boundaries. They also gain experience in connecting academic knowledge with the realities of communities, organisations and wider society.

The international dimension is central to this experience. Students learn from academics as well as from their peers across Circle U., discovering different ways of approaching the same question and building relationships that extend beyond a single course or university. These encounters develop the skills and values needed to participate meaningfully in a diverse European society.

By combining mobility, interdisciplinary learning and engagement with real-world challenges, Circle U. summer schools give students the knowledge, perspectives and practical experience to become actors in shaping solutions and to contribute to more sustainable futures.

"Through the summer school I have become more aware of climate adaptation that is already taking place. From my dorm window at the University of Oslo (UiO) I can see a pool of water in the meadow. It has been channelled there on purpose because the grass can hold more water than concrete. That's adaptation! I am on the student council and we are more focused on social issues, but I reckon we could advocate more for green issues."

Amarti,
Bachelor student in History of Ideas at UiO, participant at the Empowering Climate Action summer school.
Picture credits: Franziska Helms





Students working on a group project at the climate summer school in Berlin. Credits: Franziska Helms

Circle U. Summer Schools

Organised by our Knowledge Hubs and Platforms, Circle U. summer schools address a wide range of societal challenges. The 2025–26 programme brought students together across disciplines and universities. Discover the summer schools hosted across the Alliance below.

Plain Language, AI Literacy and Democracy in the EU

26 May - 26 June | UCLouvain

Democracy and Development in a Fragmenting World: Geopolitics, Power Shifts, and the Fate of the Liberal Order

1-5 June | University of Belgrade

Researching Languages in Education from an Ecological and Mixed-Methods Perspective

1 June; 29 June - 3 July | University of Vienna

From Potential to Power

22-26 June | UCLouvain | Read more on p. 30

New Venues for Global Health

28 June - 2 July | Université Paris Cité

Venture Creation – Making Purposeful Ideas Reality

29 June - 3 July 2026 | University of Vienna

INCLUDE Summer School track

6-10 July | University of Pisa | Read more on p. 35

Empowering Climate Action

20 July - 7 August | Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin

AI and Society in a Transforming World

7-11 September 2026 | University of Belgrade

Sustainable Agritourism Intensive Week

28 September - 2 October. 2026 | University of Pisa

More Summer Schools

Circle U. students are also invited to join summer schools organised by our partner universities.

How to do European History? Current Approaches and Controversies

15 April; 8-12 June | University of Oslo

Interdisciplinary Summer School on Cognitive Neuroscience

6-24 July | Aarhus University

Guardians of Democracy: Comparative Constitutional Law in an Age of Democratic Backsliding

27 July - 1' August | Aarhus University

Clinical Global Infectious Diseases

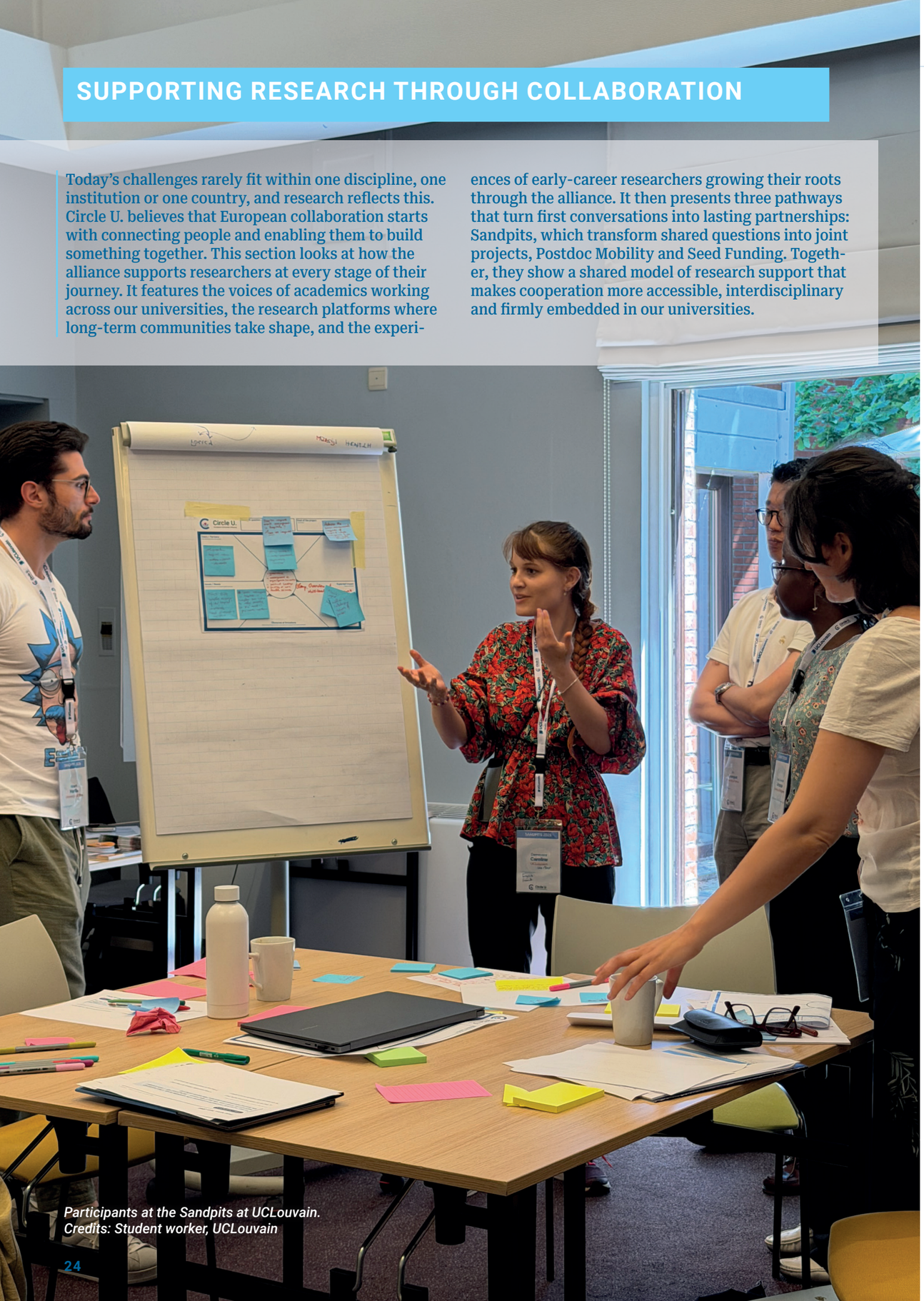
3-21 August | Aarhus University

"Europe – as an idea, space, or historical concept – can be rather abstract and difficult to define. I was therefore grateful for the opportunity to learn more about different perceptions of Europe throughout history and from the perspectives shared by the participating students and professors."

Adam Pannwitz,
Master's student at Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, participant at the *How to do European History* summer school

SUPPORTING RESEARCH THROUGH COLLABORATION

Today's challenges rarely fit within one discipline, one institution or one country, and research reflects this. Circle U. believes that European collaboration starts with connecting people and enabling them to build something together. This section looks at how the alliance supports researchers at every stage of their journey. It features the voices of academics working across our universities, the research platforms where long-term communities take shape, and the experiences of early-career researchers growing their roots through the alliance. It then presents three pathways that turn first conversations into lasting partnerships: Sandpits, which transform shared questions into joint projects, Postdoc Mobility and Seed Funding. Together, they show a shared model of research support that makes cooperation more accessible, interdisciplinary and firmly embedded in our universities.



Participants at the Sandpits at UCLouvain.
Credits: Student worker, UCLouvain

A Place to Start Research Collaboration

Circle U. helps researchers connect with peers, mentors, and collaborators across Europe — while giving their work the visibility and support it deserves. Charlotte Birnbaum-Nyberg from the University of Vienna coordinates research and innovation support. In this interview, she reflects on the pressures facing European academia and the value of working across disciplines and borders.

What trends are you seeing in academic collaboration and research across Europe?

The research landscape in Europe is under a lot of strain for different reasons. For one, funding opportunities have become scarce, and the competition among researchers for those resources is heightening. Furthermore, innovative research is needed to address global and European challenges. It is crucial for our researchers to work in interdisciplinary, innovative and collaborative ways.

How do Early Career Researchers (ECRs) benefit from Circle U.?

Circle U. can be a space for our junior researchers to meet peers as well as mentors. By engaging in the alliance, they can expand their networks and find new partners for collaborative research and teaching, as well as new inspiration for their career pathways. Additionally, ECRs can benefit from Circle U. by exploring the connections between research and education, as research-based education is at the core of the alliance.

Why is it important to empower ECRs?

With our offers, we are trying to support junior researchers in finding their career path – may this be within or outside academia. As universities, we should highlight the value of knowledge and science, and we do this by supporting our ECRs as much as we can.

Why is collaboration between academics so valuable? Do you have an example?

For the Circle U. Language Compass [Ed.: see p.35], for example, the CU.mil Academic Chairs collaborated right from the start to get it off the ground. Together, they developed the core ideas, designed the compass, wrote the content, and partnered with other colleagues to build the AI-based Circle U. Language Companion. The second phase of this collaboration is currently underway, focusing on implementation and application. Since the Compass was created for real-world use, it is now up to all Circle U. members to adopt it. Because this potential audience includes a vast number of units, lecturers, students, administrators, and management across the entire alliance, this phase has an even broader collaborative approach on an institutional level. Collaboration makes our universities move even closer together.

Would you say Circle U. is a good place to start collaborating?

Circle U. is an alliance of nine excellent universities, strategically placed throughout Europe, most of them in capital cities. The alliance offers low-threshold funding for mobility and teaching, and guides consortia through the different stages of proposal drafting. More than anything: Circle U. creates places of opportunities, bringing people together. Not only is Circle U. a good place to start collaborating – it's an easy one, too.

> ***The alliance offers low-threshold funding for mobility and teaching, and guides consortia through the different stages of proposal drafting. More than anything: Circle U. creates places of opportunities, bringing people together.***



Credits: Hans Schubert

Research Platforms

Academic Directory

Research often starts with a simple question: Who else is working on this? Across Circle U., there may already be researchers, PhD candidates, postdocs, or lecturers with shared interests. The challenge is finding the right person. The Circle U. Academic Directory makes researchers easier to find – and easier to contact. Using their ORCID identity, academics can create trusted profiles to complement their research activities. Profiles can show affiliations, research areas, and academic interests. The directory can be used to find relevant colleagues, discover shared interests, and connect in a secure way. The Circle U. Academic Directory increases the visibility of research profiles and fosters collaboration across the alliance.

Research Outputs Repository

Europe produces millions of research publications every year. But how can you quickly explore the expertise within one university alliance? Now, there is a dedicated gateway for Circle U. – the Research Outputs Repository (RoR) is a new searchable platform that brings together publications by authors affiliated with Circle U. universities. Publications are searchable and can be filtered by author, university, subject, field of science, collaboration or year.

"New research platforms are important for the entire university alliance. For Early Career Researchers, the Academic Directory is a simple way to build an international academic network. For professors, lecturers, and research teams, it can open doors to new partners, projects, teaching links and funding opportunities. The Academic Directory is not just about searching. It is about being visible to the right people. In the Research Outputs Repository, academics can identify potential partners, students can explore topics and supervisors, university teams can showcase strengths and connections and institutions or policymakers can gain insights into research trends across the alliance. It is a focused starting point to discover expertise within Circle U. and build new collaborations."

Miroslav Marić,
Professor at the University of Belgrade's Faculty of Mathematics



Participants of the In-Roots workshop at the University of Pisa. Credits: Simone Ferrini

Growing Roots in Research

IN-ROOTS – Inclusive Routes and Roots for Doctoral Communities was a three-day retreat held at the University of Pisa on 14–16 May 2026, bringing together doctoral researchers from Circle U. universities. The initiative addressed academic and emotional isolation during the PhD journey, with particular attention to the challenges experienced by international researchers navigating unfamiliar academic and social environments. Through discussions on intersectionality, peer exchange, the sharing of personal experiences and community-building activities, participants were encouraged to recognise common challenges, connect across different backgrounds and develop mutual support networks. Moving from individual experiences to collective reflection, the retreat strengthened participants' sense of belonging to a wider doctoral community and created connections that could continue beyond the event. Participants also contributed to developing a "glocal" support system, linking international doctoral researchers with local knowledge, resources and peer support to facilitate their integration into both university structures and everyday life in Pisa.

"At ***IN-ROOTS***, I realised that many of the challenges I face as a young researcher are shared by others. Talking openly, laughing over PhD memes, and designing solutions together made me feel less alone and more connected. I left with new friends across Europe and a stronger sense that we can change research culture together."

Diana Domenichini,
PhD candidate at the University of Pisa

37 Applicants
21 Participants

Three Pathways to Collaborative Research

Circle U. offers researchers different ways to connect, develop ideas and build collaborative projects. The initiatives below help turn initial exchanges into new research partnerships across the alliance.

SANDPITS

Circle U. Sandpits help researchers from different disciplines and universities turn shared challenges into collaborative research projects. In 2026, participants developed projects addressing sustainability, from deforestation and healthcare waste to barriers to interdisciplinary research. Through workshops, mentoring and expert feedback, the programme helps teams refine their ideas and prepare funding applications. The three projects from this year's edition will now apply for Circle U. Seed Funding, turning an alliance-wide approach to research support into lasting collaborations.

24 Applicants
17 Participants

POSTDOC MOBILITY

Circle U.'s Postdoc Mobility Programme funds research stays of 5 to 20 working days at partner universities. By supporting postdocs in meeting colleagues, exchanging expertise and developing joint research ideas, it helps turn initial contacts into long-term partnerships. Researchers can use these stays to build research groups and prepare future fellowship applications. The programme provides a shared model of research support across the alliance, making international cooperation more accessible and creating opportunities for interdisciplinary research.

18 Beneficiaries (2025 call)
17 Beneficiaries (2026 call)

SEED FUNDING CALL

Circle U.'s Seed Funding Scheme supports bottom-up projects led by students, academics and professional staff, with up to 10,000 euros for research, education and administration projects. Requiring partners from at least three member universities, it helps teams test ideas, develop joint research and build new educational offers. By providing initial funding for collaboration, the scheme helps small-scale initiatives grow into more ambitious joint projects, embedding Circle U.'s work within its universities and connecting expertise across disciplines and sectors.

33 Applicants
11 Funded projects

DRIVING INNOVATION AND ENTREPREUNEURSHIP

In this chapter, we show how initiatives such as the Women Founders' Network, the Cross-InCU.bation programme, the Innovation Seed Funding Scheme and the Entrepreneurial Change-Making programme create opportunities for students and entrepreneurs to exchange knowledge, test ideas and build networks beyond their own universities. Furthermore, this year Circle U. also secured funding through the SOPHIA project to support researchers in developing innovations with scientific, societal and commercial potential.

These initiatives show how innovation can become part of university life. By sharing approaches across institutions and working with partners beyond academia, Circle U. helps universities strengthen their support for entrepreneurship, connect knowledge with real-world needs and develop responses to societal challenges, all while equipping students with the skills needed to bring their ideas to life.

Participants at the Cross-Incubation Week at Aarhus University. Credits: Andreas Birkedal Ørntoft

An Open Innovation Model to Develop Ideas

Merethe Kruse is a project manager at Kitchen, Aarhus University's entrepreneurship and innovation hub, where she oversees Circle U.'s InCU.bator, a platform helping students develop innovation skills and turn their ideas into projects. Drawing on her experience in managing innovation initiatives and working with start-ups in higher education, she shares how Circle U. fosters an entrepreneurial mindset across its partner universities.

What does innovation mean in the context of a European university alliance?

Innovation is an inherent part of the value creation that European universities deliver to society today. Innovation is present in research, innovation is blended into education and innovation is also a foundation for startups created by university students or researchers. Finally, innovation is a requirement for giving European societies a competitive edge.

What kinds of innovation do you think universities need to encourage today?

Innovation need not be a radical new jump in thinking. It can also be a new development, a new solution or just represent a better understanding of an existing problem leading to a more fitting solution, which in fact it most often is. Innovation methods can be taught in simple ways, and it is a doable task to enhance the innovation capacity of university students and researchers. European universities need to encourage the blending of innovation thinking methods into the existing methodology framework – and innovation should be seen as an additional dimension which supports the classic university learning elements.

How does Circle U. help bridge academia and entrepreneurship?

Circle U. focuses on societal innovation, bridging the knowledge creation of universities with educational innovation modules, innovation courses and workshops. Our alliance collaborates with industry as well as private and public partners to create societal value. Moreover, students and researchers find the external collaboration and specific relevance gained though the collaboration meaningful and incentivising, so it is also a way of revitalising both education and research.

At which stage of someone's career can ideas emerge?

Innovative ideas can emerge at all stages of education and career paths, so we should envision an open innovation model which gives everyone the opportunity to engage and develop their ideas. Cross-disciplinary collaboration is a precondition for boosting innovation which should be supported by university environments as well as curriculum.

How can Circle U. ensure that innovation is embedded in our universities?

Circle U. universities can ensure that innovation is an embedded element by having a strategic focus on innovation, and by integrating the strategy into university laws and local study requirements. They can provide innovation opportunities through joint programmes for students and researchers as well as innovation capacity building programmes for staff together with the partner universities. The alliance universities can also establish local innovation environments inspired by their Circle U. partners and ensure that innovation projects and research receive accreditation and academic recognition. Embedding innovation into our universities requires long term systems thinking and is a cultural shift, but we can benefit greatly from mutually inspiring each other in our alliance.

> ***European universities need to encourage the blending of innovation thinking methods into the existing methodology framework – and innovation should be seen an additional dimension which supports the classic university learning elements.***



From Potential to Power: Supporting Women Innovators

The Circle U. Women Founders Network (BeeLead) is a collaborative community within Circle U. dedicated to fostering cultural change in entrepreneurship. Grounded in inclusivity and intercultural understanding, the network brings together women innovators from across the alliance. By creating opportunities for members to exchange ideas, share resources and learn from one another, BeeLead helps build the knowledge, skills and confidence needed to turn ideas into action. Ultimately, the network challenges traditional assumptions about who can become a founder and promote a more inclusive entrepreneurial culture.

In 2026, the network launched *From Potential to Power*, a progressive learning track designed to take participants from inspiration to action. The programme combined role-model conversations with women founders, practical workshops on entrepreneurial mindset, self-confidence and leadership and an intensive 5 day summer school hosted in Louvain-la-Neuve, from 22 to 26 June.

The summer school brought together students and early-career researchers from across Circle U. to work in cross-university teams on real-world challenges, particularly in student well-being, women's health and mental health. Participants developed practical skills to transform ideas into potential ventures and socially valuable solutions.

By connecting students and researchers with entrepreneurial role models and expertise beyond their own disciplines and institutions, *From Potential to Power* illustrates how collaborative education can strengthen research support and innovation across the alliance. This combination of online learning, peer exchange and hands-on project development offers a model for entrepreneurship education that can be shared and adapted within Circle U. universities.

Through these activities, the Women Founders Network advances Circle U.'s ambition to make innovation and entrepreneurship more accessible, collaborative and inclusive, while equipping the next generation of women innovators to translate their knowledge and ideas into impact.

> "This summer school reminded me that innovation can become a powerful tool for positive change when it starts by listening to people's real needs. I leave this course with new skills, fresh perspectives, and the belief that the best ideas are born through collaboration."
>
> **Azzurra Cipollini,**
> *Student at the University of Pisa, participant of the Women Founders Network's summer school.*



Participants at the Women Founders Network's summer school. Credits: UCLouvain

When Mobility Supports Innovation

Launched in September 2025 and managed by Aarhus University, the Innovation Seed Funding Scheme supports travel, accommodation and food for Circle U. students and startups developing innovative projects. By funding mobility between universities, it creates opportunities for learning and exchange. The scheme is linked to a workshop programme (the *Cross-Incubation Week*) that provides a structured learning environment and a sense of community. This approach also allows universities to reach more participants through organised events while simplifying administration compared with individual funding schemes.

From Mobility to Opportunity

The scheme has attracted advanced student startups from across all Circle U. universities to a startup acceleration programme. So far, 12 startups and 26 students have received mobility funding, enabling them to visit innovation environments abroad. By supporting short-term mobility, for which funding is often more limited, the scheme has opened these opportunities to more participants. In 2027, the InCU.bator will launch two further funding rounds: one for women founders and another for students wishing to join the *Cross InCU.bation Week*.

Innovation thrives on cross-pollination. This scheme supports mobility, connects students and startups with new environments and lays the foundations to strengthen the European startup community.

Outrun: a Concrete Example

Founded by students from the University of Oslo (UiO), *Outrun* is a Norwegian sportstech startup developing a wearable biosensor that continuously monitors lactate levels during training.

The Innovation Seed Funding Scheme enabled Phelix Li Wu, who works on biology and product development at *Outrun*, to take part in the *Cross InCU.bation Week* in Aarhus. The experience offered an opportunity to step outside familiar surroundings, exchange ideas and look at the startup's development from a different perspective.

> "In practice, it might look like taking a step back to restructure things. Thinking with a new lens. Changing the execution of ideas. This is exactly the opportunity we were granted at Kitchen, in Aarhus, as part of the *Cross-InCUbation week*, with the support of the seed funding. So why has international exchange been crucial for this process? Because the limitations of your own bubble only become visible when you step outside of it to meet other people."
>
> **Phelix Li Wu,**
> *Master's student in Entrepreneurship and Management at UiO*

SOPHIA

Funded by the EIT Higher Education Initiative (EIT HEI), the European Institute of Innovation and Technology's flagship programme for innovation in higher education, SOPHIA brings together all nine Circle U. universities and organisations from the innovation, health and industry sectors. It marks two milestones for the Alliance: the first time Circle U. has secured funding through an EIT HEI call as an alliance, and the return of King's College London as a funded partner in a Circle U. project.

Running from 2026 to 2028 and coordinated by UPCité, SOPHIA aims to help universities validate, shape and de-risk innovations addressing interconnected challenges in human health, environmental sustainability, digital transformation, cultural adoption and resilient food systems.

Partners will develop and test the Innovation Mission Officer model, which helps researchers assess and strengthen the scientific, societal and commercial potential of their ideas, drawing on expertise across disciplines and institutions.

Beyond supporting individual innovations, SOPHIA will test new approaches to research support across nine universities and with external partners. The lessons learned can be shared across the Alliance and the wider European innovation ecosystem, strengthening universities' role in turning research into solutions with societal impact.

Learning to Build Change Through Entrepreneurship

First developed as a seed-funded project, the *Entrepreneurial Change-Making Programme* has become a recurring offer on the Circle U. Open Campus. Led by UCLouvain, with support from the Louvain School of Management, the programme has also been widely adopted within the university as an educational format.

The course equips students to turn sustainability challenges into viable entrepreneurial projects. Working in international, multidisciplinary teams, students learn to assess innovation challenges, develop business models that integrate measurable sustainability goals, and pitch their solutions. Online seminars with European university professors are combined with practical workshops and a final presentation at UCLouvain's Mons campus.

By connecting academic expertise with practical entrepreneurship, the programme encourages students to test their ideas, learn from different disciplines and engage with the wider business environment. Company visits and exchanges with professionals help them confront their proposals with real-world challenges. This approach reflects Circle U.'s role in connecting universities and external sectors to develop solutions with societal impact, while giving students the skills and networks to turn innovative ideas into action.

CREATING A MORE INCLUSIVE UNIVERSITY EXPERIENCE

A European university can only be as strong as its ability to welcome everyone who is part of it. For Circle U., inclusion is not a side project: it shapes how we teach, research, communicate and govern, and it is a responsibility we share across our nine universities. This chapter explores how the Alliance is turning that conviction into practice. It begins with an interview on what inclusion means in everyday university life, followed by equality, diversity and inclusion projects and our Gender Equality Plan. It then turns to the Language Compass, a framework that helps communities embrace linguistic and cultural diversity, and to the *INCLUDE summer school*, where shared reflection becomes concrete action. Together, these stories reflect a collective, ongoing effort to make every student, researcher and staff member feel they belong, and can fully take part in university life.



Circle U. Student Union (CUSU) representative at the Management Board and CUSU workshop in Vienna.
Credits: Felix Fischbacher

Turning Shared Values into Inclusive Practices

As an alliance dedicated to democracy, Circle U. actively promotes its key ingredients Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (ED&I). Fritzi Titzmann (FT), Alliance Manager at Humboldt-Universität, and Natalie Stasiewicz (NS), Project Officer for Administration, discuss shared values, recent achievements and future plans for an all-round accessible alliance.

One of Circle U.'s goals is to create a more inclusive university experience. What does that mean?

FT: First of all, it means that we believe in the added value of diversity and that we all benefit from perspectives that go beyond our personal experience. Learning from each other is invaluable! Inclusivity also means that we recognise the diversity of our university members in terms of gender, ability, cultural belonging and more. We approach this with an awareness of intersectionality – the understanding that many of those categories and, indeed, forms of discrimination, overlap and compound. And, because one of our main activities is developing joint educational offers, inclusivity means making those offers as accessible as possible for our various demographics.

How does the alliance foster awareness and ensure accessibility?

NS: One area where we are already quite strong is supporting empowerment through competence and skill building. This can come in the form of courses explicitly developed with ED&I in mind, such as the *INCLUDE* webinar series and summer school organised by the University of Pisa. But it can also be other learning opportunities, such as a seminar on inequality in health care, developed by the Knowledge Hub on Global Health. Or the Multilingualism, Interculturality & Language Lab's *Festival of Languages*, which addressed several relevant topics.

Can you give more examples of where Circle U. has been able to make a meaningful change?

NS: Through our annual call for ED&I Flagship Initiatives, we fund bottom-up projects with up to 4,000 euros. With this, we have been able to support initiatives coming directly from our local communities. We have just selected the projects for 2027 and are excited to see them come to life.

Another success is that, at the end of 2025, we adopted our Gender Equality Plan. This document is a tool to help examine decision-making and governance structures across our universities, and to assess who is benefitting from Circle U.'s mobility offers. It allows us to understand where we stand and where there is room for improvement.

Did you make any interesting observation you made working on these initiatives?

FT: One observation is that, so far, the status of ED&I at our universities varies, but that there is enormous potential to support each other and reach broader adherence to democratic values. The Gender Equality Plan is a fitting example: The University of Belgrade's equivalent had not been renewed for some time and was practically invalid. But the colleagues in Belgrade led the development of the framework for Circle U. They then used the momentum to formalize their own commitment to gender equality and renew their local guidelines. I think successes like this show what we can do as an alliance and how Circle U. can transform our universities.

Can you give a sneak-peek of what's in the pipeline for the future?

FT: We are currently discussing the formal creation of a group of experts to help guide our different work and governance bodies to tackle any roadblocks: How can we make sure that not only certain groups apply for the ED&I calls? What do we need to do to have more diversity among academic directors? How can we allow people with lower English proficiency to participate in our activities?

NS: What we will definitely do is start monitoring the indicators we have set ourselves in the Gender Equality Plan – to make sure Circle U.'s future is an increasingly inclusive one!

> ***So far, the status of ED&I at our universities varies, but there is enormous potential to support each other and reach broader adherence to democratic values.***



Fritzi (left), and Natalie (right)
Credits: Franziska Helms

Flagship Initiatives: Promoting Equity, Diversity and Inclusion

Accessibility starts with the inception of new initiatives, joint projects and course offers. To encourage bottom-up contributions to making our alliance as inclusive as possible, Circle U. has again funded three local and inter-institutional endeavours.

The second edition of the call for Flagship Initiatives promoting Equity, Diversity and Inclusion again had a 12,000-euro budget. Once more, the annual funding opportunity, coordinated at Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, was open to students, administrative staff and faculty from all member institutions.

Selected submissions focused on doctoral education and women-led innovation: *Embedding Equity and Inclusion into the Doctoral Curriculum in Earth and Space Sciences (EDI-DOC-ESS)* is an initiative led by Chi Zhang, Associate Professor at the University of Vienna (UNIVIE). The project's goal is to create the first credit-bearing ED&I doctoral course within the Vienna International School of Earth and Space Sciences. The programme *IN-ROOTS – Inclusive Routes and Roots for Doctoral Communities* was led by Diana Domenichini, PhD student at the University of Pisa. It included a three-day in-person workshop in Pisa (13-16 May) and the co-creation of a virtual networking platform to improve inclusion and well-being for doctoral students, especially international PhD candidates who struggle to find community. Finally, *Women Founders Network: Building an Inclusive and Interdisciplinary Entrepreneurial Ecosystem (WFN)* offered monthly virtual skill-building workshops, hybrid networking events and included an in-person showcase at UCLouvain (22-26 June). The initiative was led by Karoline Krannich, master's student at UNIVIE.

Selected Projects

- ***Embedding Equity and Inclusion into the Doctoral Curriculum in Earth and Space Sciences***
- ***IN-ROOTS – Inclusive Routes and Roots for Doctoral Communities***
- ***Women Founders Network: Building an Inclusive and Interdisciplinary Entrepreneurial Ecosystem***

A Common Framework for Gender Equality

Rooted in the principles of openness, democracy and inclusiveness, Circle U. is committed to advancing gender equality as an integral part of academic excellence and institutional development.

Adopted in December 2025, the Circle U. Gender Equality Plan (GEP) establishes a shared strategic framework for advancing gender equality across the alliance's nine member universities. Developed through an analysis of existing institutional plans and consultations with partners and external experts, the GEP builds on the diversity of national and institutional contexts, recognising both existing achievements and common challenges.

Rather than duplicating institutional policies, the GEP strengthens cooperation and mutual learning, enabling universities to share practical solutions and address challenges in implementing and monitoring gender equality measures.

The plan identifies five priority areas covering organisational culture, leadership, career progression, research and teaching and the prevention of gender-based violence and harassment.

In May 2026, representatives of partner universities met in Belgrade to advance its implementation through the development of shared indicators and reporting questions, laying the groundwork for coordinated monitoring of the GEP implementation, as well as of the progress at both institutional and alliance levels in the area of gender equality.

> "For me, the value of the Circle U. GEP lies in what universities can achieve together. By adopting this plan, the alliance demonstrates how transnational cooperation can help address persistent inequalities. Our discussions showed that even universities with well-established gender equality policies face challenges in monitoring progress and translating commitments into practice.
>
> By comparing approaches, sharing solutions and developing common indicators, we can turn these challenges into opportunities for cooperation. At a time when gender equality is increasingly contested, the GEP is also an expression of solidarity: not simply agreeing on principles but creating the conditions to act on them."
>
> **Jelena Ćeriman,**
> *Senior Research Fellow at the University of Belgrade*

A Compass to Navigate Linguistic Inclusion

Developed by the Circle U. Multilingualism, Interculturality & Language Lab (CU.mil) and published in October 2025, the Circle U. Language Compass offers a practical framework for making multilingualism and interculturality part of everyday university life. Rather than prescribing a single approach, it invites students, academics and staff to reflect on their own context and identify ways to make university communities more inclusive.

The Compass looks at four areas of academic life (teaching and learning, research, communication and governance), combining research-informed insights with reflection questions, practical guidance and tools. It recognises that language shapes not only how we communicate, but also how we learn, produce knowledge and participate in university life. By valuing different linguistic and cultural backgrounds, the Compass can help more people participate and feel that they belong.

The Compass is designed as a flexible resource that can be adapted to different contexts. Its interactive online version allows people to intuitively browse through its content, while the Compass Companion lets users explore the framework through questions and receive suggestions for concrete actions, from making courses more multilingual to improving communication and inclusive events.

Through its Compass, CU.mil reaches beyond the Alliance and brings linguistic and cultural inclusion into wider European conversations on research and citizen science.

> "The Language Compass fosters inclusion in many ways: it is available as an open educational resource on Zenodo, it can be queried by anyone in a wide range of languages thanks to free AI companions on the Circle U. website, and it supports linguistic and cultural diversity across all areas of higher education (teaching, research, communication and governance)."
>
> **Fanny Meunier,**
> *Academic Director, CU.mil (UCLouvain)*



Student presentation during the INCLUDE summer school in Pisa. Credits: Raiza Rocha

A Summer School to Broaden Perspectives on Inclusion

The *INCLUDE summer school* was designed to turn equity, diversity and inclusion from theoretical principles into practices that can improve the quality of university education. The initiative combined an international webinar series with a five-day summer school at the University of Pisa (10-16 July), creating a pathway from knowledge and awareness to practical application.

Through challenge-based learning, interdisciplinary dialogue, reflective practice, experiential activities and co-creation, participants explored accessibility, neurodiversity, cultural and gender identities, language and participation.

By the end of the programme, participants had broadened their understanding of inclusive education, acquired practical methodologies they could adapt to teaching, research and professional settings, and increased their confidence in addressing complex issues related to diversity and participation.

Working across countries, disciplines and professional backgrounds also enabled them to build new relationships, exchange practices and co-create responses to real educational challenges.

These connections laid the foundations for an international community of practice, while participants identified concrete opportunities to transfer what they had learned to their own institutions and professional contexts.

BUILDING STRONGER COMMUNITIES



Mette Oftebro, WP1 Coordinator (University of Oslo), and Kevin Guillaume, Secretary General (Circle U. Office), at Circle U.'s 5th anniversary celebrations in Vienna.
Credits: Felix Fischbacher

A European University Alliance is more than a network of institutions. It is a space where students, academics and professional staff can learn from one another, share expertise and develop new ways of working. Building a strong community takes time, trust and opportunities to collaborate around shared interests, while recognising the different needs and strengths of each university.

This section looks at how Circle U. helps these connections take shape: by celebrating 5 years of the alliance, by engaging with our communities through the Ambassadors' Programme or by connecting professional staff around common challenges with our Communities of Practice. Through these exchanges, Circle U. creates opportunities to share experience, learn across institutions and strengthen the work of its members.

From an Alliance of Universities to a Shared Community

Mette Oftebro is a senior adviser at the University of Oslo and coordinates the Circle U. 2030 project. Working with coordinators from all partner universities, she helps build the structures that enable the Alliance to work together. We spoke to her about the importance of building a strong Circle U. community among students, academics and staff.

What's your definition of a community?

A community is a safe space for sharing best practices and co-creating. It's based on trust, with a genuine interest in supporting members to become more knowledgeable and jointly more innovative. A Circle U. community shares a common identity while still keeping its specific focus area at the centre of its collaboration.

What does it take to turn this alliance of institutions into a genuine community of students, academics, and professional staff?

To become a genuine community, Circle U. needs to be visible and recognisable, and it must be the attractive "go-to" unit for our students, academics and professional staff. Our community becomes a reality when we gather students from a broad range of subject areas, when the Open Campus is recognised by our academics as a place to enhance quality and innovative teaching and learning together with other partners and when professional staff see participating in Communities of Practice as a valuable way to learn and share best practices.

We must engage our institutional communities of students, academics, and professional staff in order to become an alliance community. We want our institutional communities to start actively engaging and co-creating within our framework.

We need to showcase the value of participation in Circle U. through good examples of educational innovation and inspiring initiatives and we need to enable student participation by integrating and embedding Open Campus offerings into their degree programmes.

I think that Circle U. has, to a large extent, become this genuine community. Students across the alliance participate in our offerings and report back added value and extensive learning. Academics are taking initiatives, seeking collaboration and co-creating courses. Administrative staff have created communities of practice, increasing in numbers and engagement across the alliance.

Beyond a network, should a European University Alliance aim to create a community?

I think it's easier to see Circle U. as an overarching structure that supports different communities across the nine universities. These communities may serve different purposes and not always interact with one another, but Circle U. provides the structure that allows them to connect and become part of alliance-wide communities.

When did you feel that you were part of a community?

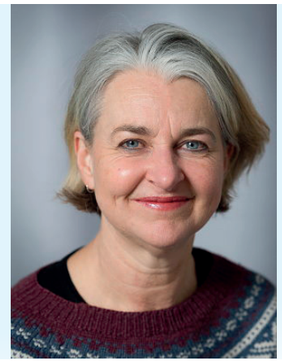
I feel that I'm part of a community when we come together—Circle U. coordinators, vice rectors, and student representatives—to discuss how we can make the alliance more relevant for our universities and how we can embed Circle U. activities more effectively.

The 5th anniversary of Circle U. brought together a large number of engaged Circle U. staff to present their initiatives and results in poster sessions. Seeing these tangible outcomes reinforced our sense that what we are building together as an alliance is meaningful.

Why is it important to get together as a community?

Because we have so much to learn from each other. We can use our individual strengths to strengthen our Circle U. partners. We can find synergies and create innovative solutions together that would not have been possible, or would be much less likely, without Circle U. as the enabling structure.

Students across the alliance participate in our offerings and report back added value and extensive learning. Academics are taking initiatives, seeking collaboration, and co-creating courses. Administrative staff have created communities of practice, increasing in numbers and engagement across the alliance.



Celebrating 5 years of Circle U.

In November 2025, more than 200 students, researchers, staff members and partners gathered at the University of Vienna to celebrate five years of Circle U. The anniversary highlighted how the alliance connects people across borders and disciplines, strengthening a shared European university community.

An interactive poster session showcased collaborative projects from the universities and encouraged participants to learn and exchange ideas. Creative activities, including textile screen-printing and a photo booth, provided opportunities for informal encounters. Circle U. Ambassadors met in person for the first time, strengthening connections between student representatives and laying the foundations for joint initiatives. The official ceremony combined reflections on the alliance's achievements with interdisciplinary keynote lectures on global health and artificial intelligence. PhD Impact Talks gave doctoral candidates a platform to present research with societal relevance.

Alongside the celebrations, work package teams met to coordinate future activities, strengthen trust and develop their cooperation. An evening reception offered other opportunities for conversation and networking.

By bringing the wider Circle U. community together, the anniversary reinforced personal relationships and a shared commitment to shaping the alliance's next chapter.

"Circle U.'s first five years have brought many achievements that can be measured in numbers. But for me, the true essence of the alliance lies beyond statistics: in the relationships we have built, the shared experiences we have lived, and the stories we have created together. Our anniversary event in Vienna was a wonderful reflection of this community spirit and of what we can achieve when we come together."

Viki Menczel,
Circle U. Lead at the University of Vienna



Welcome words of University of Vienna's rector, Sebastian Schütze, at Circle U.'s 5th anniversary celebrations.
Credits: Felix Fischbacher

Communities of Practice (CoP)

2026 has been an eventful year for Circle U.'s Communities of Practice (CoP), which bring together staff with shared professional interests to exchange knowledge, share good practices and explore new ways of working.

Since launching its second call in May 2026, the Communities of Practice have continued to grow, bringing together more than 140 members across 10 communities. Covering a wide range of themes, the CoPs allow staff to address common challenges with colleagues across Europe.

"It is both motivating and reassuring to experience that we share many of the same challenges across Europe, while our approaches may vary in ways that enrich our collective understanding. Sharing experiences makes great sense – it gives us the opportunity to learn from one another and to strengthen our practice through ongoing dialogue."

Marianne Skade,
Career Adviser at Aarhus University (Career Guidance and Counselling CoP)

A Broad Range of Communities

- **Career Guidance and Counselling**
- **Education and Pedagogical Development**
- **International Student Recruitment and Internationalisation**
- **Internal & External Communication**
- **Public Engagement and Community Outreach**
- **Research Support**
- **Summer Schools Working Group**
- **Welcome Services and Onboarding of International Staff**
- **Equality, Diversity and Inclusion**
- **Mobility**

Ambassador's Podcast

The Circle U. Podcast at the University of Belgrade explores mobility across the alliance through the first-hand experiences of students, academic staff and colleagues.

Created within the Circle U. Ambassador Programme in Belgrade, the podcast shares authentic experiences, practical advice and insights into mobility across the Circle U. alliance. Episodes explore short- and long-term opportunities, helping students understand what mobility can offer and how to make the most of the experience.

Alongside episodes in Serbian, special episodes in English feature participants in Circle U. programmes hosted in Belgrade, offering international perspectives on mobility, academic programmes, the city and the university.

One of the latest special episodes, for example, was recorded during the *AI and Society in a Transforming World* summer school and features conversations with a professor and PhD students from across Europe.

With 19 episodes, the series covers practical aspects of mobility, student experiences, global health, entrepreneurship and the wider opportunities offered by Circle U. The podcast is a great example of community outreach tool, allowing ambassadors' in Belgrade to communicate to their peers.

"By working together as podcast hosts and creators, ambassadors have strengthened their connections, exchanged experiences and developed new communication and storytelling skills. The podcast has become not only a platform for sharing Circle U. stories, but also a collaborative learning experience that brings the ambassadors closer together."

Brankica Filipić,
Professor at the University of Belgrade, Circle U. ambassador

A FUTURE TO DESIGN, A FUTURE TO SECURE

In the 2024-2025 activity report, we concluded by referring to the early discussions on the next EU budget and highlighting how decisive these negotiations would be for the future of the European Universities Initiative, including Circle U. As we bring this 2025-2026 report to a close, that conclusion can only be reaffirmed, if not strengthened further. While important decisions still lie ahead, the signals emerging for higher education, research and innovation in Europe remain a cause for concern.

On 10 October, the Irish Presidency of the Council of the European Union presented a new negotiating box to Member States. Seeking to reconcile the positions of the so-called “frugal” and “cohesion” states, the proposal goes even further than previous discussions, reducing the proposed 2028-2034 EU budget by an additional €159 billion compared with the European Commission’s proposal published in July 2025. While the document acknowledges higher education, research, innovation and education as essential drivers of Europe’s competitiveness and prosperity, the scale of the proposed reductions would inevitably require difficult choices between policy priorities, programmes and actions. Given the current geopolitical and political context both within Europe and beyond, EU investment in higher education, research and innovation is likely to face increasing pressure.

Yet the road towards the adoption of the next Multiannual Financial Framework remains long. The European Parliament is currently finalising its position on the next Erasmus+ programme for 2028-2034, advocating for a more ambitious budget than that initially proposed by the Commission. Across Europe, sector organisations and university networks such as European University Association, The Guild and the Coimbra Group, in which Circle U. universities are actively engaged, will continue to make the case for a level of investment that matches both Europe’s ambitions and the challenges facing the European Higher Education and Research areas.

Through FOREU4ALL, where Circle U. plays a leading role in policy dialogue activities, the 73 European Universities Alliances and Seal of Excellence holders continue to demonstrate the transformative potential of transnational cooperation. Their achievements show how alliances contribute to shaping the future of higher education and research in Europe. Ultimately, the most convincing argument for sustained investment lies in the tangible impact of our actions, the relevance of our results and the value we create for our communities.

At the same time, uncertainty surrounding future EU support should encourage us to look beyond EU funding programmes and reflect on how to secure the long-term sustainability of Circle U. Work on the funding application began before the summer, while the alliance’s leadership has provided strategic direction for the next phase of development. The message is clear: we must continue to embed the alliance more deeply within our institutions, across faculties, departments, research centres, laboratories and professional services. Circle U. is not an additional layer placed on top of existing structures; it is a living laboratory through which our universities can innovate, collaborate and transform themselves.

The SOPHIA (Synergies for Open Planetary Health Innovation Action) project, funded under the European Institute of Innovation and Technology Higher Education Initiative, is a powerful illustration of this potential. By helping universities transform research into real-world solutions to pressing societal challenges, particularly in the field of planetary health, SOPHIA demonstrates how Circle U. can serve as a trusted and effective framework for launching new initiatives and partnerships. The durable, trust-based cooperation built over more than five years has become one of the alliance’s greatest assets and a catalyst for future opportunities.

These opportunities will be further strengthened by the United Kingdom’s return to the Erasmus+ programme. King’s College London has already secured its participation through the Erasmus Charter for Higher Education. King’s has continued to play a central role in the alliance’s development despite not receiving EU funding, but its renewed access to Erasmus+ funding will once again allow students and staff to receive EU support for mobility involving King’s, significantly enhancing the university’s participation and collaboration across the alliance.

A future to design, a future to secure. The future of Circle U. will not ultimately be determined by the success of a bridging application or even by the outcome of the next funding period. These milestones matter, but they are not the destination. The ultimate goal is to ensure the alliance’s sustainability as an intrinsic part of its member universities. We will continue to move from seeing Circle U. as a project alongside our core activities to recognising it as a strategic building block of our universities’ core missions in education, research, innovation and societal engagement. The future we must secure is one in which Circle U. is not sustained by external funding, but by the conviction that working together creates lasting value for our students, staff, researchers and society as a whole.



Circle U.

European University Alliance