A YEAR OF TRANSITIONS & OPPORTUNITIES

Annual Report | 2019 – 2020
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Foreword

This has been a year of profound change. In response to the Covid-19 pandemic, universities have quickly moved all of their activities online. Universities, including members of The Guild, that had evolved as institutions since the middle ages became virtual centres of teaching and research overnight. But the role of universities changed beyond their immediate communities. Medical faculties offered equipment, personnel (including final-year students) and laboratories to public health authorities. Scientists from across all disciplines dedicated their research to overcoming Covid-19 and its effects. And our experts moved to the forefront of providing advice to governments and citizens about how we could maximise our collective response to this unprecedented situation.

The Guild has played a crucial role in bringing to the EU’s attention the immediate concerns about implications for EU-funded programmes. It has developed into a forum of reflection and dissemination about the consequences of the crisis and how universities could best respond to it. The Guild has become an important forum for collective discussion about how universities might transform in the long term as a result of this crisis. The crisis has only added the importance of The Guild, and we are most pleased, in this very special context, to welcome our 20th member, Babeș-Bolyai University from Romania.

Vincent Blondel
Chair of The Guild
Rector UCLouvain

Over the past year, The Guild continued to engage with the planning and implementation of Horizon Europe. Moreover, we were delighted to establish a strong relationship with new Commissioner Mariya Gabriel, and welcomed that her portfolio comprised research, education, and innovation – with universities at the core of her remit. Thus we welcomed Commissioner Gabriel’s support for universities, signalled by her intentions to develop a vision for the Future of Universities in Europe, alongside the renewed ERA and the European Education Area. This has led to a period of profound strategic reflection in Brussels, of fundamental importance to Universities. The Guild – led by the active involvement of its university presidents – was actively involved, providing rich input publicly and privately, to help shape a new momentum for research and education at the European level.

Alongside the continuation and flourishing of our existing working groups, we developed significant new areas of activity, including our gender and diversity working group. Most prominently, in the past year we partnered with the African Research Universities Alliance (ARUA) to develop detailed proposals for investing in an African knowledge society. This was supported by The Guild’s first Insight Paper, written by Prof. Peter Maassen (University of Oslo), which provided the evidence base for the arguments put forth by The Guild and ARUA. The Guild thus positioned itself as a network seeking to inspire not only the European Union, but also national funders and governments, as well as the wider university sector in Europe. The Guild has continued to flourish in every domain over the past year, and this provides us with a strong basis to support and inform the transformations that are yet to come – at a policy level and amongst our members.

Jan Palmowski
Secretary-General of The Guild
Navigating a global pandemic

Guild members’ responses to the coronavirus crisis

Since the early months of 2020, the coronavirus pandemic has brought unprecedented and transformative challenges to all universities across the range of their activities. Through its blogs, The Guild provided a space for reflection and peer learning for its members, shared with the wider sector.

In their reflections, Presidents and Vice-Presidents not only articulated the importance of research, but highlighted the unpredictability of science, amidst the need to develop a vaccine quickly. Guild members also shared their reflections on how the crisis impacted on students. New ways of supporting students were found quickly across the board. All the while, universities grappled with important challenges, for instance around the organization of examinations, and how to replace laboratory teaching. Across the Guild member universities’ departments, student societies and university administrations have also worked hard to encourage social spaces and digital formats to support the wellbeing of the university community.

At the same time, university leaders wrote about what they might gain as a result of this experience; what is in danger of being lost; and what kind of future we should aim for after this crisis. A widely shared concern has been a downturn in international student numbers, which may take time to overcome. Our universities are international in their essence. The digital format can enrich an international student experience, but it cannot replace physical mobility. Indeed, at a time when international borders have been closed, our members highlighted the important function of universities to stand for openness, collaboration, and finding ever new forms of cross-border interactions.

For the future, Guild members have also emphasized their keen interest in supporting societies amidst the challenges of the economic downturn. Universities are key spaces for where alternative futures can be imagined and experimented. And a future post-Covid-19, the blogs suggest, needs to be greener, more sustainable, and more balanced for our lives, and our environment.

This is a kind of frost heave that has opened up new channels for doing what academia is best at: sharing, collaborating and competing for pushing the boundaries of knowledge.

Åse Gornitzka and Gro Bjørnerud Mo
(University of Oslo)

The Guild’s priorities during the pandemic

As our lives were transformed by the coronavirus pandemic, the Guild’s activities moved fully online. In addition to working on the EU’s ongoing policy agenda and enhancing collaboration through alternative formats, The Guild responded to the crisis in a number of ways. We engaged with a fast-changing policy landscape as the EU confronted the long-term implications of the crisis. One concerning early effect of the crisis, for instance, was that it appeared to sharpen arguments for the support for innovation and industrial actors in light of the economic downturn, at the expense of fundamental science. The Guild communicated quickly with our members to inform the Commission about the immediate concerns of ongoing research projects and Erasmus+ exchange students during the confinement measures. We also prioritised demonstrating to policy-makers and a wider public how responsive, agile and committed our universities have been to helping overcome the pandemic, through regular featured webarticles, blogs, social media, and direct communications to policy makers. And finally, we began to consider the long-term implications of the crisis and how it might affect the sector, in our working groups and in our June 2020 General Assembly.
Towards the Multiannual Financial Framework 2021-2027

A key issue that remained unresolved over the past year was the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) 2021-2027, which would determine the budget allocation for Europe’s forthcoming research and innovation framework programme, Horizon Europe. Whilst the European Parliament proposed €120bn, against a more reserved €94bn proposal put forward by the European Commission, the European Council was unable to reach an agreement on the EU’s future budget by Spring 2020.

The Guild backed the European Parliament’s demand on research and innovation as a critical investment in Europe’s future. To this end, we joined forces with other Brussels-based university networks to launch the call “Seize Our Common Future”. With more than 800 signatories, including The Guild’s members, the call for a budget allocation of €120bn to Horizon Europe was presented at the European Research & Innovation Days (September 2019), a flagship event organised by the European Commission. Since then, The Guild has developed targeted social media campaigns to raise awareness of the EU’s unachieved target of investing 3% of GDP in research by 2020.

Throughout the year, The Guild has also actively supported the call of the European Parliament and the European Commission to significantly increase the budget for Erasmus+. It has made these arguments through opinion pieces and by liaising with EU Presidencies and high-level officials.

Given the scientific and societal challenges we face, we know that a budget of €94 billion for Horizon Europe is not enough. Universities have long urged that we need €120 billion in the next MFF. It is for the politicians demanding that science deal with the coronavirus to tell us why that is too much to invest in saving lives and making our societies and economies prosper.

Jan Palmowski, Secretary General of The Guild
Preparing for Horizon Europe

Research and innovation must set the agenda for the future rather than support it. Share your enthusiasm for Horizon Europe with finance ministers to secure the budget.

Kurt Vandenberghe (Director for Research and Innovation, European Commission) at The Guild event “Science & Innovation for Europe’s future”

Establishing ties with Commissioner Mariya Gabriel

In September 2019, The Guild welcomed the new Commissioner-designate Mariya Gabriel through an open letter highlighting our priorities regarding the next five years when she would lead the development of European R&I and education policies. Amongst others, The Guild asked for her support to maintain producing new knowledge as an essential aim for R&I policy, and develop an ambitious plan for the renewal of the European Research Area (ERA) that would boost Europe’s global standing in science. At the same time, we asked her to empower R&I as a driving force for EU policies in other sectors.

Commissioner Gabriel showed interest in engaging with The Guild since the beginning of her mandate, by acknowledging our network’s proactive role in the policy landscape and our ability to bring together comprehensive and research-led universities from all parts of Europe. We were among the first university networks to meet Commissioner Gabriel, in January 2020. In a fruitful exchange with The Guild Office, Mariya Gabriel discussed issues related to widening the participation of EU-13 countries in Horizon Europe, her priorities for the European Research Area and European University alliances, as well as The Guild’s initiative to advocate for stronger research collaboration with African universities.

Later in the Spring of 2020, The Guild’s Board met again with Commissioner Gabriel to discuss evolving policy developments related to the coronavirus crisis and its implications for universities and the development of ERA, our vision on the Universities of the Future with a particular focus on research and innovation, as well as the role of the European Research Council in Horizon Europe.

Establishing ties with
Commissioner Mariya Gabriel

General Assembly meeting, University of Bologna (October 2019).

Sarika Wilson (The Guild), Mariya Gabriel (Commissioner for Innovation, Research, Culture, Education and Youth), Ivana Didak (The Guild), Silvia Bottaro (The Guild) and Jan Palmowski (The Guild) at the Berlaymont (January 2020).
Strengthening the focus on fundamental research

One topic has cut across all of The Guild’s policy engagements: the relentless advocacy for increasing the support of fundamental research. This has been a core mission for our network since its establishment, and the past year has seen a number of occasions where the need for reiterating the public benefit and value of investing in fundamental science became timely. This has been the case with our work on the definition of research priorities of Horizon Europe, where a careful balance between research and innovation driven topics is essential. Research and innovation (R&I) policy has seen a growing focus on innovation and the achievement of impact within a limited time frame. In response, we will continue to advocate for the importance of maintaining and growing the knowledge base, which is needed to understand current and future challenges that will shape the lives of citizens.

In addition, The Guild has been vocal about our support for the European Research Council (ERC) during the past year. This has been a key priority during the change of political mandates at EU level, and the simultaneous budget negotiations for Horizon Europe. In 2019, the ending of Professor Jean-Pierre Bourguignon’s mandate as President of the ERC marked a move towards a transition phase where the continuation of its highly esteemed and autonomous character was and continues to be a key concern for our academic community.

When it comes to influencing the character of Horizon Europe as a whole, The Guild’s R&I Policy Group has been instrumental in providing proactive and timely contributions to the development of the upcoming programme. Through its frequent meetings, the group has established an effective practice of channeling the voice of our universities into the shaping of the research policy of the EU. During the past year the group has engaged with topics such as the strategic planning process. The Deans Groups had earlier presented their insights in three successive publications focusing on Health, Social Sciences and Humanities, and Digital and Industry.

The Guild’s efforts to foster a dialogue on strategic research and innovation (R&I) priorities continued as our network established contacts with other Commission Directorate-Generals. In particular, The Guild had a successful meeting with the Director-General for Health and Food Safety Anne Bucher, and the Deputy Director-General, Martin Seychell. They welcomed our Health Deans’ scientific advice regarding the priorities for Horizon Europe’s Health cluster. In the meeting we emphasized the need for a greater balance between priorities related to public health and medical research, and underlined the need for interdisciplinarity including the Social Sciences and Humanities. Throughout the year, the Health Deans group also engaged with other policy priorities, such as the European Partnership for Health Innovation (the successor of the Innovative Medicines Initiative), and Horizon Europe’s Cancer Mission. The group held its annual meeting in Oslo in February 2020, where it also exchanged institutional practices on how to foster interdisciplinarity in health research.

The goal of addressing societal challenges holistically and though interdisciplinary perspectives emerged as a shared priority for The Guild’s other Deans Groups. In 2019, Our Deans Group for Social Sciences and Humanities continued its mission to promote the importance of including social perspectives in addressing challenges that are traditionally approached through natural sciences and technological development. Our Deans Groups on Law and Theology also engaged with the topic of further developing collaboration in doctoral training. These groups also reflected on how they, as distinctive disciplines, could and should engage with EU funding programmes, and the strategic priorities of Horizon Europe.
During the past year, The Guild has consolidated its activities in the area of Open Science as we started a structured dialogue with the European Commission and became a recognised stakeholder in informing the EU’s Open Science policies. This was enabled by The Guild’s Open Science working group, composed of representatives with responsibility for developing Open Science strategies and overseeing their institutional implementation. Through their commitment and proactive contributions, Guild Open Science working group members established a forum for discussing timely policy developments, and exchanging institutional practices in key areas such as research data management.

Given the growing prominence of Open Science in Horizon Europe, the group has been discussing and providing inputs to the changes proposed in the upcoming programme. It also engaged with the definition of priorities for the renewed European Research Area (ERA) by advocating for the need for long-term policy approaches that cover all dimensions of Open Science, and the fostering of bottom-up solutions in the development of career evaluation frameworks that take into account the Open Science principles. Finally, The Guild also engaged with the European Open Science Cloud (EOSC), one of the cornerstones of the European data strategy and a clear priority of Commission President Ursula Von der Leyen. This included the participation of five Guild representatives in a workshop organised in January 2020 by the Commission, which aimed to convey the views of universities towards the development of the EOSC.

Creating opportunities and providing support for innovation and entrepreneurship through sustained collaboration is one of the core objectives of The Guild. Our work on this topic is shaped through the Innovation Working Group, composed of heads of innovation or senior representatives with an institutional remit on innovation. The group met in November 2019 at the University of Warwick, where it had the opportunity to exchange practices in the area of Open Innovation and visit pioneering examples of innovation, Warwick Manufacturing Group and the UK’s National Automotive Innovation Centre.

The Guild also continued its policy work in this area by participating and conveying the views of the group to a workshop on Universities in Innovation Ecosystems, organised by the Commission in December 2019. Another important area of work has been the European Institute of Innovation and Technology (EIT), where The Guild has been following the legislative process and submitted amendments to the European Parliament. The Guild’s proposals aimed to clarify certain legislative provisions to foster more integration between the different lines of action of the EIT Knowledge and Innovation Communities (KICs). We highlighted the need to ensure topics for new KICs are selected based on a transparent process. We also emphasized that the enhanced EIT’s higher education activities, and the new initiative to foster the entrepreneurial and innovative capacities of Higher Education Institutions, should be based on bottom-up and flexible approaches.
As a network which brings together excellent research-intensive universities across Europe, The Guild continued to engage in the discussions on Horizon Europe’s instruments which aim to strengthen the participation of Widening or low R&I performing countries in the Framework Programmes. Within our Widening Participation working group we closely followed the Advancing Europe package of measures during the extensive Horizon Europe negotiations. We were pleased to see most of the Guild’s substantive recommendations included as targeted actions to foster true pan-European collaboration. Moreover, in September 2019 we presented detailed proposals for Horizon Europe’s new instrument, the Excellence initiative. Most importantly, we called for Horizon Europe to support the best universities and research organisations in Widening countries to develop bottom-up strategies for building on excellence and delivering on it.

The Guild also provided recommendations for changes foreseen under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA). Our members supported the continuation of MSCA Widening Fellowships in Horizon Europe as they address the challenge of attracting international researchers to Widening countries. When it comes to funding former MSCA fellows to undertake their fellowship with a host in a Widening country, we advised the scheme should complement rather than replace Widening Fellowships.

Members of our Widening Participation working group contributed to the discussion on the future priorities of the European Research Area (ERA). They stressed that a fully functioning ERA is particularly well placed to capture the full potential of research talent across Europe by responding to the systemic causes of brain drain in certain countries and regions of Europe. The Guild offered recommendations on advancing national research systems and attracting international talent from abroad based on good practice examples of our member universities.

The question of how we can boost research excellence across Europe will continue to be a priority for The Guild.

**Strengthening excellence across Europe**

Antonino Rotolo (University of Bologna) and Igor Papič (University of Ljubljana).

Stanisław Kistryn (Jagiellonian University) and Berit Eika (Aarhus University).

Svein Stølen (University of Oslo) and Dana Samson (UCLouvain).

Antonino Rotolo (University of Bologna) and Igor Papič (University of Ljubljana).
Engaging with the renewing of the European Research Area

In Summer 2019, The Guild started its work on defining priorities for a renewed European Research Area (ERA). Acknowledging its potential for aligning national and European R&I policies, our Vice-Presidents established a dedicated task-force to articulate our priorities, supported by contributions from four Guild working groups (Widening Participation, Gender, Open Science and R&I Policy). The work was guided by strategic discussions at the General Assembly and two Vice-Presidents’ meetings, and it resulted in a comprehensive position with recommendations on the underlying values, priorities and governance models for ERA. This process was undertaken in close interaction with the European Commission and the European Research Area and Innovation Committee (ERAC), consisting of representatives of all ERA countries, that invited The Guild to present its views in two stakeholder hearings. The Guild highlighted the need for ERA to promote values of academic freedom and institutional autonomy, and strengthen the commitment of national governments to increase the levels of national research and innovation (R&I) investments, including institutional funding for universities. Likewise, The Guild called for ERA to establish new ways of engaging with research communities at the European and national levels, to ensure their contribution to the priority-setting and implementation of its strategic priorities. The position also emphasizes the necessity to continue pursuing specific aspects of the current ERA objectives related to the balanced development of national R&I systems across Europe, and improving the conditions for the mobility of researchers. Likewise, we gave recommendations on addressing gender equality of R&I systems and the circulation of knowledge and technologies, among others. The Guild also called for a more nuanced approach to challenge-driven research and its links to Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), coupled with the strengthening of the role of bottom-up fundamental research.

Shaping new strategies for European research and education policies

Towards the European Education Area

Even before the Covid-19 crisis, The Guild’s Presidents recognized that education was an area with a significant potential for change in the coming decade. In our open letters to Commissioner Gabriel and the Parliament’s Committee on Culture and Education we expressed our support for the EU’s ambition to work towards the European Education Area. We defended an ambitious budget for Erasmus+ and the European Universities initiative, and called for the strengthening of students’ transferable skills in all study fields. We conveyed our support for better synergies between research, innovation and education without compromising the core aims of the Horizon Europe and Erasmus+ programmes. Within our Erasmus+ working group, we engaged with the novelties planned for the new programme, such as blended and short-term mobility. Moreover, the group formed proposals for the Commission in the midst of the Covid-19 crisis calling for a unified procedure which would allow Erasmus+ participants to keep their Erasmus+ grant, even if they continue their study remotely. Through a continuous dialogue with the Commission we were able to influence the discussion on the transformation of universities in the area of teaching and learning. By bringing to the attention of policymakers The Guild’s view on distance learning, interdisciplinarity and lifelong learning, we contributed to European policies which will support universities in dealing with these challenges.
Kick-starting the European University alliances

From the very beginning, The Guild has supported the European Universities initiative as a unique opportunity for universities to reinforce the interchange between education, research and innovation. From our perspective, the initiative could strengthen institutional excellence through the exchange of people, knowledge and ideas. We were particularly pleased about the success of our members in the first Erasmus+ pilot call dedicated to the new alliances: CIVIS (involving the University of Tübingen), EUTOPIA (involving the Universities of Ljubljana and Warwick) and UNA Europa (involving the University of Bologna and Jagiellonian University).

As a network we continued to supply up-to-date information to our members, while in turn providing strategic and impartial input to the Commission on the further development of the initiative. For instance, The Guild organised a workshop in Glasgow following the results of the first pilot, where members had a chance to directly liaise with the Commission, and exchange views ahead of the next call.

In December 2019 we organised a public event in Brussels discussing the priorities and challenges presented by European Universities. This came at a moment when the first alliances had kicked off their activities, the second pilot call had been published, and policymakers began turning their minds to the full implementation phase of the initiative. It was one of the first events to address the critical point of creating more meaningful links between the European Research Area and the European Education Area. As an associated partner to further applications in the second pilot call, The Guild will continue to support our members in their efforts to test innovative, ground-breaking ideas for collaboration and exchange.

Students should be the first beneficiaries of investment made into higher education institutions.

Valérie Glatigny, keynote speech at The Guild Forum on European Universities (December 2019).

Vincent Blondel (Chair of The Guild and Rector of UCLouvain) with Valérie Glatigny, Minister of Higher Education and Research, Federation Wallonia-Brussels) at The Guild Forum on European Universities (December 2019).

Stanisław Kistryn (Jagiellonian University, UNA Europa), Apostolia Karamali (Head of Academic R&I and Research organisations Unit, DG RTD – European Commission), Sophia Eriksson Waterschoot (Director for Youth, Education and Erasmus+, DG EAC – European Commission) and Jan Palmowski (The Guild) at The Guild Forum on European Universities (December 2019).

Vanessa Dabisa-Santon (Head of Unit; Higher Education, DG EAC – European Commission) at The Guild Forum on European Universities (December 2019).

Vincent Blondel (Chair of The Guild and Rector of UCLouvain) with Valérie Glatigny, Minister of Higher Education and Research, Federation Wallonia-Brussels at The Guild Forum on European Universities (December 2019).

Themis Christophidou (Director General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture – European Commission) at The Guild Forum on European Universities (December 2019).

Vanessa Dabisa-Santon (Head of Unit; Higher Education, DG EAC – European Commission) at The Guild Forum on European Universities (December 2019).

Vincent Blondel (Chair of The Guild and Rector of UCLouvain) with Valérie Glatigny, (Minister of Higher Education and Research, Federation Wallonia-Brussels) at The Guild Forum on European Universities (December 2019).

Valérie Glatigny, keynote speech at The Guild Forum on European Universities (December 2019).
In early 2020, The Guild was invited to join other stakeholders in a process that aimed at articulating a strategic vision for universities and their research and innovation (R&I) activities for the next decade. The exercise was initiated by the European Commission, building on the development of European University alliances that The Guild had engaged with since 2018. This process presented an opportunity for our own Presidents to reflect on the main challenges and opportunities for their institution in the next ten years. The areas identified by them ranged from digitalisation, interdisciplinary collaborations to lifelong learning and addressing the SDGs. But presidents also emphasized the continuing importance of fundamental research, and the crucial role of Social Sciences and Humanities to enable strong, interdisciplinary challenge-driven research.

In parallel with the development of our own priorities for the future of universities in Europe, The Guild participated in giving feedback on the evolving vision reflecting the Commission’s priorities for universities. Here, we highlighted the need for adopting a vision that acknowledges the value of universities as key actors in their communities and democratic systems. We argued that the goals defined by the EU need to be based on evidence, reflecting the actual needs, challenges and opportunities of universities. Finally, we underlined the importance of taking into account the capacities of universities to work digitally, engage with their communities and provide the evidence-base for policy-making, as demonstrated by the coronavirus crisis.
Investing in Africa’s research capacity

African research universities need to be at the forefront of the new effort to transform Africa for the people of the region.

Professor Idowu Olayinka
Chair of ARUA

A pioneering partnership with the African Research Universities Alliance

Since early 2018, The Guild has been developing new ideas for collaboration with the Global South, particularly in Africa, with the aim of providing thought-leadership to the sector in Europe as well as to policymakers. Within our North-South working group, members had an intensive debate about institutional best practice in relation to North-South partnerships and explored how to develop sustainable research and education collaborations with leading African universities. At the same time, the opportunity arose for developing a partnership with the African Research Universities Alliance (ARUA) which brings together sixteen of the continent’s leading universities. Whilst it is not uncommon for international networks to join in discussions on mutual areas of interest, the ARUA-Guild partnership aims at sustained joint collaboration, with a real ambition to join forces across both continents. Thus, the partnership, formed in early 2020, provides rich opportunities for developing mutual learning opportunities and strengthening the capacity of universities to respond to common societal challenges. Providing spaces to explore common concerns and priorities will ensure that the partnership is built on genuine mutuality and shared interests. Our most important joint endeavor with ARUA, however, has been a shared concern to develop and articulate a new perspective on the role of education and research in the future partnership between the two continents.

Universities and the creation of an African knowledge society

In late 2018, The Guild and the African Research Universities Alliance (ARUA) engaged with key policymakers working on partnership initiatives between the African Union (AU) and the EU in research and education. In an open discussion supported by practitioners with experience in EU-Africa collaboration, we explored initial ideas on how to bring existing cooperation to the next level. Following the ambitions of the von der Leyen Commission to work towards a new joint strategy with Africa, The Guild and ARUA emphasized that research and education needed to define a positive space for the AU and the EU within their future strategic partnership. This was a key concern in light of Africa’s demographic perspective, and common global challenges.

Building on the proposals of our North-South working group, and the work done by Prof. Peter Maassen from the University of Oslo, we called for investment in African universities as crucial to building an African knowledge society. In the position paper developed jointly with ARUA, we advocated for a substantial fund for research collaboration between African and European universities, and targeted support for early-career researchers. We also supported the creation of an African Research Council and the funding of 20 doctoral schools, awarded on a competitive basis. The call was accompanied by The Guild Insight Paper “Developing equal, mutually beneficial partnerships with African universities”, our new publication format, which aims to offer independent academic input to the wider sector and policymakers. In the paper, Prof. Maassen provided a detailed analysis of the major academic trends. He highlighted the need for Europe, as Africa’s closest neighbour, to play a key role in strengthening African public universities. Since Horizon 2020 and Erasmus+ do not have the resources or the strategic aims to address the gap in Africa’s research and innovation capacity, with this joint initiative we highlighted the importance of making research a priority in the EU’s development efforts. ARUA and The Guild followed up these arguments in discussions with representatives of the Directorates-General for Research and Innovation (DG RTD), for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture (DG EAC) and for International Cooperation and Development (DG DEVCO). We were pleased that our proposals received broad support in Brussels but also among the African Union’s policymakers and the wider academic sector.
As Brexit approached, the importance of cooperation and the exchange of ideas and people between the UK and the EU featured even more prominently in our activities. By working closely with the Russell Group, Universities UK and other stakeholders we advocated for continued full UK participation in EU research, innovation and education programmes.

In a statement ahead of the initial exit date of 29 March 2019, The Guild had urged politicians to seize the moment to lay the foundations for a strong, mutually beneficial relationship between the EU and UK. We continuously informed our members about the impact of Brexit on the UK’s participation in Erasmus+ and Horizon 2020, including immigration rules and tuition fees. The Guild had also supported Universities UK’s call for study abroad opportunities for UK students, highlighting the significance of Erasmus+ in facilitating international mobility.

The Guild’s Presidents supported the joint call of 40 science and higher education stakeholders across the UK and Europe for continued cooperation following the departure of the UK from the EU. In a statement in late January 2020, our Presidents called for research, education and innovation to be prioritised in the future EU-UK relationship. They also reiterated their insistence on the importance of research workers being able to move freely between the EU and the UK post-Brexit.

In September 2019, The Guild Vice-Presidents discussed the role of the scientific community in maintaining close ties with Europe post-Brexit together with Richard Lochhead, Minister for Further Education, Higher Education and Science in the Scottish Government. During the meeting, the Minister presented plans to mitigate disruption in mobility flows and research funding to help Scottish universities retain their position as hubs of excellence.

The Guild’s Presidents supported the joint call of 40 science and higher education stakeholders across the UK and Europe for continued cooperation following the departure of the UK from the EU. In a statement in late January 2020, our Presidents called for research, education and innovation to be prioritised in the future EU-UK relationship. They also reiterated their insistence on the importance of research workers being able to move freely between the EU and the UK post-Brexit.
The Guild
network and its collaborative spaces

The Guild was the first network that reached out when I started, almost two years ago, and we had an extensive, open discussion on what the European Universities would look like. I learned a lot on that day from that group of Rectors, Professors, where Jan Palmowski and colleagues hosted me. I appreciate the constructive spirit that has accompanied us over these couple of years.

Themis Christofidou, keynote speech at The Guild Forum on European Universities (December 2019).

Babeș–Bolyai University joins The Guild

On 1 June 2020, The Guild welcomed its twentieth member, Babeș-Bolyai University (UBB). Located in Cluj-Napoca, a multicultural city in Western Romania where Romanian, Hungarian, and German-speaking populations have coexisted for centuries, UBB traces its origins back to the 16th century. The university emerged in its current form in 1959 from a merger between Cluj-Napoca’s Hungarian and Romanian universities, established respectively during the 19th and 20th centuries.

With 45,000 students, UBB is Romania’s largest university. Officially trilingual, and with study programmes in Romanian, Hungarian, German, English, and French, UBB is a European university that builds on a rich cultural diversity. UBB brings to The Guild an invaluable perspective from South-Eastern Europe, enhancing the geographical and cultural diversity of the network.

The Guild’s member universities were convinced by the quality of the research undertaken at UBB, and its ambitious vision for the future. The Romanian university has consistently been ranked number one nationally. It has also been the most highly ranked university in South-Eastern Europe in the most recent Times Higher Education Rankings (2018). In its ambitious strategic plan, the University is committed to enhancing further the international visibility of its research.

Looking forward to membership in The Guild, the Rector of Babeș-Bolyai University, Professor Daniel David, said: “UBB, by its academic tradition, has always been anchored in the richness and the excellence of the academic European area. We are honoured by the invitation of The Guild, which will be our new international ‘academic home’.”

We are delighted that UBB has accepted our invitation for membership. As a truly multinational university from its foundation, it has a particularly valuable perspective to bring.

Vincent Blondel
Chair of The Guild
The Guild Governance

The Guild is driven by the active engagement of its members, and this includes the Presidents. Our General Assembly, which meets twice per year, determines the strategic direction of The Guild, and sets the objectives for our work. Our Presidents make attendance at the General Assembly a priority, with at least 80% of our Presidents being present in person. In between the meetings, our Presidents also provide feedback and input on critical matters, including on the Future of Universities, and academic collaboration post-Brexit.

The Board meets formally seven times per year, and provides direction to The Guild office. The institutions of the Presidents represented in the Board have also provided generous additional assistance. For instance, UCLouvain supported the webstreaming of our event on European Universities in December 2019, while we continue to support from the generosity of the University of Oslo which hosts our website. The Board makes decisions on behalf of the General Assembly, in accordance with the priorities it set out.

Finally, Vice-Presidents have emerged as a critical strategic body for The Guild. They meet three times per year, and the personal commitment of Vice-Presidents is as high as that of Presidents, with equally strong attendance rates. In addition to the meetings, where strategic items (including position papers) are discussed in detail, Vice-Presidents are also active in strategic task forces, for instance on developing a position on the renewed European Research Area.

The Guild’s Working Groups

Research, Education & Innovation Policy:
- Erasmus
- Innovation
- Open Science
- R&I Policy
- Widening Participation

Institutional Enhancement:
- Institutional Liaisons
- Gender and Diversity
- Quality Assurance in Research
- Research Support Offices

Research & Academic Collaboration:
- Deans of Health
- Deans of Law
- Deans of Social Sciences and Humanities
- Deans of Theology
- North-Shouth Dialogue

The Guild Board of Directors 2018–2020, Anton Muscatelli (University of Glasgow), Svein Stølen (University of Oslo), Eva Åkesson (Uppsala University) and Vincent Blondel (UCLouvain).

Law Deans meeting with Filomena Chirico (Head of Unit for Programme Analysis and Regulatory Reform, DG RTD - European Commission) at The Guild office (September 2019)

Quality Assurance in Research meeting at Radboud University (November 2019)

Gender & Diversity working group kick-off meeting at the University of Bern (November 2019)

The Guild’s Working Groups
The Guild’s newest working group focuses on Gender & Diversity

This year marked the creation of our Gender and Diversity working group, composed of representatives who oversee the development and implementation of institutional strategies related to gender, diversity, inclusion and intersectionality. Over the years, gender equality has been gaining increased attention in EU policy-making, including in research and innovation policy. Whilst universities have been attentive to enhancing gender equality and diversity in their internal policies, challenges persist. The group facilitates institutional development by fostering the exchange of best practices and benchmarking across our member universities.

With the new leadership of the European Commission taking office in late 2019, the topic of gender and diversity has been reinvigorated through a new EU Gender Equality Strategy which includes, for the first time, proposals for binding measures, and it covers actions related to the EU’s research, innovation and education policies. The gender dimension will be further integrated in Horizon Europe, by requiring Gender Equality Plans (GEPs) from applicants. In the field of education, the Erasmus+ programme will also play a role in addressing gender inequalities.

As a first contribution to The Guild’s policy work, members of the Gender & Diversity working group contributed to The Guild’s position paper on the renewal of the European Research Area (ERA). They emphasised the need to create a level playing field in access to research careers, and considered that ERA should establish a common set of indicators to benchmark the EU’s progress and facilitate the implementation of GEPs. They also called for ERA to connect to the European Education Area through action against unconscious bias, addressing and mainstreaming values from the start of academic integration. The timely creation of the Gender & Diversity working group enables The Guild to continuously expand its expertise in topics relevant to EU policymakers, enhancing the voice of its members.

Enhancing institutional quality

The Guild Special Interest Group on Quality Assurance in Research continued its work on sharing data between universities to enable mutual learning and institutional development. The first findings were presented during a meeting hosted by Radboud University in September 2019. Here, members discussed the quality of the data and defined areas of particular interest, resolving to continue the project and deepen the analysis. In the last meeting, hosted by the University of Glasgow (via teleconference) in April 2020, members examined the data sets, which now also comprise performance indicators across EU funding schemes. In particular, they discussed the topic of reputation, a key indicator affecting the positions of universities in global rankings.

Through the continued work of the group and the consolidation of its objectives, it has contributed significantly to The Guild by bringing new insights to the network’s research activities. By exploring data on co-publication between member institutions and their diverse subject areas, alongside grant performance, the group is now able to provide a baseline against our members’ future development.

Capacity-building with the Research Support Offices’ working group

Research Support Offices have their dedicated working group within our network, a forum for sharing institutional practices. In October 2019, King’s College London hosted a successful workshop on the growth and performance of research support staff, with sessions ranging from recruitment and training practices to aspects of talent retainment.

The group has evolved into a lively network of likeminded RSO teams, that have in many cases started building bilateral relations with other Guild universities. The second workshop of the academic year will be hosted virtually in June 2020, focusing on implementation aspects of Horizon Europe. Besides featuring several speakers from the Commission, this workshop will address the challenging themes of facilitating interdisciplinary research collaboration, engaging with the EU’s research and innovation partnerships and engaging with the impact of research projects in Horizon Europe.
Our first Ph.D. summer school, hosted by Université Paris Diderot, focused on the career-readiness of doctoral candidates. In the rapidly changing labour market, where greater cross-sectoral and cross-disciplinary collaboration is in high demand, it is the responsibility of research-intensive universities to prepare doctoral students for a variety of professional contexts within and beyond academia.

In July 2019, around 30 young researchers from Guild member universities had the opportunity to explore how their doctoral training could be used in various settings, ranging from local organisations and businesses to European and national public policy. Through a combination of lectures, workshops, site visits, and networking events, participants learned about the key competences that make up their research training. The summer school enabled participants to engage in discussions with fellow researchers from across Europe and build their academic and professional network. In addition, they explored transversal skills that could enhance their research profile, such as research ethics, leadership, and public engagement. Coming from very different national backgrounds and disciplines, participants were able to share common concerns about applying their research skills outside of academia. Student feedback from the summer school was highly positive, singling out for particular praise the quality of the workshops and the opportunity to interact with Ph.D. candidates from various disciplinary fields.

Professor Thomas Coudreau, Head of the French doctoral college association, and host of the summer school, emphasized that empowering doctoral candidates to become active in influencing their future career paths is important, but more encouragement for this is needed, notably from their supervisors. That is why our member universities, including Université Paris Diderot (now Université de Paris) have created dedicated training courses, including project management, public speaking or data management plans.

The first Guild Summer School: interdisciplinary, intercultural, cross-sectoral

On 1 January 2020, The Guild’s member university Université Paris Diderot officially merged with the Université Paris Descartes and the Institut de Physique du Globe de Paris (IPGP) to become the Université de Paris.

In 2011, the French government launched a call to fund innovative partnerships and institutional mergers between research and higher education institutions (IDEX), with the goal to identify and foster the emergence of world-class French institutions. The creation of the Université de Paris reflects the will of Université Paris Diderot, Université Paris Descartes and the IPGP to join forces to enhance their international visibility, strengthen the excellence of their research across all subjects, and improve the student experience. Université de Paris is one of the few universities that have received the IDEX-excellence label from the French government.

Université de Paris is a multidisciplinary institution, organised around four faculties: Health, Sciences, Humanities and Social Sciences, and the IPGP. The university particularly distinguishes itself in the disciplines of Earth Sciences (reaching top 20 in the Shanghai Ranking), Physics and Mathematics (top 25), and Medical Sciences and Life Sciences (both top 50).

With one of the largest medical faculties in France, Université de Paris has had a prominent role in French research on Covid-19. The newly established university has also made immediate strides towards realising its international ambitions. It has concluded strategic agreements with distinguished international partners such as the National University of Singapore. The university also strengthened its European dimension through becoming a co-founder of the European university alliance Circle U in 2018. This strengthened the university’s foundations in The Guild, as it deepened its collaborative ties with four other Guild members: Aarhus University, University of Oslo, King’s College London and UCLouvain.
The Guild at a glance

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<td>10</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>132</td>
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Looking forward

The coming year will be pivotal for our societies, and our universities. The experience of our current public health crisis, and its social and economic effects, heighten the urgency of ensuring that universities are at the centre of Europe’s recovery. Research must find a cure for Covid-19, and our students must ensure a future for Europe that does not see new barriers of protectionism, division, and mistrust.

For the next decade and beyond, we need to ensure that Europe is distinguished by the strength of its research base, and by knowledgeable students capable of critical reflection and of addressing changing circumstances with skill and sophistication. This must be the ultimate ambition of the European Research Area, the European Education Area, and the Universities of the Future vision. The current crisis makes these strategic endeavours of the European Commission and the EU’s member states all the more timely and important. And they make it imperative that the voice of universities is heard effectively and comprehensively.

Four years old, The Guild is still a young network: but since our creation, Europe has changed, almost beyond recognition. Terms such as Brexit, Covid-19 and ‘post-truth’ have entered into our vocabulary, and this only strengthens our mission as a network, to be an effective voice for universities in public debate. Over the past years we have benefited from the immense generosity of our members in giving us their time, their expertise, and their thoughtfulness. We have been vastly encouraged that this commitment has not waned in any way through the trials and tribulations of our universities’ fully digital transition. And we look forward to a new academic year in which the richness of our members’ input, and their commitment to benefiting from each others’ experience, will continue to shape our network, and inform our positions.
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The Guild (2020): Sarika Wilson, Mariya Gabriel, Ivana Didak, Silvia Bottaro and Jan Palmowski, p. 8; The Guild team meeting with Anne Bucher and Martin Seychel, p. 10; Law Deans meeting, p. 28.

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Université de Paris (2019): the first Guild Summer School, p. 32.


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