Next Generation University

Share your thoughts. Dare to innovate.

To meet the challenges of our time, we need a new generation of universities.

Right now, we are seeing a historically unique convergence of geopolitical change, stress tests for democracies, climate change, and a new manufacturing environment for essential western industries. In these turbulent times filled with global challenges, universities have the duty – and the opportunity – to make a major contribution to the future well-being of society and to play a leading role within the innovation landscape that will make Europe the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world. This is the target set by the EU’s Lisbon Process and the subsequent Europe 2020 strategy.

In light of this situation, RWTH Aachen University has launched the "Next Generation University" initiative. The ambitious goal: universities should position themselves much more strongly as key players who are able to find and shape the innovative solutions for the societal challenges of our time.

"How can we get more out of universities?" is the guiding question that serves as the initiative's compass. It is rooted in some of the following observations from the science and innovation system in which universities are embedded:

- EU member states have committed to investing at least 3% of their gross domestic product in R&D, but the representatives at the Berlaymont are still struggling to find a smart way of orchestrating higher levels of technology maturity faster.

- DARPA is seen as the symbol of US technological superiority, while Europe has not yet found a suitable equivalent that would allow us to pave the way for leap innovations on a similar scale. Could e.g. SPRIND and DATI (only) in Germany be the appropriate instruments for this?

- In various locations in Europe, scholars are conducting experiments to find out which instruments universities can use to develop into effective innovation platforms and drivers. However, they have not yet been able to share and discuss the success/failure of these measures fully and transparently. As a result, it is difficult for them to recognize real cause-and-effect relationships, and so, unfortunately, the wheel is being reinvented in many places at the same time.

- Researchers now spend so much time applying for funding that a results-oriented funding system should be considered rather than one that is expectation-oriented.

- Political decisions sometimes result less in solutions to a problem but more so in limiting the framework in which to find them (e.g. e-vehicles, nuclear phase-out). A new, more self-evident collaboration between politics and science, (i.e. a way of communication that has been tried and tested even before a potential crisis situation develops), would also make it easier for science to work towards the benefit of society.

This series of observations (which could easily be extended) leads us to conclude that our current science and innovation system – including the centuries-old institution of the university – is anything but up-to-date and efficient.
We need innovative rethinking at the systems level, at the institutional level, and at the personal level:

- We need a new way for science, economy, and society to interact; a new form of collaboration between universities, research institutions, companies, and politics.
- We need measurable cause-and-effect relationships to be able to build the best innovation ecosystem without fear of making mistakes but with the capacity to redirect whenever we realize mistakes have been made.
- We need universities – which, after all, are places where knowledge is created and talent pools are generated – that play a supporting role in this overall societal process by reinventing themselves in an agile, strategic way and by engaging in a transparent exchange with one another.
- We need the willingness to fully challenge our personal and institutional capabilities, as well as the current rules of our system, and to innovate ourselves.

"Next Generation University" creates space for radical rethinking

With these needs in mind, "Next Generation University" sees itself as an initiative with the capacity to learn and interconnect different groups while it encourages self-critical discourse, inspires courageous action, and serves as a platform for sharing and discussing innovative model projects at universities. Always with the goal of exploiting the full potential of universities for the benefit of society in mind.

"Next Generation University" is a think tank, network, experimental space, and pan-European flagship conference for the science community – (a conference that is scheduled to take place annually from 2025 onward).

The initiative was launched in 2022 with three workshops and two expert meetings, in which the following topics were discussed:

- How can we meaningfully orchestrate the many outstanding individual achievements at universities and other research institutions in Europe? What skills do individuals and institutions need to have and what does the system need to offer?
- How can we combine improvements at universities and a better platform for innovation? Which experiments and instruments to this end are already available in Germany and Europe?
- How can research results benefit society more quickly? How do we enable "the translation of research into impact" through incentives and structures?
- How can fundamental characteristics of the US DARPA (radical innovative capacity, autonomy, failure culture) be transferred to the European science system and especially to universities?
- How do we achieve an efficient interaction between science, politics and the media?

A larger set of think tank formats on further questions is being prepared in coordination with our network partners. The results and ideas will be presented in 2025 at a pan-European flagship conference. The Next Generation University-Summit is intended to provide the science community with innovative answers to the major question: "How can we get more out of universities?"

Achieving more together: The initiative builds on collaboration

Using our collective intelligence, we aim to envision and test radically new concepts for universities and empower institutions to lead society into a world worth living in... Will you join us?

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