

# Rector Elections 2020 Draft Policy Document 2020-2024

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candidate-rector

All the world 's  
a stage,  
and all the men  
and women  
merely players.  
They have  
their exits and  
their entrances;  
And one man  
in his time  
plays many parts.



In October 2016, I was honoured with the privilege of becoming the rector of this well-balanced, well-governed and financially sound university. By then, the internal reorganisation required by the 2003 merger had been completed and processed, and UAntwerp was ready to move up a gear.

Right from the start, I was able to rely on the competence and experience of the policy team, my direct staff, the chair of the Board of Governors, the deans, the faculty directors and department heads, and so many other staff members in various capacities. It was also a pleasure to work together in fruitful partnerships with the student representatives. My sincere thanks go out to everyone for their constructive and loyal cooperation.

Special thanks are due to my closest staff, the vice-rectors for Education, Research, Valorisation & Development and Services to the University & Society: Ann De Schepper, Ronny Blust, Silvia Lenaerts and Filip Lardon. Together, we have shaped our joint project. When I use the word 'we' in what follows, I am referring to our cooperation.

Our university is a force to be reckoned with. It has become much more visible. UAntwerp now has a **more outspoken vision**, one that is also being picked up elsewhere. UAntwerp aspires to the highest possible quality in all aspects of our main missions: education, research and services to the University & Society. In doing so, we want to help shape every facet of society. We actively play

a leading role in the wider region, as the laboratory of the modern, multi-diverse city of the 21st century, founded on the pillars of democracy and human rights. We work closely together with stakeholders, with a specific focus on networking. UAntwerp aims to be a forerunner in Flanders and in the world, collaborating on and stimulating similar high-quality projects wherever possible. Much of what we do is inspired by the phrase 'Act local, think global'. Nevertheless, we also act globally: we are carrying out research with a universal scope in the all three areas of science, and we also want to attract students from all over the world. Over the course of the past term of office, however, we have realised that the Antwerp region – at the intersection of both physical roads and cultures – is an important foundation for the structural development of our university in Flanders and the world. We have strengthened that foundation in various areas, and we will continue to do so.

**Collaboration** is key in this regard. My policy team and I have worked extensively on that during the past term. Both internally and externally, we want to increase our collaborations in order to strengthen the university's position. Of course, we approach our contacts in a businesslike manner, but at the same time we aim for cooperation on the basis of **mutual trust**. This, too, is a key concept in our policy.

Moreover, I want to continue working towards a distinctly amicable, less competitive working environment that encourages more cooperation.

## 1. Cooperation in concrete terms

National and international research cooperation is mostly established from the bottom up, on the initiative of researchers or research groups. Structural cooperation between universities, on the other hand, is often related to educational cooperation. But this can also stimulate research cooperation, simply because we get to know each other better.

I have aimed to make **foreign missions** (e.g. state visits organised by the Federal and Flemish governments, missions led by the City of Antwerp, ...), including 'official' visits to other universities, more result-oriented. This is no an easy task, and there are often no immediately tangible results. For our mission to South Africa this coming May, we will be testing a new format.

We have also participated in the European University Initiative of the European Union, and we are proud that the **YUFE network**, which we are a member of along with nine other European universities, was not only approved, but considered to be the best proposal of them all (see [www.yufe.eu](http://www.yufe.eu)). Eventually, we will become part of a truly European University. We will keep our distinct

UAntwerp identity, but within an overarching framework, an alliance, a confederal structure, with several universities developing additional activities together, such as joint courses, joint degrees, and so on. This intense and groundbreaking project offers many opportunities and will allow our university to strengthen its position internationally as a driving force behind a new European university model.

We are also focusing on university cooperation in our own country. As **VLIR** president in 2017-2019, I managed to get the five Flemish universities to work together again. We certainly do not always share the same interests, but we still work together on ongoing issues wherever this is possible, useful and necessary.

Meanwhile, I have also focused on more specific **cooperation with Ghent University and the VUB**, both Flemish universities that advocate the same model: no 'merger and acquisition', but cooperation with respect for each other's individuality, in domains where we can complement and support one another. We also have a lot in common with these two universities, including the fact

that we all operate in distinctly urban settings. Lifelong learning will be the first domain that we will focus on together.

In addition, UAntwerp and the VUB are setting up a joint **Knowledge Platform for Diversity, Urbanism & Citizenship** in Mechelen, financed by Flemish Minister Bart Somers. This platform will bring together research groups from both universities, with a view to strengthening both research and educational services. As a result, our university will have a branch in Mechelen, in a wing of its city hall.

Within our own region, too, we are striving for cooperation that could benefit UAntwerp. Cooperation with both the City and the Province, with the Port Authority and with other regional partners such as Voka and Essenscia, has been increased considerably. We have been closely involved in the successful internal reform of the Antwerp Management School (AMS), and we have spurred collaboration with the Institute of Tropical Medicine (ITM). The university works closely with the Antwerp University Hospital (UZA) and now plays an active role in initiating collaborations between the region's hospital networks, too; for the first time, partial agreements were concluded on radiotherapy (Iridium) and oesophageal and pancreatic surgery.

We also need to strengthen cooperation within our own university. This is why we have introduced a **new allocation model** that still rewards faculty growth, but no

longer at the expense of other faculties. This will allow us to improve **interfaculty cooperation**. This is an important issue for the coming years.

In light of major societal challenges, **interdisciplinarity** is required now more than ever. Researchers and professors from across the university should be brought together on key social issues such as circular economy, employment, well-being, housing, education, health, culture and communication, heritage, traffic and mobility, sustainability, biodiversity and the environment. We have to get away from the compartmentalised thinking that is unfortunately so typical of university organisations. Existing structures sometimes stand in the way of cooperation and integration; let us get rid of those obstacles as best we can.

The structural development of a strong interfaculty level therefore seems crucial to me. Institutes such as IMDO and USI should be allowed to grow and become fully-fledged interdisciplinary players in the university organisation, and we will further valorise the expertise at CeMIS. In evaluations and promotions, faculties should also praise and reward interfaculty commitment and services to the university and to society.

Last but not least, I realise more than ever the importance of close cooperation with the Student Council and student representatives. They have been significantly involved in policy this past period, thanks to their constructive commitment and professionalism. We want to continue this fruitful cooperation.

## 2. Organisation

A sound **personnel policy** is the basis for any organisation's success. Everything starts with proper recruitment, followed by opportunities for career development. This requires a policy of appreciation, as well as a positive corporate culture in which everyone is proud to be part of UAntwerp.

This corporate culture sometimes involves 'simple' matters such as fun staff parties and lively graduation ceremonies. Our university is also closely concerned with the ups and downs encountered by its staff and students. Furthermore, we have been working on more visibility for the honorary doctorates. These kinds of events promote cohesion, contribute to people's well-being and are also excellent networking opportunities. It is important that we participate in all of this.

The HR department suffered a heavy loss with the death of Greet Dielis, as well as Serge Simon's long-term absence. And yet, they succeeded in further developing the policy lines set out by Greet and Serge. I want to thank them for that. We have also focused on the further development of quality service provision.

Wherever necessary, my policy team and I have sup-

ported a targeted, strategic human resources policy, for example in the context of the expansion or in the continuation of research groups.

**Promotions** of senior academic staff (Dutch: *zelfstandig academisch personeel*, ZAP) have become less competitive following the introduction of quota-free promotions (for transitions to associate professor and to professor). The promotion policy will be reassessed after the current promotion round.

We will encourage **sabbaticals** even more, by optimising the search for temporary replacement professors.

I would also like to work on an internal corporate culture which has an open and positive approach to **staff mobility**.

An appreciative and supportive personnel policy is not just a matter of rules and regulations; a good corporate culture means that everyone in the workplace helps to ensure that everyone is treated correctly. Management sets an example in this regard, encouraging each other and everyone, at every level, to create and maintain a pleasant working environment.

The matter of the TTZAPBOF staff (see below) has made it clear that we need to step up our efforts to implement a **well thought-out long-term policy on the recruitment of senior academic staff** in general, with the probationary period for recruitment being regarded as such. We want to further refine our recruitment procedures, for example by better monitoring gender neutrality. For one thing, the centralised procedure for senior academic staff appointments was strengthened by placing it entirely in the hands of the **Executive Board**, whereas it used to involve both the Executive Board (vacancies and job profiles) and the Board of Governors (appointment). This reform allows the **Board of Governors** to focus on strategic matters. The broad lines of the annual budget are now put in place earlier, in June of each year, which

makes it easier to make adjustments where necessary. For the first time, the faculties submitted their **faculty policy plans** to the Board of Governors for discussion. As a result, faculty boards can deepen their own policy visions and establish long-term perspectives on the basis of SWOT analyses. The culture of consultation has been intensified in the **Council of Deans**, both among the deans and with the rector and vice-rectors. This is another important improvement in university governance. After all, the deans are key figures in our organisation. They underpin the personnel policy in their faculties. As I mentioned above, a sound personnel policy is the basis for any organisation's success. I will therefore continue to focus on more open and intense collaboration with our deans.

### 3. Funding

**University funding** is a major challenge for UAntwerp. Let's start with the good news. Our university played an important role in the negotiations of the five Flemish universities with Minister Muyters, resulting in a substantial increase in BOF and IOF funding. We are also putting a lot of effort into increasing third- and fourth-flow funding – and successfully – while also optimising overheads (*bijdrage indirecte kosten*, BIK). However, core funding remains problematic, all the more now that the new Flemish government is imposing additional cuts. Together with the other Flemish universities, we will continue to press this issue. Thanks to careful financial planning, we can still move forward with our major building projects. In the coming period, these include the Paardenmarkt site, Campus Mutsaard, BlueApp (sustainable chemistry) and Building W (fundamental chemistry) at Campus Groenenborger. For the further expansion of Campus Drie Eiken (hall of residence, health campus and associated infrastructures) we are using a well thought-out leasehold formula. In the implementation of the Climate Action Plan, we will

prioritise significant climate investments. We also have to take into account the chronic shortage of investment funds for the real estate portfolio, while recruiting additional staff also remains a challenge. For instance, the limited budget is in direct opposition to the need to develop a middle management level. We have invested in additional research and valorisation managers and educational supervisors, and will continue to do so. We have also given faculties additional budget, but in some faculties the ZAP/AAP ratio remains problematic. Both the university as such and the faculties will have to make more adequate of reserves and earmarked funds. Faculties must also find innovative solutions in developing their long-term personnel policy: for instance, should every leaving ZAP member always be replaced by another ZAP member? This context of tight budgets means that new, additional recruitments should essentially pay for themselves over time. On top of that, additional investments in ICT security and university-wide digitisation will be unavoidable.

### 4. Education and students

#### 4.1. Recruitment, study progression and graduation

The **recruitment** of students remains an important concern. The university wants to attract talented young people from all layers of society. In 2019-2020, 20.8% of first-registration students (sometimes referred to as 'generation students') were from migration groups. In 2014-2015, this was only 12.5%. So in this regard, our university is achieving good results. In order to help young people take the step from sec-

ondary to higher education, most of our programmes organise **placement tests** ('instaptoetsen') in the first few weeks of the academic year, including for academic Dutch. By providing students with a clear picture of their initial competences, combined with remedial teaching options, we help them to hit the ground running. It goes without saying that we want to continue these efforts. We are also participating in the further development and validation of the Flemish-wide **calibration tests** ('ijkings-toetsen') for courses in the broad STEM domain, includ-

ing the elaboration of remedial teaching options and targeted feedback, as well as research into the impact of calibration tests on various groups.

As a way to provide an extra challenge to excelling pupils in secondary education, we started a special **honours programme** in 2018, allowing them to take a course unit from a Bachelor programme in their final year of secondary school. This programme was an instant success, with participants obtaining impressive study results.

However, UAntwerp faces a broader problem of **student recruitment**. The picture is different for every faculty, but overall intake of first-time students has been declining steadily since 2013, resulting in a loss of 5.8% in this segment. The problem is that we are not keeping pace with the demographic evolution, while other Flemish universities are holding their ground or even gaining ground. So in one of our main missions, the provision of education, we are falling behind. For this reason alone, this trend must be reversed. If not, UAntwerp will eventually face serious financial problems. Overall student recruitment is therefore an important policy priority for the coming years.

Everyone has their own opinion about this phenomenon, but what exactly is going on? I have surrounded myself with an ad-hoc working group that provides various analyses. While still ongoing, their research already shows that this downward trend cannot be attributed to factors such as increasing diversity, or traffic congestion in Antwerp. However, at this stage it is difficult to indicate which factors are actually having a negative impact. After all, we are dealing with a complex and interwoven set of factors, making it hard to pinpoint the impact of each element separately. Further analysis is needed.

Nevertheless, it is already clear that we need to take a broader view of the global concept of student recruitment. This has always been centrally organised, from a supply perspective: 'Here's what we're offering.' Going forward, we should also consider the demand perspective: 'What do prospective students want?' 'What do practitioners in the field want?' There is a need for new expertise with market-oriented tools, and for the development of a broader vision, with a greater focus on the faculty level. We also need to rethink how we welcome international students. Further expansion of student recruitment implies both university-wide and faculty-specific investments, with payback effects over time. This is a joint responsibility we all share, so every single staff member should be committed to it.

It is also essential that we maintain our increased focus on students' **progression** through their studies. Not only do we offer psychosocial and financial support and guidance to students (see below, Services to the University & Society), but we also have a set of tools – offered by academic staff and study programme counsellors in the

faculties and at the Study Advice and Student Counselling Service – focusing on each student's specific study path, depending on the programme they have chosen. We have added to and streamlined this broad range of tools and made them available on an accessible web portal. Investments have also been made to help every faculty provide study programme counselling, and Mentoraat Plus has been rolled out to all faculties.

UAntwerp's pursuit of quality over the past decade has resulted in strict **deliberation rules** – stricter than those at any other Flemish university. After extensive discussions with the Education Board and in consultation with the College of Deans, I gave the go-ahead to ease the general rules somewhat by introducing a limited tolerance, without detracting from our high ambitions. It also seems advisable – and is already the case at other universities and in some of our own faculties – to shift towards **fixed exam schedules** for purely written exams, so the dates are known from the start of the academic year. We may sacrifice some flexibility for students who do not follow a standard study programme, but then again, the timetable is never perfect for everyone. At least this would allow students to schedule their holiday jobs, summer activities in youth movements, and so on, well in advance.

I also want to strengthen our policy of excellence through **incentives for top students** (summer schools and doctoral scholarships with further specialisation at major universities abroad). Our summer schools have a strong dynamic and can be strengthened further through cooperation with other universities. UAntwerp will also support the projected increase in **student mobility** (YUFE) for outgoing students financially, with a social budget policy being paramount of course.

Another area of concern is student graduation and **outflow**, with several rapidly growing job fairs ('Talent Forum') and investments in special guidance such as 'Duo for a Job'. Furthermore, we have opted for an additional strategic policy theme on entrepreneurship and employability, for which our departments are currently developing a broad range of initiatives.

Given the rapid evolution in the professional field, we urgently need to expand and broaden the **Lifelong Learning** programme at the post-academic level, starting from what our faculties currently offer. We will promote these programmes more intensively, leveraging the expertise of our Centre for Work and Studying ('Centrum WeST'). We will do this in cooperation with Ghent University and VUB (as above).

Our **alumni policy** needs to be developed further, also for student generations predating the unification in 2003.

#### 4.2. The programmes we offer.

We will strengthen our university by offering carefully selected **English-taught programmes**. There is a specific

need for such programmes, and careful selection will also help our competitive advantage. The faculties of Business & Economics and of Social Sciences intend to offer a joint English-taught Bachelor. We will also promote and market our existing English-language Master programmes more extensively.

The YUFE network we participate in could really contribute to the **further internationalisation** of our curricula and offer new opportunities for physical mobility, virtual mobility and internationalisation@home.

We are also working on the development of a **Master in Bioscience Engineering**, focused on sustainable urban development.

Furthermore, we are continuing to develop our **Master of Teaching** programmes. There is an acute shortage of teachers in our region, so it is our responsibility to train competent secondary school teachers. To this end, we are further promoting the integrated Master of Teaching programmes that are directly available to our Bachelor students, while also launching additional initiatives to market the abridged programmes to graduates who already have Master degrees. With a flexible range of programmes for post-experience students in Antwerp, Mechelen and Turnhout, either full-time or part-time, we also cater for those who want to combine teacher training with a (first) job in education. In addition, we remain very active in the field of in-service training for teachers with the wide range of quality courses we offer through our In-service Teacher Training Centre (Dutch: *Centrum Nascholing Onderwijs*, **CNO**).

Another particular focus should be **ICT-driven teaching methods**. There will be additional infrastructure investments enabling a more extensive roll-out of blended learning. The existing experience in the YUFE network will undoubtedly be of great use to analyse new needs. We will of course continue to offer additional training courses to our lecturers and provide guidance to those who want to switch to blended education.

There will be increasing demand for **interdisciplinarity**. That is why, following an intense consultation process, we decided to broaden the scope of the compulsory World View course by introducing the '**basket**': a set of general interdisciplinary courses that seek to respond to today's major societal challenges. The basket has proven to be a well-balanced range of courses that do not threaten the existing World View subjects, with students from all faculties choosing from all the different basket subjects, including the optional subjects. Only the (atypical) subject of Community Service Learning needs to be promoted more widely. Some faculties offer little room for broadening electives. Bachelor and Master students themselves have raised this issue on multiple occasions, including in the recent programme evaluation questionnaire. The rectoral team

will strive to give the programmes a more interdisciplinary character, and to introduce new insights linked to sustainability into the curricula.

New, additional basket subjects will be considered, for instance in the field of artificial intelligence. Students should also be able to develop entrepreneurial skills, which could be achieved by introducing a basket subject. In addition, we will intensify our collaboration with TakeOffAntwerp ([www.takeoffantwerp.be](http://www.takeoffantwerp.be)). We need to further reflect on the concept of basket subjects by debating the very values of our university.

Interdisciplinarity requires intense and smooth cooperation between study programmes and faculties, supported by the central departments. This means that the faculties are able to share their expertise with students through **service education**, which we want to stimulate and reinforce however we can, keeping in mind each faculty's specific context.

### 4.3. Quality assurance.

In 2021, our institution will be visited by a panel as part of an institutional review. One of the most important criteria in this regard is a strong **quality culture**, which we have been developing in our institution in recent years.

Our own system of **programme assessments** has been rolled out systematically since 2016, and with good results. Several internal and external peers have been assessing our Bachelor, Master and Advanced Master programmes, from a place of trust and appreciation. The analysis thus far shows that our quality culture, our clear nexus between education and research and our attention to student-focused, competence-oriented and activating education are most often identified as strengths, while various panels indicate there is still room for improvement in areas including internationalisation and image building.

The **programme evaluation** organised in 2019 among all final-year Bachelor and Master students was closely linked to this. The students indicated that they were quite satisfied with their programmes, including the education-research nexus and competence-oriented and activating education. However, they mentioned that several programmes would stand to benefit from a greater focus on internationalisation, on the professional field and on feedback.

We will be continuing these programme assessments in the coming years, so that over a period of six years all training programmes will have gone through a full cycle, while always striving to reduce the administrative burden. We will also continue to focus on sharing best practices, on targeted professionalisation and on supporting faculty initiatives, for instance through our new three-year UFOO project on educational development, which specifically addresses issues raised in peer reviews and programme evaluations.

## 5. Research

This past period, the University of Antwerp has achieved **good results** in this domain. We leveraged the University Research Fund (BOF) to create opportunities, and this has paid off. For the first time in UAntwerp's history, our real share in the BOF key has exceeded the guaranteed share of 13%. Moreover, we can be proud of our FWO (Research Foundation Flanders) performance, which is an excellent university-wide barometer.

### 5.1. To measure is to know?

The **Times Higher Education Ranking** recently ranked our university among the top 200 in the world. This ranking is important because it opens new doors, and it indicates that our university is a strong player. In Belgium, only KU Leuven, Ghent University and UCL – all significantly larger than UAntwerp – are ranked higher. At the same time, more in-depth analysis is needed, with **discipline-specific criteria**. Although our university has long played a leading role with its broad research assessments, we must take the lead more decisively in using discipline-based benchmarking as input for research policy decisions. The international trend towards recognition of the uniqueness of disciplines is paramount in this regard. In line with the principles of the Leiden Manifesto ([www.Leidenmanifesto.org](http://www.Leidenmanifesto.org)), we aim for a broad evaluation of our research, with recognition of the social impact and valorisation of research, in addition to much-needed continuous quality assessment. This is a complex issue we are firmly committed to.

### 5.2. Growth opportunities and levers

A central theme in the policy vision for 2016-2020 was the ambition to pursue an **explicitly stimulating research policy**. We want to consolidate, fine-tune and reinforce the various initiatives launched this past period. In this regard, we need to foster more **collaboration** between the research groups. After all, today's societal challenges are highly multidisciplinary in nature. We have therefore adjusted the excellence funding system to make cooperation possible (TOP projects), compulsory (Methusalem) and worthwhile (GOA). We will continue to focus on stimulating multi- and interdisciplinary collaboration, for instance with regard to future opportunities for new research excellence consortia. Whenever existing structures stand in the way of close cooperation and integration, we must actively strive to get rid of those obstacles.

Our research assessments invariably show that almost all faculties and departments are conducting high-level, reputable research, with several peaks of excellent, internationally leading research. We will continue to give

further **career growth incentives** to all our researchers, in part with a view to attracting international funding and strengthening their international position. We also want to make room for **new, innovative research initiatives** that are still in their early stages, but with results that look very promising.

UAntwerp has played an important role in the successful negotiations of the universities with the previous Flemish government, which resulted in a substantial increase in funding from the BOF (University Research Fund) and the IOF (Industrial Research Fund). We have translated this into a number of incentives, while also increasing the chances of success. In the coming period, we will evaluate how BOF and IOF funding can be deployed in an even more complementary way, in order to boost leverage effects and increase the chances of success even further. Tax recovery is an important tool for out-of-the-box initiatives and strategic renewal, and for connecting BOF to IOF where possible, as a gateway to valorisation and long-term return.

Thanks to the increase in BOF funding we are able to **grant starting projects to new ZAP members**: after a quality assessment, possibly followed by feedback from the reading committee involved, they will receive a DOCPRO. In doing so, we can help boost the careers of starting ZAP members.

The extra funding has also allowed us to support our growth policy with new initiatives. For instance, the Research Board and IOF Council encourages researchers who, in the case of large European projects or demanding SBO applications, come up short just before the finish line. With appropriate bridge funding, we want to encourage them and provide them with concrete tools to submit new applications that have even greater chances of success.

If we want to foster growth opportunities, we also have to use **leverage effects**. In recent years, the explicit link between DOCPRO and FWO projects has led to a substantial increase in high-quality FWO applications and a higher number of awarded FWO projects. In the new policy period, we will continue to systematically examine how BOF funding can be used to leverage more external funding. Based on a good understanding of our relative participation and successes, we want to see to what extent the channels for FWO mandates can be stimulated even more effectively and efficiently. Similarly, we also expect supervisors of COE consortia, GOA and TOP projects to use the funds allocated to them even more emphatically than before to leverage international funding. We need to further expand and strengthen our position in international research networks and funding channels. We already have a solid presence in certain channels, but there is still great untapped potential here.



### 5.3. A more ambitious TTZAPBOF policy

In 2020, the team of research professors at UAntwerp is larger than it has ever been before, and the number of ERC Grantees who are temporarily fulfilling ZAPBOF mandates as full-time ZAP members, or who have been recruited as (TT)ZAPBOF after obtaining ERC Grants, has grown even more.

We want to provide better guidance to our tenure-track research professors so they can build successful and impactful research careers. We will do this by giving them the right incentives from the start. That is why we are also rethinking the evaluation system used in the **TTZAPBOF policy**, to arrive at a set of criteria based on trust, with ambitious benchmarks customised to the portfolio of the research domain.

Here, too, we want to make maximum use of leverage effects. We expect research professors to at least have the ambition to obtain an ERC project. We are also focusing on attracting candidates for FWO Odysseus funding. When recruiting research professors, it is essential to have sufficient guarantees in terms of the potential quality of education, a good fit with medium-term faculty planning, as well as long-term employability in the fields of services to the University & Society and policy implementation.

### 5.4. Research support: focus on the researcher

In recent years, the Department of Research & Innovation has been working closely with research and valorisation managers from the faculties and/or associated with consortia, which has increased the overall capacity for offering thorough readings, trial juries, and so on. The courses offered by the **Antwerp Doctoral School** were specifically expanded to better prepare our PhD students and postdocs for the challenges they are likely to face after their PhDs or postdoc periods. Because of high demand, the frequency of supervisor training has also been increased. Furthermore, with the successful **'Dive-into' training programmes**, we are offering more project-based guidance, from the application phase all the way through to the completion of a project. It is also important to assemble a team of **experienced project managers** who can help launch large-scale international projects. We will stimulate collaboration between all stakeholders through a more integrated interplay between research, innovation and valorisation, with open lines of communication and mutual learning as guiding principles.

Removing administrative barriers and obstacles is an important point of attention. We want to make great strides towards **administrative simplification** in various areas, which generally goes hand in hand with a boost in terms of content. Our overarching aim is to achieve integrated

processes across entities and to make sure researchers have a clear picture of who can help with which questions and what is expected by when, and why. Concrete actions include:

- Streamlining the PhD process by means of a doctoral file that is kept from the start until the thesis defence.
- Bringing together all relevant information about an awarded project in Antigoon, so that researchers/supervisors can find everything there and see which (administrative) steps still need to be taken.
- Reworking the project procedure, including mandatory notification and registration of all project applications.
- Further activation of the Research Infrastructure module in Antigoon, as a stepping stone in the development of a university-wide policy and a business model for the use, reuse and sharing of scientific infrastructure.
- Continuing to examine BOF calls and procedures critically, with greater input from external referees leading to a more efficient evaluation process.
- Eliminating partitions that sometimes still exist within our own structures, and which prevent or hinder better cooperation and integration.

### 5.5. Scientific infrastructure: more than a basic prerequisite

The increase in research funding means that we need to be vigilant when it comes to capacity in the organisation. Researchers sometimes reach the limits of what they can take on and supervise. In such cases – if this has not already been done – there is an urgent need to optimise and increase efficiency. This is certainly still possible in a number of areas, for instance in our scientific **research infrastructure**. This is an important point of concern. We are already doing a lot with regard to research infrastructure, but it is our aim to step things up a gear. Successful research is becoming increasingly capital-intensive in almost all disciplines. That is why we want to pursue a more ambitious policy with regard to our scientific infrastructure in the coming years. In Social Sciences and Humanities, too, there are tremendous challenges. For instance, we are still insufficiently armed to deal with rapid advances in artificial intelligence, big data research and digital humanities, even though these are fields in which we play a significant role. In short, the needs are great in all areas of science. Providing an answer to these needs is high on the agenda for the coming years.

Funding for the 'small' basic infrastructure was tackled consistently in the past term, with the creation of a new application channel within the BOF, for which additional funds were also mobilised. But that does not mean our work is done. The ambition is not only to release more internal funds for scientific infrastructure, but also to strengthen the leverage effects of BOF funds, to

streamline internal procedures and underlying business models, to exchange best practices, and to stimulate the use of equipment by multiple groups even further. This important exercise should give wings to our infrastructure-reliant researchers in the coming years.

A particular point of attention is the medium-heavy infrastructure. With the current level of funding, we sometimes have to walk a fine line between protecting strong research traditions and making room for new lines of research. Can we have our cake and eat it too? Not without additional funding. But we are looking for it, and we will find it. We also need to re-examine and optimise existing funding channels for research infrastructure, such as the funding line for the 'maintenance contracts', 'core facilities' and so on.

In any case, the issue must be addressed in such a way that our researchers can participate even more in major external funding, such as the FWO IRI channel and the infrastructure calls of the European Framework Programme. Strong dedication to long-term recognition through inclusion in (the roadmaps for) ESFRI is also essential. These challenges are so enormous that we can only meet them by carefully fine-tuning our policy, with constructive input from all stakeholders.

## 5.6. Internationalisation of research

For the university and for research in particular, it is essential that we expand our international horizons, in Europe and beyond. Our chosen path of encouraging European project applications, as well as connecting BOF and FWO projects, has already proved to be a springboard towards more external fundraising. It is no coincidence that in 2018 and 2019 our professors were particularly successful in attracting European funding, both within the prestigious ERC channel, through MSCA funding and in the broader 'Societal Challenges' calls. This not only increases the focus on internationalisation, but also on multidisciplinary and social relevance. These factors have also played an important role in the selection and attribution of a total of **15 new Centres of Excellence**, where (co-)supervisors and research managers bring together researchers from different fields to work on major scientific and societal issues. As successors to the former research 'spearheads', these Centres of Excellence showcase our research on an international level. As I have already noted, we have released funds within the BOF to support this process more actively.

Another potential new catalyst is **YUFE**. The transformative modules for European Universities that were recently proposed by the European Commission offer an excellent opportunity to attach a strong research component to YUFE, thereby creating a fertile seedbed for new consortia and project-based collaborations. Our aim is to create a steppingstone towards European Framework Programme funding, both with YUFE and with other international partners.

With the growing alternative funding channels for open science, innovation ecosystems and training for entrepreneurship, UAntwerp's involvement in strong networks is now more crucial than ever.

Not only do we want to attract the most promising and talented researchers, but we must also provide them with a warm, professional and challenging environment. The further internationalisation of the **Antwerp Doctoral School (ADS)** is therefore crucial. After all, an increasing proportion of our PhD students and researchers in general come from abroad; ADS is an essential marketing and image-building element that can help convince PhD students to choose UAntwerp. Consequently, the ADS will further strengthen its international network.

## 5.7. Influence on the government

Together with the VLIR, the FWO and VLAIO, we try to influence the Flemish and European authorities responsible for research and innovation. These are important aspects of university networking.

**Open Science** is high on our agenda. UAntwerp has launched numerous initiatives to remain a frontrunner in this field, and will continue to do so in the future. Yerun is a good steppingstone for fostering an open science culture in which **ethical conduct, integrity, openness, involvement of stakeholders and citizens, and societal impact** are key aspects. In cooperation with external partners, we are looking into the possibility of an open-access publishing platform. With a cash injection from the Flemish Open Science Board, we will be able to further develop a high-quality Human & Technical Infrastructure for research data management, with more data stewards close to the researchers and a layered data archive, all the while embedding our own initiatives in the European framework through participation in EOSC (European Open Science Cloud) projects.

## 6. Valorisation

Since 2016, research valorisation has been an important new policy priority for UAntwerp. Valorisation is the process of converting knowledge that is useful for the economy and society, gathered through innovative research, into a product, a process, an organisational model or a business model.

As mentioned earlier, there was a substantial increase in IOF funding under the previous Flemish government. The IOF, which falls under the Antwerp University Association, serves as a valorisation lever. It helps to lay the necessary groundwork for targeted long-term policies. By its very definition, valorisation initially yields few tangible results. Nevertheless, we have already achieved promising results while building a solid foundation for our future efforts. UAntwerp was recently named the most innovative European research institution by [CFI.co](#). Broad and clear perspectives are emerging, some of which are already within our reach.

### 6.1. Cooperation as a starting point for valorisation

Valorisation can only succeed when many players and stakeholders work together to achieve a win-win situation. A complex set of relationships needs to be developed, and we have focused intensively on these networks. We work closely with institutions in the region that are organisationally related to the university, while also having close ties to valorisation, such as the AUHA partners, UZA, AMS and the ITM. In addition, we have built up strong contacts with the business community and with the City, the Province and the Port of Antwerp, as well as with other institutional and societal stakeholders, both in Flanders and at the European level. We have established the Belgian department of the important European Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN) in Antwerp, with UAntwerp as its coordinator; our partners are the other Flemish universities, The Shift, VITO, AMS, Cifal and ICOR. With AMS we have set up an Antwerp Partnership for Sustainability. The Master of Safety Sciences – important to the business community – was redesigned through a Chair organised in collaboration with Essenscia and Mensura. These and other collaborations are all part of our broad valorisation policy.

### 6.2. Three multidisciplinary valorisation domains

When we launched Valorisation as a separate cluster, we immediately focused on a number of multidisciplinary domains which have clear potential for valorisation. This ecosystem approach fosters intense collaboration between researchers, businesspeople, entrepreneurs, investors, policymakers, citizens and society as a whole.

We looked at demand outside the university, such as roadmaps and long-term plans, while also taking into account our existing strong research groups. We gave priority to areas where funding exists, also in the European context.

The valorisation domains we have defined cover all three major areas of science. With this new, knowledge-driven approach, the University of Antwerp acts as a driving force in innovation ecosystems that develop solutions that have an impact on the economy and on society. The university has thus broadened its role to become a driver of innovation, and an innovative regional force to be reckoned with in knowledge-intensive ecosystems. Not only do we deliver well-trained people and generate knowledge and insight, we also aim to meet the specific needs of the innovation ecosystem in which the university is embedded.

Based on its own strengths, combined with the unique characteristics of Antwerp as the economic engine of Flanders – with its major international sea port, the second largest chemical cluster, a thriving creative sector and empowered citizens, but above all a shared ambition to grow the region through innovation – the University of Antwerp has decided to focus on three valorisation domains: Sustainable Chemistry and Materials; Vaccination, Infectious Diseases & Environmental Health; and the cluster around Metropolitanism & Smart City, Mobility & Logistics.

#### *Sustainable Chemistry & Materials*

The pre-incubation structure containing professional support for co-creation and co-development projects for sustainable chemistry and materials was christened BlueApp. Specifically, **BlueApp** is a building equipped with laboratories for projects involving sustainable chemical processes and materials. It is also an innovation ecosystem which offers additional support in the form of people, infrastructure and resources. This building will be completed in 2021; it is located in Antwerp South, on the BlueChem site.

BlueApp will focus on valorisable research in collaboration with industrial and societal partners, and also on the development of products, processes and models that can lead to a licensing or investment agreement. There will also be a permanent research group in the building, dedicated to process intensification of (bio)chemical processes, at TRL levels 3 to 6. Collaboration with other research groups at UAntwerp, but also with other national and international knowledge institutions, government bodies and companies, is key.

By establishing BlueApp on the site of Blue Gate Antwerp, UAntwerp is positioning itself as a driving force in the innovation ecosystem in sustainable chemistry that will shape the future of the region and society.

### *Vaccination & Infectious Diseases & Environmental Health*

Flanders and Belgium have global reputations as regions for conducting clinical trials, in particular vaccination trials. The Antwerp region has a unique ecosystem with sufficient critical mass and ambition to put its research and innovation in infectious diseases and vaccinations on the world map: from UAntwerp to ITM, the pharmaceutical companies, UZA and the hospital umbrella organisations, the SMEs involved in diagnostics, the collaborations with other universities in immunology, vaccine studies and diagnostics, as well as the hospital networks with their large patient populations – the Antwerp ecosystem is unique. It is no coincidence that we are a leading player right now as far as COVID-19 and polio are concerned.

The Antwerp innovation ecosystem for vaccination and infectious diseases wants to increase its reach with the expansion of **Vaccinopolis**. This is our response to the clear need within the ecosystem for research into infectious diseases and vaccines, conducted at a comprehensive facility for clinical studies, with accommodation for volunteers, adapted laboratories, state-of-the-art diagnostics, and biobank facilities. By focusing on translational research and interdisciplinary collaboration, Vaccinopolis will significantly improve and accelerate the development of new vaccines and therapies for infectious diseases.

This ecosystem will stimulate innovation and valorisation, and as a hub it will attract talented individuals, such as highly educated researchers. We are putting Antwerp on the map, generating more impact and more collaboration with other research institutes, international funders and companies. In light of the tremendous societal importance of vaccination and infectious diseases, the close involvement of legal, social and ethical experts is a given. We also focus on environmental health research, in particular into the impact of our environment on our health and well-being. This interdisciplinary research will investigate the effects of exposure to environmental factors on human health.

### *Metropolitanism & Smart City, Mobility & Logistics*

With its new focus on valorisation, UAntwerp was a driving force in the establishment of **The Beacon** in 2019, in collaboration with the city, the port, IMEC, Lantis and Agoria. Located in the city's old Toll House, this community hub is dedicated to IoT and AI projects with applications in Smart Cities, Smart Mobility, Smart Port & Logistics, Smart Industry and Smart Buildings. The Beacon is a starting point for digital open innova-

tion and will continue to grow as a regional innovation amplifier in the Loodswezen and Boeienloods complexes, with room for the Supernova Innovation Festival and for an ever-increasing number of growing companies. Within this ecosystem, specific courses can be offered with lecturers from the university, the government and the business community.

In addition, the Faculty of Design Sciences and The Beacon are working on the development of a 'Design Science Hub' in order to realise valorisation at the intersection of spatial planning, environment and health. In this highly innovative approach, interdisciplinary labs are being developed that can provide new concepts and actually lead to valorisation in such fields as urban planning and the building sector.

### **6.3. About growth opportunities and support**

These three valorisation areas are the first strategic anchor points in a new valorisation policy, but of course we do not want to limit ourselves to these three. We are open to any form of support for ongoing research, so new opportunities and new initiatives can grow into important interdisciplinary valorisation projects in an innovation-ecosystem approach. We strive for the **bottom-up integration of research groups**, so that they may become strong valorisation platforms.

We have strengthened the Valorisation Office by recruiting permanent and temporary staff to support IOF consortia and research groups. They look for valorisation opportunities and additional funding opportunities, while striving to connect external business developers to our researchers. They identify file owners and stimulate cooperation between researchers and internal services on the one hand and external partners on the other hand. Through consultation platforms, the Valorisation Office encourages the sharing of best practices between research groups and with external partners. The Office fosters content-oriented cooperation with institutional partners and with strategic research centres, while further intensifying cooperation with the spearhead clusters. In addition, there will be an increased focus on new European initiatives, such as the Green Deal, and funding channels related to valorisation.

Something that has been very important for the senior valorisation consortia at our university is the recent creation of a separate business unit, **Antwerp Valorisation & Development** (AVD), which brings together the organisational and financial valorisation efforts of our university.

## 7. Service to the University & Society

### 7.1. University & Society Department

Part one of the **Diversity Action Plan** (DAP 1), which consists of actions to promote the recruitment, study progress and graduation of students from disadvantaged groups, was launched in December 2018. Three scientific studies were carried out by ADU&S, in collaboration with CeMIS, with a view to identifying the obstacles faced by socially vulnerable students at UAntwerp (2015-2016-2017). On the basis of these data, we have drawn up an action plan in order to guide the faculties and raise awareness of their own diversity actions. A module has also been developed to monitor disadvantaged groups within the student population. The data will be used to develop the diversity policy further and faculty administrations will be given the opportunity to describe their student populations and to determine policy priorities. The Diversity team at ADU&S needs to grow and evolve into a Diversity Expertise Centre, for the benefit of the entire university. In cooperation with Unia, a central action framework is being developed for various diversity-related issues.

In the next policy period, the theme of **poverty** will be examined. There will be a pilot project aimed at developing policy advice on the basis of in-depth interviews with students.

In order to improve the study progression of our students, and as per DAP 1, **Mentoraat Plus** was rolled out to all faculties. The result is that our university now offers an intensive support trajectory, aimed at the academic and social integration of each student. Demand from secondary education for pupil tutoring by university students has risen sharply over the past four years. As a consequence, **Tutoraat** has evolved into an initiative with significant influence, firmly rooted in the educational landscape. However, in spite of the ever-increasing demand, the number of tutors has remained roughly the same, so this is a challenge that requires creative solutions.

After the diversity action plan for students, we are now working on the elaboration of a **diversity action plan for staff**.

UAntwerp is an important player in the field of **science communication** to the general public, offering active support and encouragement to its researchers. For instance, we have entered into long-term partnerships with the Antwerp Book Fair and with the University of Flanders. External questions are examined case-by-case in terms of their feasibility, relevance, return for researchers and potential contribution to the image and core values of UAntwerp.

Revenues from the **University Fund** continue to grow, and 2019 was the best year ever, with 2,164,615 euros in donations. This increase is mainly thanks to heightened internal and external awareness that the fund exists, as well as the reactivation of 'sleeping' donors, the growing number of Chairs, and the fund's new staffing.

The University Fund has established **10 new Chairs**, bringing the total to 22 active Chairs at our university. In the future, the University Fund will focus on 'info lunches' with business leaders in the presence of the rectorate. We will actively reach out to service clubs, and we are also considering organising large-scale charity events.

The unrelenting phenomenon of **internationalisation**, which has led to a growing influx of international students and staff, is affecting and transforming the entire university. In order to meet the needs of all target groups, all the while ensuring quality and sustainability, all offices involved need to provide customised service. First and foremost, this service has to be customer-friendly, while always keeping in mind that cases can be ambiguous; second, applicants need to be helped effectively and efficiently. A lot of good work is being done in supporting internationalisation, and we have gone to great lengths to improve processes that have flaws, but there is still a long way to go.

We are working on an English-language website with its own format, aimed at foreign visitors. Greater efforts are also needed to streamline the services offered, to make them more visible and to ensure coherence and completeness, so that all offices and people involved can develop a joint internationalisation policy in symbiosis. A new position paper on internationalisation was recently approved by the Board of Governors. The challenge now lies in developing specific actions that put this vision into practice, including strategic and operational objectives and clear responsibilities.

### 7.2. Social, Cultural and Student Services

Following an analysis of student **accommodation**, it was decided to renovate the hall of residence in the Koningsstraat by means of a leasehold formula. In addition, the university is making agreements with homeowners providing student housing. Together with the city of Antwerp and other higher education institutions, DSCS is also committed to the smooth operation of the Kotweb platform. A regulating effect on rent levels is to be expected due to the relative excess supply of student rooms in the city. However, students who have financial difficulties can count on support from the university (see below, the social service).

In the area of **catering**, we are working on solutions to create more space in the Komida restaurants, we are making affordable and healthy food more sustainable, and we are minimising food waste. Keeping prices as low as possible is an important point of attention. On Campus Drie Eiken, the limited size of the Komida remains a problem. We are addressing this issue in the broader context of **Making CDE**, with an extended leasehold formula. Campus Drie Eiken will be expanded into a Health Campus, which will include a hall of residence, a sports hall and additional catering facilities. The renovation of the TPC hall of residence (owned by the Diocese of Antwerp) is also on the horizon, and will be closely monitored.

As in all large cities, the problem of poverty and disadvantaged young people is also present among our students. The **social service** attempts to help students overcome difficult socio-economic situations by taking a comprehensive approach, relying heavily on discretion and expertise. After all, students often need more than just financial support. For that reason, they can also count on advice about grants, student jobs and the social statute of 'student', so that they can fully participate in society and in student life.

There are indications that we are not yet reaching disadvantaged students enough. We will be working hard to remedy this issue. For example, DSCS will develop an accessible and user-friendly digital 'Social budget policy tool' to inform (potential) students about possible means of support during their studies.

DSCS has also been restructured in order to meet increasing demand for **psychological support**. It operates on demand, offering support that is tailored to each student and their study programme, with a focus on front-line care. Staff is now also available after office hours. In addition, the association-wide channel named Psy-net has been expanded. In order to avoid drop-outs and improve study progress, DSCS has also focused on providing training in study skills, both individually and in groups, in recent years.

**Sports and culture** are an integral part of the student experience. The range of activities we offer is expanding year after year. The UAntwerp Plus Pass could probably do with a refresh.

Through their **student representatives**, students participate actively in the decision-making process at UAntwerp. I am very grateful to the student representatives for their constructive cooperation. Recently, a

renovated building in Prinsesstraat was made available to the Student Council and other organisations.

We want to facilitate student life through student associations, societies and organisations. The student coach and I always strive to take a constructive approach to any problem that may arise in the context of student life, and we work closely with the city of Antwerp to create and maintain proper conditions for an exciting student experience.

### 7.3 Library

The **University Library** is faced with the increasing costs of preserving both analogue and digital content. This is a worldwide problem. Increasing the library's budget seems unavoidable, not least because in certain disciplines, especially in Social Sciences and Humanities, the library and its databases are virtually the equivalent of laboratories in other disciplines. Consequently, we have been working hard to further optimise our current purchasing policy these past few years.

Now more than ever, the focus will be on **cooperation** – not only internally, with Research (research data management), ICT (digital sustainability, eDepot), the AMS, Loyola and the city of Antwerp (Anet), but also at the Flemish and Belgian levels (Open Access, Elektron) as well as internationally (the Netherlands, YUFE, the EU). The library is continually expanding its range of **Information Skills** courses, tailored to the needs of Bachelor, Master and PhD students as well as pupils in secondary education.

More desk space for reading and studying has been created on CGB and on CDE, and opening hours have been extended during (pre-)exam periods. Students use the libraries in large numbers.

Our intentions as regards '**The Memory of the University of Antwerp**' have been realised: we now have a professional University Archive, our academic heritage is being inventoried, and we are communicating with the public. The VLIR Working Group on Academic Heritage is now also operational, scientifically cataloguing our very important collection of Art on Campus.

A very pressing problem (across the globe) is **digital sustainability**. If we do nothing, then relatively soon the digital content we are creating now will be lost forever. Medieval manuscripts can still be read perfectly, but floppy disks from 1990 are now unreadable. The University Archive aims to launch an eDepot to ensure digital sustainability.

## 8. Final considerations

Our university wants to be a strong and excellent organisation, but it is also large and complex. Those of you who are still bearing with me after reading this long and rather heavy policy text (thank you!) will appreciate that making an executive summary of all this is very difficult. I would much rather conclude with some musings about the possible future of our university.

As I was rereading the policy texts from 2016, it struck me that some of the factors we consider crucial today were barely touched upon or not even mentioned at all. The new dynamic, it seems to me, has a lot to do with increased collaboration, both inside and outside the university. The interdisciplinarity we so urgently need in order to translate the SDGs into concrete actions will take shape in the next few years through many collaborative partnerships, between universities here and elsewhere, between researchers and research groups across faculties and departments. Such cooperation is especially fruitful when it takes place in an atmosphere of positive openness and mutual trust, so we should all devote ourselves to achieving that.

The educational landscape is in a state of flux. Student intake, study progression and graduation remain points of attention that will require a great deal of effort, along with digitalisation and themes such as gender and diversity, sustainability, and so much more. But we also have important strengths. For example, the YUFE project offers many opportunities, while the Lifelong Learning trajectory, which we will be developing further, can open the door to a new university concept. Another important

strength is that our university wants to keep its finger on the heartbeat of society when it comes to education. For one thing, the 'distance' between our lecturers and students is rather small. This is part of our DNA, as we are the result of the merger of three relatively small universities in 2003. And then there is our open world view: as a laboratory of the metropolis, our university is committed to building and developing our society, in all its kaleidoscopic versatility. All of this gives us confidence; it inspires the university with its 6000 staff members and 21,000 students. So we can face the future together. *Plus est en vous!*

The research landscape is also constantly changing through interaction with a society that has specific demands, needs, hopes and expectations. It goes without saying that the evolution towards much more 'open access' will require the necessary attention and resources. We also still have a long way to go in terms of a gender-neutral research policy. And anyone who thinks that the call for sustainability will not apply to our research is probably not watching the same evening news that I am. It would be nice if our university played a leading role in this regard as well. Becoming sensitive to these challenges, while also keeping our eyes peeled for opportunities in terms of research and valorisation, is high on the agenda. I look forward to working on this with all those involved.

We do not know what the future holds, but together we can shape the best possible one. This is how we all help shape the world around us.

I wish you all the very best, and I thank you for the trust you have placed in me.