

The League of European Research Universities (LERU)

Introduction

Thank you for the invitation and opportunity to present LERU at this conference. What I will try to achieve is to give you a brief overview of LERU. What is LERU? What are the objectives of LERU? How does LERU work? What is the role of LERU in European research policy?

1. What is LERU?

The League of European Research Universities (LERU) is an association of 21 prominent, comprehensive research-intensive universities which have a strong emphasis on internationally competitive research. The network was founded in 2002. It is thus a relatively young institution. Its main objective is to promote the issue of first-class basic research at universities. Thus, LERU focuses on two interacting dimensions of research. The first one is the particular role of basic or blue sky research as a key driver for innovation. There is always a certain tendency among politicians and the general public to prefer applied research which promises immediate results and benefits relative to basic research. However, it is clear that, in the long run, basic research is the main source of new ideas, inventions and innovation. It is, therefore, one purpose to highlight and to promote the particular role and importance of basic research. Our second objective concerns the role of universities in the research process. Again, it is often agreed that research should be strengthened at non-university research institutions. What LERU tries to make clear and to emphasize is the role of universities as backbone of the research process.

LERU is a relatively small organization with only 21 members. Our network is not a closed shop or an exclusive club, but we want to stay as a small group so that the contribution of

each of our member universities is significant and visible. And this is also the reason why cohesion and cooperation within our network is strong and vibrant.

The LERU office which is based near Brussels has a total of five staff members. The office is run by LERU's Secretary General, Professor Kurt Deketelaere, whom probably many of you know.

I would like to give you some figures with regard to our members: The 21 universities that form our network are from 10 countries. Member universities are, for example, Oxford, Cambridge, Zürich, Strasbourg, and Heidelberg. Together, they have about 550,000 students, ca. 50,000 of them being PhD candidates. Our members award 12,000 doctorates per year. The total research budget of all members per year exceeds 5 billion Euros. Roughly 20 % of all ERC grants accrue to our members, and more than 230 Nobel Prizes and Field Medal winners have studied or worked at our member universities.¹

The organizational structure of the league is very simple and transparent: The highest body is the Rectors' Assembly which takes all strategic decisions and meets twice a year. The Board of Directors implements the decisions of the Rectors' Assembly and monitors the budget. I have the honor to currently serve as chairman.

2. How does LERU achieve its goals?

LERU pursues its objectives in two ways. First, we are an active partner in the dialogue with all the institutions at the European level. This concerns the European Commission, the European Research Council, and the EIT. LERU also cooperates with other stakeholder organizations like the EUA. One has clearly to admit that this is a kind of lobbying effort in the political arena to promote the role of basic research and the role of research-intensive universities. The second instrument is the standard instrument of academics: publications. Over the years, LERU has published numerous policy papers, policy proposals and statements. The topics range from fundamental issues like the role of universities and the

¹ League of European Research Universities (2013). *About LERU*. Available at: <http://www.leru.org/index.php/public/about-leru/> (accessed 16 January 2013).

nature of the research process to urgent and more practical issues like social security law as an impediment to the mobility of researchers across Europe. In addition, LERU has published papers on the current policy debate in Europe, for example on the European Research Area (ERA).

I think it is fair to say that the LERU papers have had a significant impact on the debate on research and higher education policy. The papers have helped to clarify and to frame the underlying issues in many debates and have made proposals for political solutions. The high quality of the LERU papers is one key factor in the success of LERU.

3. What has LERU achieved so far?

Last year, LERU celebrated its ten year anniversary. That gave us the opportunity to take stock and to assess what we have achieved so far. I think there is strong consensus that LERU has established itself as one major stakeholder in the European policy debate. While other organizations pursue somewhat different goals, LERU can be seen as the institution representing the interests of research-intensive universities with a clear focus on basic research. The role of LERU as a stakeholder in European Research policy can also be seen by the fact that LERU is among the first signatories of the Memorandum of Understanding on the further realization of the European Research Area.

In the future, we will intensify our ties with international institutions like the Association of American Universities (AAU) in the US, the Group of Eight in Australia or the C9 League in China.