

President Speech
YERUN Launch Event
7 November 2017
European Parliament

Dear Madame Soledad Cabezón, dear Mister Keith Sequeira, dear rectors, dear colleagues, dear friends, ladies and gentlemen,

it is my pleasure to launch this event, the first one that YERUN is organising in Brussels. We want to present you the commitment of YERUN members, to introduce you to our “young” history and, most importantly, to engage you in our future activities.

First of all, let me thank especially Soledad, our host, not only for your support in making this event a reality but also for your very quick response in addressing some YERUN priorities in your report on the mid-term evaluation of Horizon2020. I am looking forward to listening to some updates on this, after my introduction.

YERUN, the Young European Research Universities Network, was created as the result of existing collaboration among 18 young and highly ranked universities in Europe: Antwerpen, in Belgium; Southern Denmark; Eastern Finland; Paris Dauphine, in France; Bremen, Konstanz and Ulm, in Germany; Dublin City University, in Ireland; Università di Roma Tor Vergata, in Italy; Maastricht, in The Netherlands; Nova de Lisboa, in Portugal; Autònoma de Barcelona, Autònoma de Madrid, Carlos III de Madrid and Pompeu Fabra, in Spain; Linköping, in Sweden, and Brunel and Essex, in United Kingdom. They decided to establish the network, back in 2015, to promote joint initiatives in the areas of research, teaching and mobility in Europe.

Europe, is an idea for some; for others, it is a myth; for the universities that make YERUN, it is a reality embodied in our everyday work. But still, as Europeans, we are never satisfied with reality as it is.

The Spanish thinker, María Zambrano, used to say that Europe is a utopia, perhaps the last utopia we can feel proud of. For YERUN, utopia and reality go hand in hand in our daily work to strengthen cooperation amongst European universities, to develop together scientific research and to offer an excellent academic education to our European citizens and international students.

These days, it is necessary to acknowledge that the European project is enduring hard times. The decision of the British people to leave the EU, the refugee crisis, the post truth era we live in, are some of the aspects that make this evident.

Not only Europe, but the whole western world is undergoing difficulties. Some academicians say we live in a VUCA world. This acronym, VUCA, stands for volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity. We can say that we live in a VUCA Europe as well. The good news is that our institutions, the Universities, are in a privileged position to face it. Universities are the most comfortable place for uncertainty, since knowledge is by definition an adventurous journey to an unknown destination. Universities are the place for complexity: scientists provide real breakthroughs in their fields of research, precisely because they acknowledge the complexity of their topics and are able to manage it.

Despite all the difficulties, Europe is the place where we all live together, united by our differences. In the same way, Universities are ecosystems where ideas coexist and are ready to be challenged, rebutted or confirmed. Ready to be developed or disregarded, to be innovative and creative, to drive the research that will make our societies move forward and perform better. Albert Einstein said, “in moments of crisis, only imagination is more important than knowledge.” Universities are places where imagination and knowledge go together. Research and innovation are a crucial contribution that Universities make to society.

The need for the European project is stronger than ever before. However, Europe as an idea would not make sense if there were not actual and specific achievements. For us, YERUN is one of these achievements and I must say I feel proud of the accomplishments we have made in these years. YERUN embodies our will to build the networks that strengthen European knowledge and innovation, in order to provide our societies with more progress, wealth and wellbeing. There are no limits to our success as long as we reach the necessary critical mass to have our say in the global world. That is our task, and we are working hard at it.

YERUN members acknowledge the many changes that affect the dynamics of our universities. There is pressure on ensuring that the investments made in knowledge creation bring competitive advantage to Europe. There is a stronger focus on innovation. There are stronger demands for modern educational systems. A need to provide transversal and interdisciplinary skills to our graduates. And a request to reinforce communication, to put the created knowledge at the disposal of citizens and society at large.

Young universities have solid collaborations with private partners, governments, civil society organisations and citizens, at all levels. We bring research to our learning and teaching, and we evolve constantly our education and research. While YERUN members are being very active in addressing these aspects at their local levels, the network wants to bring upfront the experiences we are tackling collectively.

This brings us to this Launch Event. The 18 European young universities that founded YERUN decided to open their Brussels office a year ago. They had a larger objective in mind: being close to the heart of the European Institutions and complement the European policy landscape by bringing our perspective on research, education and innovation.

We are just coming back from a very successful General Assembly in Ulm, Germany, where members shared the advances of the initiatives put in place. There are 14 Joint Programs developed and 16 more that will start in the next years; there are more than 300 research collaborations amongst members and almost 60 joint publications per year. YERUN has put in place mobility schemes for researchers and staff. We are organizing research workshops that will intensify these collaborations, especially among our early career researchers. Those are internal actions that we are implementing at institutional level and are increasing the opportunities we offer to our students, researchers and partners.

Together, YERUN has more than three hundred thousand students in three thousand and three hundred study programs, 26 thousand teaching staff and a total budget for Research and Innovation of 1.25 billion euros a year. These are capacities that we want to maximize by working together.

At European level, we are joining the calls for further investments in research and innovation, as clearly requested in the Lamy Report. We need to extend the success of Horizon2020. We want a future Framework Programme, FP9, that builds on the accomplishments of its predecessor and works even better, maximising its impact and showing how it delivers solutions to problems we all face.

We have among us today the Chair of the YERUN Working Group on EU Policy, Tom van Veen, who will present our position on FP9, and also our researchers who will show the benefits of the EU collaborative research YERUN members do.

YERUN is committed to the implementation of Open Science. Being represented at the Open Science Policy Platform, we feel proud of having the opportunity to codesign, with the Commission and stakeholders, the future of how we do research, how we communicate it and how we promote it. This is a cornerstone that defines us and we want to bring up the actions we are taking at our institutions.

We are a “young” network of “young” universities. But, to be young is something that heals over time. We want to be modern and maintain excellence and innovation. Our universities have matured when Internet technologies matured, some of them were even born with the web, when digital research infrastructures were adopted, and powerful ways of scientific communication emerged. That is why we naturally embrace Open Science and digital education in our campuses.

“Turn your wall into a step,” said German poet Rainer Maria Rilke. Let the boundaries between countries and universities become the steps that will lead our network to make great contributions to Europe and to its citizens. This is just the beginning of many more actions we will undertake together.

Thank you for your attention and welcome to this Launch event.