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Universities with Purpose

YUFE Conference: Key Takeaways

28 November 2025



Universities with Purpose – Key Takeaways

Advancing the Third Mission through Engagement, Knowledge Valorisation and Leadership

Post-Event Summary | Brussels, 28 November 2025

Thank you for joining us (onsite and online) for a full day of reflection, challenge, and shared vision at *Universities with Purpose*. The conversations across panels, spotlights, and keynote interventions offered a clear message: **European universities must act with purpose, embed societal engagement into their core mission, and lead with courage in turbulent times.**

Below is a brief overview of the main insights that emerged.

1. Europe Needs Universities That Are Adaptable, Connected, and Engaged

Vanessa Debiais-Sainton (European Commission) set the tone: **European University Alliances are now essential pillars of Europe's talent strategy.**

As AI reshapes the labour market, students must become *both experts and adaptable humans*. Alliances can deliver this by pooling infrastructures, expertise, and diverse experiences across institutions. The next step is clear: **move from pilot projects to systemic implementation**, backed by sustainable funding and demonstrable impact.

2. Civic engagement needs trust and long-term structures

Across the first panel and the Spotlight testimony, participants emphasized that:

- **Community engagement transforms students, communities, and institutions.**
- It must be structurally supported, not left to individual enthusiasm.
- Evaluation systems need to evolve so that engaged research and teaching are valued.
- Trust-building with communities is long-term work that must outlive individual contracts.

- Engagement must be recognized as scholarship, not charity, to become sustainable.

Student speaker from the Universidad Carlos III de Madrid, **Ines Huergo González**, illustrated this powerfully: engagement in form of a legal helpdesk for migrants helped her to turn her legal knowledge into a tool for empowerment. Her journey showed how civic pathways cultivate empathy, responsibility, and democratic skills and shape the citizens Europe needs.

3. Knowledge Valorisation Requires a Cultural Shift

Panel 2 emphasized that valorisation goes far beyond commercialisation. For universities to have societal impact, they must:

- Foster **entrepreneurial and opportunity-seeking mindsets** across *all* disciplines.
- Entrepreneurial mindsets mean opportunity recognition and collaboration, not necessarily start-ups.
- Better integrate **humanities and social sciences**, which are essential for social innovation and public acceptance.
- Redesign doctoral and postdoctoral training to prepare researchers for **diverse, hybrid careers**, not only academia.
- Build trust through regular collaboration with industry, public institutions, and communities.

Talent passports, micro-internships, and co-creation spaces were highlighted as practical tools to bridge students with society and employers.

4. Leadership Today Requires Kindness, Clarity, and Courage

In a polarized context, inclusive leadership emerged as a cornerstone:

- **Kindness is strategic courage**, not softness.
- Leaders must defend democratic values, create safe spaces for dialogue, and set boundaries against extremism.
- Trust is built when leaders articulate a shared vision and act consistently with it.

- Universities must protect academic freedom, support staff and students through uncertainty, and maintain integrity in the face of political pressure.
- Safe spaces require structure, trained moderators, and policies. Trust does not emerge spontaneously.

The message was clear: **leadership is relational and values only matter when practiced.**

5. Looking Ahead: A Call to Adapt, With Purpose

In his closing remarks, **Tasos Christofides (University of Cyprus)** reminded us that universities can no longer rely on a traditional two-pillar mission. To remain relevant, they must:

- Embed the **Third Mission**, engagement, impact, responsibility, into governance and evaluation.
- Strengthening public trust through independence, transparency, and social contribution.
- Embrace lifelong learning, micro-credentials, interdisciplinarity, and sustainability as core to future education.
- Prepare learners not only for employment, but for **democratic life and social cohesion**.

His final words resonated across the room:

“The alternative to adaptation is irrelevance.”

Our heartfelt thanks for your engagement and commitment throughout the event

This gathering was a fitting close to a day marked by reflection, challenge, and optimism. We extend our warm thanks to:

- **All participants**, for your insights, energy, and commitment
- **France Universités**, for hosting us so generously
- **YUFE members, partners, and contributors**, for shaping a shared vision of socially responsible European higher education
- Your [feedback](#) and engagement are very valuable in shaping future editions.

Together we are building a network that is essential in today's world, and shaping universities with purpose.

