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He obtained the degrees of Master of Science in Engineering Physics and Doctor of Engineering at the Faculty of Engineering and Architecture at Ghent University.

After a visiting postdoctoral fellowship at the University of Arizona (Tucson, USA) he returned to Ghent, became a full-time assistant professor in 2001 and set up the Multimedia Lab, one of the founding research groups of iMinds (since 2016: imec). In 2004 he became full professor, and in 2010 senior full professor. After a merger with two other research groups (across departmental and even university boundaries), the Multimedia Lab was renamed in 2016 as the Internet and Data Lab (IDLab). IDLab is a very large group, encompassing about 300 members.

From 2012 until 2017 he was dean of the Faculty of Engineering and Architecture at Ghent University.

European Higher Education Cooperation in a Global Context

In pursuit of knowledge
Steering academic cooperation in times of global crises

In 1989 the winds of change opened up a world which for more than forty years had been divided in two opposing blocks and a group of non-aligned countries, bringing new opportunities for global trade and cooperation, including academia. It was also a time when Europe made promising advances in structuring educational cooperation against the background of strengthened EU integration. Prior to 1989, the scale of academic cooperation was much smaller, both within Europe and outside, and contacts between academics of opposing blocks were scarce. Once the Iron Curtain fell, often researchers from one side would be surprised to learn that their new acquaintances from the other side had been doing similar activities for years.

Thirty-five years later, we all understand that the 'end of history', as predicted in the nineties, did not happen. Geopolitical and economic turmoil, war, global scarcity in resources, inequality, cultural differences and the devastating effects of climate change, pollution, and loss of biodiversity are fuelling political movements that reject globalist approaches. Alongside quests to decouple or de-risk how our economies work, comes a threat for renewed academic isolation. This includes the risk of re-division of the world into a number of more or less isolated blocks.

As academics, we are convinced that science has a vital role to play in tackling the issues our world is facing. Moreover, in contrast to some economic considerations, scientific knowledge is not a zero-sum game. For typical commodities, a gain for someone is a loss for someone else. Knowledge is different, as you do not lose it when you share it. One can share it with other people, as can the others. Everyone that is touched by this expanding circle of knowledge typically benefits (in terms of knowledge gained). In addition, and perhaps more importantly, the frontier of scientific knowledge gains significantly from having a 'critical mass'. Due to the highly specialised nature of

knowledge, there are only ever a handful of people and teams at the leading edge of any specific scientific field, and they are spread out all over the world. By working together, they can advance much faster. As such, our ability to tackle pressing global challenges would be severely restricted if we went back to Iron Curtain-style isolation, both due to a waste of intellectual resources and duplication of efforts, and due to an effective reduction in 'critical mass' at the leading edge of science.

How can we then best avoid the mistake of decoupling in academia, while also remaining true to our values and protecting our vital interests? In his introductory piece to this Think Pieces series, ACA President Ulrich Grothus already shared a couple of pertinent concerns. These concerns revolve around the shift in how global cooperation and exchange in higher education and research are currently being perceived and also increasingly organised. However justified and still fairly reasonable this ongoing recalibration may be in the light of the recent 'polycrisis', it is clear that the academic sector has reason to show caution and therefore ought to take a clear stand. Drawing on some of Grothus' valuable suggestions, in this piece I share further considerations specifically from my perspective, both as Rector of an individual university – Ghent University, in Belgium – and as President of a large university association (CESAER).

Toward a case-by-case approach, with caution

In his piece, Grothus rightly highlights that the recent disruptive developments should make us more aware that internationalisation activities of universities are about "striking a balance between openness and realism" regarding the state of play in international affairs; although the choice of putting openness and realism at opposite ends of a balance may be controversial. To somewhat reconcile conflicting goalsls when collaborating, for instance, with partners from countries that do not sufficiently uphold or protect the fundamental values that we hold close as universities, Grothus argues for "a differentiated approach – by purpose of cooperation, subject areas, individuals and institutions".

While such a case-by-case approach is certainly the best way forward, it should not exempt us from remaining critical of the basic assumptions that are behind the ongoing turn toward the primacy of protecting national or European interests. On 30 June 2023 , the European Council concluded that de-risking is the way forward with regard to China – while asserting that "the European Union does not intend to decouple or to turn inwards". The reasoning that seems to be behind this strategy is that collaboration with certain regimes

by default constitutes a risk rather than a benefit. In the current context, however, the common presumption that China always takes from the West and never the other way around seems highly questionable. How can we be confident that keeping knowledge from 'leaking' to other parts of the world will bring more benefits than drawbacks? Is not the knowledge system one of multidirectional circulation rather than of 'leaking' in a single direction? And is it then a wise thing to start closing knowledge pipelines 'case by case' with the risk that the overall knowledge system gradually dries out? For example, scientists based in China rapidly sequenced the genetic sequence for the SARS-CoV-2 virus and shared it globally. This quick action enabled effective vaccine research to begin promptly, including in the EU. As a result, countless lives were able to be saved. It is confronting to imagine a scenario where, due to 'leakage prevention measures', such circulation of scientific knowledge had been slowed down, restricted or prevented.

Another dimension that tends to be overlooked is that internationalisation activities often aim at serving multiple purposes at once. How realistic is it, for instance, to expect from universities that they are able to systematically eliminate potentially hazardous collaborations when at the same time they are attempting to maintain some balance between helping to achieve short- to mid-term local socio-economic needs (notably international recruitment for filling local skills needs) and serving important long-term collaborative aspirations (such as intercultural awareness, multiperspectivism, and jointly tackling global challenges)?

One important note to add here is that a case-by-case approach will only work if it is left to the full responsibility and autonomy of the individual universities. For instance, as Grothus rightly emphasises, a differentiated approach toward collaboration at the institutional versus the individual level is key, and universities in principle are best placed to proceed judiciously when a far-reaching formal alliance at institutional level is envisaged and, at the same time, to grant full trust to their academics when the collaboration amounts to primarily maintaining personal contacts among academic peers or exchanging individual students.

Many of the considerations that I have just shared also inform the procedures that Ghent University has applied so far in its assessment of international collaborations as part of its Human Rights Policy. In line with this policy, an internal human rights impact assessment is conducted prior to setting up collaboration in the field of education, research or societal outreach, but it is done on a case-by-case basis and only for formalised collaborations at

the institutional level. This means that non-formalised cooperation between academics in principle will always be allowed. Our insistence on the autonomous assessment of our collaborations does not mean that we are averse to external involvement. It is, in fact, quite the opposite even. As part of our joint vision on knowledge security and foreign interference, the Rectors of the universities united within the Flemish Interuniversity Council (VLIR) have explicitly called for the creation of a national knowledge security desk that could proactively provide strategic intelligence to knowledge institutions (cf. what already exists in the Netherlands).

Assuming Leadership

An important principle of Ghent University's Human Rights Policy is reciprocity. Adding a human rights clause to institutional agreements implies that our partners can also hold us responsible for human rights violations. This approach resonates well with Grothus' suggestion, as a means of striking some balance amid the many conflicting goals that we are currently facing, to stand for academic freedom and actively 'live' the values and standards that we cherish as universities. Indeed, especially when implementing value-anchored collaboration, which may include both prioritising partnerships with like-minded institutions and critical scrutiny of contact with partners from contexts that are considered more problematic, universities ought to be critical of how they protect these values within their own contexts. This includes the acknowledgement that standing for these values includes going beyond our comfort zone and supporting partners in areas of the world where they are under pressure: not despite it being complex, but precisely because it is complex.

I deliberately use the word 'protect' here, as, in my experience, there is a lot more that universities can do than, for instance, explicitly (re)confirming the principles that are at the core of modern universities by signing (the updated version of) the Magna Charta Universitatum. While some of the current developments are beyond their responsibilities and powers, universities ought to stand firm and assume leadership wherever they can. What I have in mind here is actively shaping and improving the institutional context in which academics work – taking into account, of course, the limits and barriers that are imposed from outside.

To illustrate this, I would like to give two examples from my own institution. In 2018, Ghent University decided to drastically reform the career path and evaluation policy for its professorial staff. In the new model, a predominantly quantitative and output-driven assessment process made way for more supportive and trust-based evaluation practices prioritising intrinsic motivation, open feedback, and collaboration. The idea here was to strengthen academic freedom by giving our professorial staff control over their own careers. Recently, just before the summer break, our Board of Governors took the strategic decision to start granting basic research funding to all our professors, thus somewhat restoring the balance between competitive and non-competitive funding of research, and – above all – guaranteeing that each and every professor has the means to unconditionally do what they were hired for: academic research and teaching.

Both of these are examples of new approaches and structures we are exploring to ensure that the university fully supports its staff and community in pursuing our shared societal mission. If we lift this up by one level, for universities to fulfil their societal roles and responsibilities, the Magna Charta Universitatum asserts that the research and teaching of universities "must be morally and intellectually independent of all political authority and economic power". A large part of the challenges we face related to increasing geopolitical tensions comes from implicit or explicit efforts to position universities as servants to either political or economic interests. This is a sectoral issue, which leads us to an imperative for joining forces.

An imperative to unite

Much of the driving forces for current efforts at the geopolitical level come from political and economic domains. Fundamentally, this is often centred around the notion of competition: whether it is a competition of ideological approaches (e.g. elections), or, for example, an economic competition around semiconductors and chips. Competition thus structures thinking, strategy and approaches deployed in these areas. From those perspectives, it is tempting to see universities as a tool to support 'winning' such competitive (win-lose and zero-sum) endeavours. The role and responsibilities of universities are different, as they are not centred around competition. Instead, universities can constitute mutually beneficial endeavours (win-win and non-zero-sum) which can then act as important bridges over conflicts, continents and cultures, particularly when there are tensions in other domains. Acquiescing to a competitive framing is both incorrect and counterproductive for universities. Getting the message across for how universities and their activities are distinct from, and complement, political and economic domains, requires sustained communication efforts, at all levels, and can only be achieved by working together. University

networks and associations, such as CESAER, are vital tools to amplify this key message. One example is the ongoing pursuit towards a global framework for science and technology cooperation.

Notwithstanding, this is neither a call for universities to be apolitical, nor neutral in relation to economics and economic systems. On the contrary, to fulfil the mission of a university it means for it to not be a passive spectator of society, but a (pro)active participant, positively guiding societal developments (including political and economic), to the best of its ability. This includes using the latest scientific knowledge and the best understanding of its community. Universities have a responsibility to society to be conscientious stewards of knowledge and progress, living and advocating for the values that underpin them.

As geopolitical tensions continue to rise, universities must recognise the imperative of working together to defend their shared interests, including the principles of collaboration, academic freedom and open discourse. By uniting in solidarity, including through networks and associations such as CESAER, academia can send a strong message that the pursuit of knowledge knows no boundaries and that the bonds of cooperation transcend political and economic differences. This is not only a desire for universities, but a must for them to effectively contribute to a more peaceful, sustainable and just world where the pursuit of understanding prevails over divisive forces.