



SOI-158

## Challenge: Navigating the Future of Universities in Europe

*ECIU Student Leadership Development Programme -  
Transforming Universities in Times of Transition*

### Challenge Provider: ECIU University

The ECIU University is a EU-funded initiative of the alliance of 12 universities in the ECIU that creates a ground-breaking and innovative educational model on a European scale.

### Hosting Institution

Università di Trento, [School of Innovation](#)

**Study Format:** Blended

**Study period:** 19 October - 06 November

In presence: 02-06 November 2026 in Trento

**Calendar of activities:**  AGENDA 2nd ed. - Navigating the Future of Universities

### Learning Outcomes:

- To analyze and understand the unique characteristics and challenges of leadership and strategic management within a university context.
- To expand knowledge of key policy developments and emerging trends in European and global higher education.
- To develop personal leadership qualities and skills to effectively lead in a dynamic and evolving environment.
- To collaborate effectively in a multinational project team, leveraging diverse perspectives and expertise focused on the future of the ECIU University.
- To enhance learning through sharing and comparing experiences across different ECIU universities and their respective higher education systems.

### The Challenge - Description

The world we live in is changing at an accelerating pace. Universities, too, are constantly confronted with diverse transformations in their environment and are compelled to seek appropriate responses in order to successfully address these changes. Strong leadership and effective strategies are essential to maintain or strengthen their position. The changes faced by universities are complex, often unpredictable, and multifaceted, encompassing (geo)political, economic, social, demographic, environmental and technological trends and shifts. Some of these developments may be perceived as threats, while at the same time they can also present opportunities. The ability of universities to provide adequate responses

depends on their strategic capacity and organizational resilience in addressing threats and capitalizing on opportunities.

The key questions, therefore, are: what does the environment of universities look like in 2026, which developments can be identified, what significance do they hold for universities, how do or should universities anticipate or respond to them, and what responses are required to remain future-proof in a complex and turbulent environment ?

In this challenge, you should focus on two major developments, which may or may not be related to other developments and trends, with the aim of developing a strategy for ECIU University (or one of its member universities) for the next five to ten years. In other words, what would constitute an effective approach to successfully addressing the following two developments?

These two developments are:

- Demographic shifts and decline in the traditional student population. In many countries, after years of growth, the number of (prospective) traditional students is decreasing as a result of demographic trends. By traditional students here we mean 18-24 year old domestic students. The consequences of a declining enrollment of these traditional students may have far-reaching consequences for university funding, the design of educational offerings, and the labor market.
- Urbanization (the migration to urban areas) and rural (or peripheral) depopulation. In many countries, considerable regional disparities are emerging. While some urban regions are becoming increasingly overcrowded, other, often rural or peripheral regions are experiencing population decline. This raises pressing concerns about the liveability, vitality, and economic resilience of shrinking regions.

The central task of this challenge is to analyse the potential implications of these two developments for the ECIU University and to come up with a strategy that will enable the ECIU University to respond effectively to these pressing challenges.

## Information

European universities are currently facing major challenges within the rapidly evolving landscape of higher education and research. Effective leadership, both at present and in the future, is indispensable at all levels within universities. In this context, ECIU seeks to engage its students as the next generation of leaders and managers. This challenge is unique in the world and is distinguished by its diversity in several respects, bringing together participants from different academic disciplines and from across ECIU member universities.

This student-focused challenge builds upon the longstanding Leadership Development Programme for ECIU staff, which has been successfully delivered for over twenty years. This challenge is specifically designed for students who may not yet possess formal leadership experience but who demonstrate a strong interest in acquiring and developing such skills. The insights and competencies acquired

through this challenge are intended to be transferable to participants' ongoing and future involvement in ECIU activities.

The challenge has different focuses:

- The exploration and further development of personal leadership styles,
- Examination and discussions of the latest developments in (European) higher education policy,
- Understanding and exploration of vision and strategy development, organizational cultures and leadership styles within universities,
- Experimental learning through an institutional immersion at the University of Trento, including site visits to innovative projects
- Engagement in challenge-based learning by carrying out a real-life project independently in teams.

This challenge is closely aligned with the ECIU University Vision 2030, which articulates a holistic view on the interconnection of higher education, research, and innovation, emphasising the integration of these domains with both regional and the European ecosystems, with the aim of generating sustainable, societal impact through innovative approaches. During the challenge, students will work collaboratively on real-life problems confronting universities, particularly those associated with new, flexible and personalized educational pathways, as well as broader issues concerning the establishment of a truly European university and ecosystem that serves society.

The challenge is targeted at ambitious students with a strong interest in leadership and organizational development in the public sector, especially in higher education. Affiliation with ECIU or experience in university policy work is considered advantageous.

We expect the participating students to engage fully (being full-time present) at both the online sessions and the in-presence week in Trento. Physical presence during the Trento week is compulsory, as the sessions will not be streamed. Furthermore, students must commit sufficient time to collaborative work on the challenge during the Trento week.

The seminars are taught in English. The sessions are highly interactive in nature, incorporating (small-group) discussions and exercises. Accordingly, proficiency in both written and spoken English are a prerequisite for participation.

### Academic Facilitators

- Harry de Boer (programme leader) is senior researcher at the University of Twente - section Knowledge, Transformation & Society (KiTeS)  
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- Stefano Turrini, PhD in Geography, is the ECIU Community Coordinator at the University of Trento, where he also conducts research on Challenge-based



Learning. He is currently working to promote and expand its implementation within the university.

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- Ryan Wakamiya is the Learner Engagement Coordinator for the ECIU University in which he works to co-create student initiatives across the alliance. He is based at the University of Twente where he works at the Strategy and Policy department in internationalisation and the implementation of the ECIU University activities in the local education system.

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