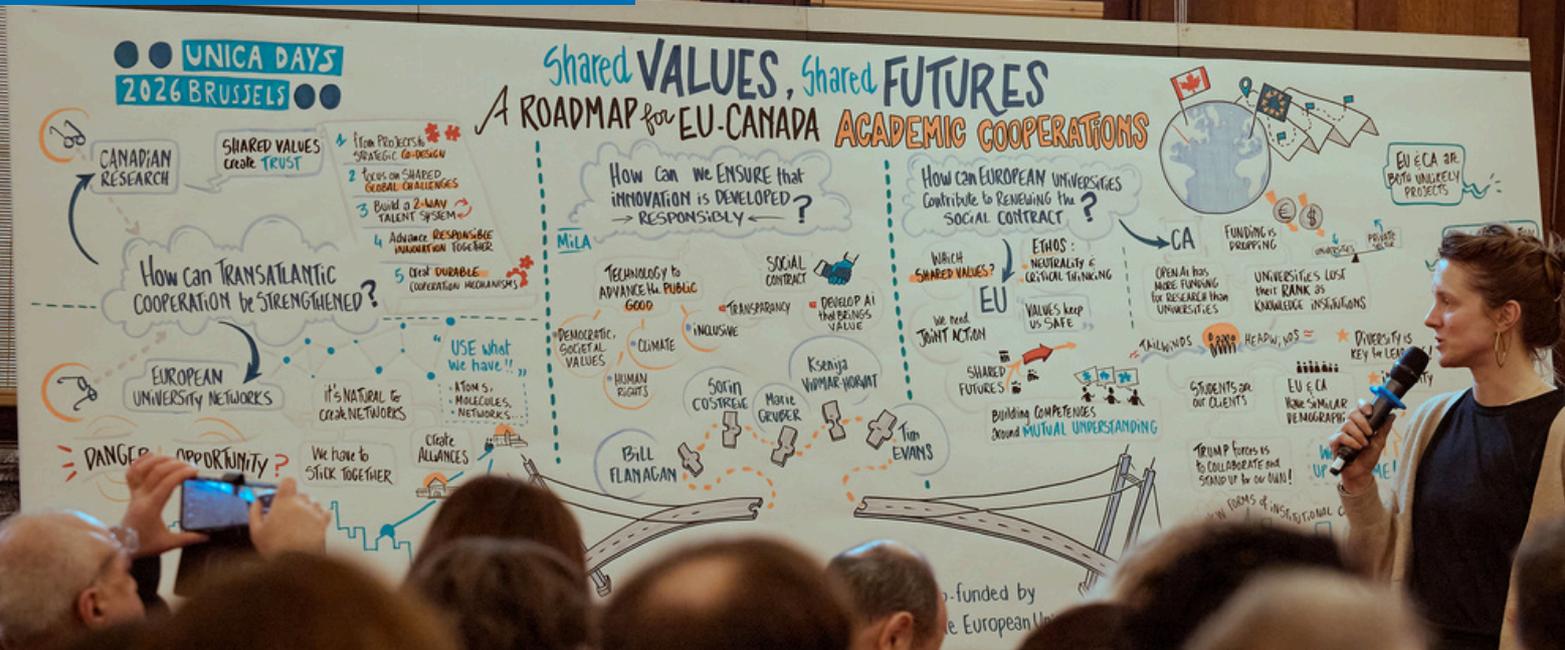


EU-Canada Cooperation: Shared Values, Shared Futures

Conference report from the UNICA Days 2026

March 2026



Conference Report from the UNICA Days in Brussels 2026

"EU-Canada Cooperation:
Shared Values, Shared Futures"



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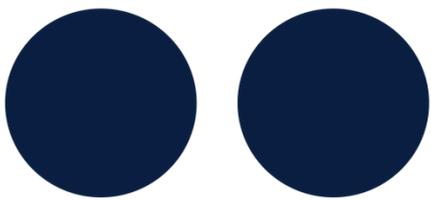
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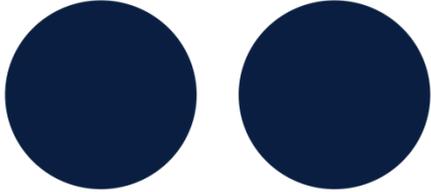
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UNICA DAYS

2026 BRUSSELS



+100 PARTICIPANTS

65 INSTITUTIONS 24 COUNTRIES

27 SPEAKERS

5 SESSIONS

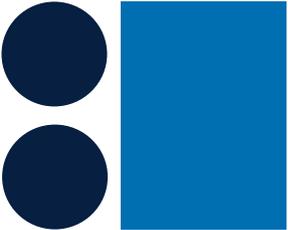


TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	6
Key messages	8
Session 1	
SCIENTIFIC DIPLOMACY AND SOCIETAL LEADERSHIP: THE ROLE OF UNIVERSITIES IN EU–CANADA COOPERATION	10
Session 2	
EU-CANADA RESEARCH COOPERATION: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES	17
Session 3	
EU–CANADA COOPERATION FOR CLIMATE ACTION, URBAN RESILIENCE AND GLOBAL SUSTAINABILITY	23
Session 4	
GLOBAL EDUCATION FOR GLOBAL CITIZENSHIP: UNIVERSITIES MISSION IN A CHANGING WORLD	28
Session 5	
SHARED VALUES, SHARED FUTURES: A ROADMAP FOR EU– CANADA ACADEMIC COOPERATION	33
Conclusion	38
Future directions	41
Beyond the report	43
Acknowledgments	44

INTRODUCTION



“Anchored in our shared values, we move forward together not only to protect one another, but to preserve and renew a world of openness and trust.”

Sorin COSTREIE, President of UNICA

Following two successful editions in 2024 and 2025, the third edition of UNICA Days took place in Brussels from 25 to 27 February 2026, under the overarching theme **“EU–Canada Cooperation: Shared Values, Shared Futures”**. The event offered a **platform for European and Canadian higher education institutions and university networks to strengthen transatlantic cooperation** and jointly reflect on the role of universities in addressing global societal challenges.

The UNICA Days 2026 conference brought together representatives from European and Canadian universities, research institutions, public institutions, policy organizations, and academic networks to reflect on the **evolving role of higher education in addressing global challenges** and **strengthening transatlantic cooperation in research, innovation, and scientific diplomacy**.

Canada and Europe have cultivated a **longstanding and multidimensional partnership rooted in common democratic values**, pluralism, a commitment to multilateralism, and a shared dedication to research excellence and innovation. In **July 2024**, this partnership entered a new phase with Canada’s formal association to Horizon Europe Pillar II, granting Canadian institutions access to the European Union’s flagship research and innovation funding programme. This milestone marked a **significant turning point in EU–Canada research collaboration** and opened new opportunities for joint scientific initiatives and institutional partnerships.

In today’s **fragmented and often volatile geopolitical landscape** - marked by the rise of authoritarian tendencies, the spread of disinformation, and declining public trust in democratic institutions - such **value-driven alliances gain renewed strategic importance**. As global science increasingly intersects with geopolitical considerations and international research cooperation faces growing pressures, the role of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) becomes particularly relevant.

Universities are not only engines of knowledge production but also **key actors in civic engagement, global dialogue, and societal progress**. They play a unique role in shaping democratic citizenship, advancing innovation, and addressing global challenges, offering distinct opportunities for international relations grounded in scientific collaboration and evidence-based dialogue.

Against this backdrop, the UNICA Days 2026 spotlighted the EU–Canada relationship through the lens of higher education, research cooperation, and scientific diplomacy. The event aimed to **highlight existing achievements, explore new opportunities for collaboration, and identify emerging challenges** within the transatlantic education and research landscape.

By bringing together diverse stakeholders from academia, policymaking, and international organizations, the conference stimulated **forward-looking dialogue on key issues** such as research funding and innovation partnerships, climate action and urban resilience, the role of universities in science diplomacy, and the promotion of democratic values through education.

The conference was organized in collaboration with the Delegation for Relations with Canada of the European Parliament, the International Association of Universities, and Science|Business. The event concluded with a strategic closing session aimed at identifying **future priorities and policy directions for strengthening EU–Canada academic collaboration**.

Beyond serving as a forum for discussion, the UNICA Days 2026 conference represented a strategic moment to reaffirm the **importance of international academic cooperation grounded in shared democratic values**.



KEY MESSAGES

The discussions throughout the UNICA Days 2026 conference highlighted the growing **importance of academic cooperation between Europe and Canada in a rapidly evolving global landscape**. Across the different sessions, speakers emphasized the strategic role of universities in fostering international collaboration, advancing research and innovation, and promoting democratic values.

The exchanges confirmed that transatlantic partnerships between universities are not only beneficial for academic communities but also essential for addressing shared global challenges. The following key messages emerged:

1

EU-CANADA COOPERATION IS ENTERING A NEW STRATEGIC PHASE WITH GLOBAL RELEVANCE

Canada's association to Horizon Europe and the evolving EU-Canada partnership mark a shift from cooperation to strategic alignment. This collaboration serves not only bilateral interests but contributes to shaping global research, innovation and education agendas.

2

SHARED VALUES ARE THE FOUNDATION — AND THE PURPOSE — OF COOPERATION

Academic freedom, democratic governance, inclusiveness and openness underpin EU-Canada collaboration. These are not only enabling conditions, but also shared objectives: cooperation between universities contributes to promoting and safeguarding these values globally.

3

UNIVERSITIES ARE KEY ACTORS OF SCIENTIFIC DIPLOMACY AND GLOBAL ENGAGEMENT

Universities play an increasingly strategic role in fostering dialogue across borders, translating knowledge into policy and building long-term trust between societies, particularly in times of geopolitical uncertainty.

4

LONG-TERM INSTITUTIONAL PARTNERSHIPS MUST COMPLEMENT PROJECT-BASED COLLABORATION

Speakers stressed the need to move beyond short-term, project-based cooperation toward sustained, strategic partnerships between institutions, including co-designed research agendas and joint initiatives.

5

UNIVERSITY NETWORKS AND ALLIANCES AMPLIFY INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION

Transnational networks — including UNICA, European University alliances and global organisations — act as multipliers of collaboration, enabling coordination at scale across research, education and societal engagement.

6

CITIES AND CAPITAL-BASED UNIVERSITIES ARE KEY LABORATORIES FOR GLOBAL CHALLENGES

As institutions embedded in capital cities, this positioning allows them to play a unique role in addressing urban challenges such as climate resilience, social inclusion and governance, while connecting local action to global agendas.

7

UNIVERSITIES MUST STRENGTHEN THEIR SOCIETAL ROLE AND PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

Beyond research and education, universities are called to contribute actively to democratic resilience, evidence-informed policymaking and public debate, including by combating misinformation and making research more accessible to society.

8

RESPONSIBLE INNOVATION AND COLLABORATION ARE ESSENTIAL TO ADDRESS GLOBAL CHALLENGES

From climate change to technological transformation, speakers emphasised that addressing global challenges requires both cross-border collaboration and a strong commitment to ensuring that innovation — particularly in fields such as artificial intelligence — serves the public good.

Session 1

Scientific Diplomacy and Societal Leadership: The role of universities in EU–Canada Cooperation

Chair: Anne WEYEMBERGH, Vice-Rector for External Relations and Development Cooperation, Université libre de Bruxelles, and member of the UNICA Steering Committee



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The opening session of the UNICA Days 2026 explored the **role of universities as key actors in scientific diplomacy and societal leadership**, particularly within the context of EU–Canada cooperation. Bringing together representatives from academia, European institutions, and diplomatic services, the discussion examined how universities can contribute to strengthening international cooperation while addressing emerging societal and political challenges.

In an increasingly complex global environment, **universities are also called upon to assume greater societal responsibility** by contributing to evidence-based policymaking, **democratic resilience**, and **responsible innovation**.

Opening the session, Chair **Anne Weyembergh** emphasised the **long-standing and multifaceted collaboration between Europe and Canada across higher education, research and political dialogue**, highlighting its resilience and continued relevance. She situated the discussion within a rapidly evolving global context marked by geopolitical uncertainty, climate challenges, digital transformation and pressures on democratic systems. In this environment, **scientific diplomacy** — understood as the role of science and higher education in building bridges across borders — **emerges as a key instrument to sustain dialogue**, foster cooperation and strengthen long-term mutual trust.

She further underlined the growing expectations placed on universities as both knowledge producers and societal actors. Beyond generating evidence, universities are increasingly called upon to support informed policymaking, reinforce democratic resilience, foster responsible innovation and uphold fundamental values such as academic freedom and freedom of enquiry. In this context, **EU–Canada cooperation - grounded in shared commitments to multilateralism, inclusiveness and science-based governance**, and reinforced by frameworks such as Canada’s association to Horizon Europe - provides a **strong foundation for deepening collaboration**. Universities and transnational networks therefore have both the capacity and the responsibility to act as key drivers of scientific diplomacy and to contribute to shaping collective responses to global challenges.

In a written statement addressed to the participants, **Ambassador Nicholas Brousseau** emphasized the **strength of the EU–Canada relationship** and welcomed the focus of the UNICA Days 2026 on transatlantic cooperation in higher education and research. He highlighted that the partnership between Canada and the European Union is built on shared democratic values, longstanding cooperation, and **strong people-to-people connections**.

The Ambassador referred to recent political developments that have further strengthened this relationship, including the **2025 EU–Canada Leaders’ Summit**, which led to the adoption of a **New EU–Canada Strategic Partnership of the Future** and an EU–Canada Security and Defence Partnership. These initiatives aim to deepen cooperation across a range of areas relevant to research and innovation, including artificial intelligence, semiconductors, quantum technologies, cybersecurity, climate change, oceans, the circular economy, and polar research.

Ambassador Brousseau also highlighted the **importance of strengthening mobility and collaboration between researchers and students**, while promoting and protecting academic freedom and the independence of scientific research.

A key milestone in recent EU–Canada cooperation has been Canada’s association to Horizon Europe Pillar II in 2024, which has significantly expanded opportunities for Canadian and European researchers to participate in joint projects and international research consortia. According to the Ambassador, Canadian participation in the programme increased by 300% in 2024 compared to the years preceding association.

Mobility between the two regions has also increased through Erasmus+, with outbound exchanges of Canadian students and staff rising by almost 70% between 2022 and 2024, while inbound exchanges to Canada increased by 80%.

Looking ahead to the next European Research Framework Programme (FP10), the Ambassador emphasized that, in an increasingly fragmented global environment, **collaboration between trusted international partners will become even more important.**

Strengthening research cooperation between Canada and the EU will be essential for advancing scientific discovery, supporting innovation, and addressing shared global challenges while promoting long-term prosperity on both sides of the Atlantic.

Patrick Deane highlighted the **deep academic ties between Canadian and European universities**, situating them within the broader historical and intellectual relationship between Canada and Europe. He referred to the common description of Canada as **“the most European non-European country,”** suggesting that this should be understood not merely as a statement, but as an **ongoing project aimed at strengthening trust and cooperation between Canadian and European institutions and societies.**

A central theme of his intervention was the evolving relationship between universities and society. Deane noted that universities in Canada, as in many other parts of the world, are facing **growing public skepticism toward academic expertise and institutions.** He pointed to a visible decline in trust in academic knowledge, a trend also observed in neighbouring countries such as the United States. In this context, he argued that universities must not only strengthen international partnerships but also **rebuild trust with the societies they serve.**

Deane stressed that Higher Education Institutions have a broader civic responsibility to uphold democratic values, critical thinking, and free intellectual inquiry.

He noted that **threats to academic freedom are often closely linked to wider pressure on democratic systems** reinforcing the importance of universities as defenders of open and pluralistic societies. He also highlighted the importance of what he described as a **“borderless academy”** where the advancement of knowledge depends on international cooperation in research and education. However, sustaining such global collaboration requires continued support from governments and policymakers.

Finally, Deane emphasized that EU–Canada academic cooperation should remain open and inclusive. Rather than becoming an exclusive partnership, it should **serve as a platform for broader global engagement**. Referring to research on global challenges such as poverty, he underlined the value of diverse institutional perspectives and described this approach as one of **“sustainable openness”** combining strong bilateral cooperation with wider international collaboration.

Josep M. Garrell presented the perspective of the European University Association (EUA), which represents nearly 900 universities across Europe. He described the organization as both an advocacy body and a platform for mutual learning, working to identify emerging trends in higher education while representing the interests of universities at the European level.

Garrell emphasized that **diversity is a defining characteristic of the European Higher Education landscape**, with institutions differing widely in mission, structure, and national context. To support international cooperation, the EUA collaborates with partner organizations worldwide, strengthening global dialogue among universities.

A central theme of his intervention was the **role of universities in academic diplomacy**. Garrell noted that universities contribute to international cooperation through their everyday activities, including research networks, mobility programmes, faculty exchanges, and institutional alliances. These collaborations help sustain dialogue across borders, particularly during periods of geopolitical tension.

He also distinguished between **“diplomacy for science,”** which enables research collaboration through diplomatic channels, and **“science diplomacy,”** which refers to the broader contribution of universities to international dialogue and cooperation.

Universities and their associations therefore have an **important role in raising awareness of the risks facing academic freedom and international research collaboration**, while defending the principles that underpin open academic exchange.

Regarding EU–Canada cooperation, Garrell underlined the long-standing relationship and shared values that support collaboration between institutions on both sides of the Atlantic. Existing programmes, such as Erasmus+, already provide **important instruments for academic exchange** and mobility.

Looking ahead, he suggested that the current framework creates favourable conditions for deepening EU–Canada academic relations, guided by the principle of “**responsible openness**,” which promotes international engagement while respecting institutional autonomy.

Javier Moreno-Sanchez addressed the **role of the European Parliament in strengthening EU–Canada relations**, highlighting the importance of parliamentary diplomacy as a complement to traditional diplomatic channels.

Parliaments play a key role not only in shaping legislative frameworks but also in facilitating dialogue between political actors and explaining the benefits of international agreements to the public. In the context of EU–Canada relations, parliamentary engagement helps **reinforce political support for cooperation** in areas such as research, innovation, and higher education.

Moreno-Sanchez also emphasized the growing importance of academic cooperation in addressing broader societal challenges, including misinformation and political polarization. Universities, he argued, play a crucial role in strengthening democratic societies by equipping citizens with critical thinking skills and promoting evidence-based knowledge.

At the same time, he noted that **universities often face difficulties in communicating the value and societal impact of their work to the broader public**. Although academic research generates significant benefits for society, translating these contributions into accessible narratives remains a challenge.

Strengthening the connection between academia and society is therefore essential to reinforce public trust in scientific expertise and sustain support for international academic cooperation.

Maria Cristina Russo focused on the **strategic and policy dimensions of EU–Canada cooperation in Research and Innovation**. She emphasized that the partnership is grounded in shared values, including commitments to academic freedom, open science, and international collaboration, which facilitates close cooperation between the two research systems.

Russo highlighted that **trust plays a central role in enabling joint initiatives in science and technology**. She noted that the **EU and Canada share similar approaches to the governance of research and innovation**, creating favourable conditions for collaborative programmes and policy alignment.

She also referred to recent developments in the EU's research security framework, adopted as a recommendation at European level. The objective is to ensure that international research collaboration remains secure while fully respecting the autonomy of universities and research institutions.

Science diplomacy, Russo noted, **is becoming an increasingly important component of the EU's international research policy**. The European Commission is currently developing a broader framework in this area, which explicitly recognizes the role of universities as key actors in international scientific cooperation.

Looking ahead to the next European Research Framework Programme (FP10), Russo emphasized that Canada already plays a role that goes beyond that of a traditional partner. As an associated country to Horizon Europe, **Canada is effectively contributing as a co-creator of research and innovation solutions**, particularly in addressing global challenges such as climate change and technological transformation.

The discussion highlighted the strong foundations of EU–Canada academic cooperation, grounded in shared democratic values, long-standing institutional partnerships, and a common commitment to academic freedom and research excellence. Speakers emphasized that universities play an increasingly important role not only as centers of knowledge production, but also as actors in scientific diplomacy and international dialogue.

The session also underlined the importance of **maintaining open and inclusive international collaboration** particularly in a global context where academic freedom and democratic values may face growing pressure.

Strengthening trust between universities and society, while reinforcing cooperation between trusted international partners, emerged as a key priority.





Session 2

EU-Canada Research Cooperation: challenges and opportunities

Chair: Pieter BALLON, Vice-Rector for Research, Vrije Universiteit Brussel and Coordinator of UNICA Research



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The second session of UNICA Days 2026 examined the **evolving landscape of EU–Canada research cooperation**, focusing on both the opportunities created by Canada’s recent association with Horizon Europe and the practical challenges that still shape transatlantic collaboration.

Canada’s association to Horizon Europe Pillar II represents an important milestone in EU–Canada research relations. This status enables Canadian researchers and institutions not only to participate in but also to **lead large-scale research consortia**, strengthening collaboration around shared priorities such as climate change mitigation, artificial intelligence, digital transformation, public health, and Indigenous knowledge systems.

Opening the discussion, Chair **Pieter Ballon** highlighted the **strong engagement of European universities in Horizon projects**, referring in particular to the extensive experience of Vrije Universiteit Brussel in European research programmes.

The session explored how these **new opportunities can be translated into concrete collaborations**, while also addressing structural challenges such as administrative complexity, differences in research funding systems, and the need to build stronger institutional connections between research communities on both sides of the Atlantic.

Hélène Drainville highlighted that cooperation between Europe and Canada has a **long history**, but that the current moment represents a **new phase in scale and strategic importance**, particularly in the context of shifting geopolitical dynamics.

She presented the strong research and innovation **ecosystem of Québec**, which includes 18 universities and a **highly interconnected innovation landscape**. The province has developed internationally recognised expertise in areas such as artificial intelligence, quantum technologies, life sciences, and the green transition, supported by competitive industrial clusters in aerospace, ICT, and life sciences.

Drainville emphasised that Québec's innovation model is based on close collaboration between universities, industry, and public authorities, reflected in the creation of innovation zones and research **networks designed to connect academic research with economic development.**

At the same time, she acknowledged practical challenges affecting participation in European programmes, including the **complexity of Horizon Europe**, geographical distance, and the need for Canadian institutions to gain experience with EU funding structures.

Despite these obstacles, she reaffirmed **Québec's strong commitment to expanding partnerships with European universities**. The Québec delegation in Brussels plays an active role in facilitating contacts between researchers and institutions, supporting the development of long-term academic and innovation collaborations.

Anja Geitmann provided an overview of the Canadian higher education and research landscape, noting that **Canada hosts more than 80 universities**, including a group of 15 research-intensive institutions that play a leading role in international collaboration.

She explained that research funding in Canada is primarily organised through federal tri-council agencies, which support research in natural sciences, health sciences, and social sciences and humanities. In Québec, this system is complemented by the Fonds de recherche du Québec, which provides additional support across research sectors.

Geitmann highlighted McGill University's strong international engagement, including around 80 student exchange agreements with European partners.

Following Canada's association to Horizon Europe, the university now participates in approximately 30 Horizon-funded projects, although adapting to the scale and administrative complexity of the programme has required a significant learning process.

She also pointed to Montréal's MILA Artificial Intelligence Institute, which brings together around 1,500 researchers working on artificial intelligence and its societal implications, as well as McGill's interdisciplinary sustainability initiatives that connect hundreds of research groups across disciplines.

To strengthen institutional capacity for international collaboration, McGill has also introduced **administrative staff mobility programmes**, allowing research support staff to **gain practical experience with European research funding structures**.

Daniel Jutras highlighted the **growing strategic importance of EU–Canada research cooperation**, particularly in a context where Canadian universities are seeking to diversify their international partnerships.

He noted that collaboration with European institutions has become increasingly relevant as Canadian universities aim to reduce excessive dependence on the United States in certain areas of research and innovation. European partners share similar research values and **operate within stable institutional frameworks**, making them natural collaborators.

Canada's association with Horizon Europe represents an important opportunity to deepen these partnerships. However, Jutras cautioned that the **collaboration remains at an early stage**, with Canadian participation increasing but overall funding flows still relatively modest.

He also highlighted the administrative complexity of Horizon Europe as a potential barrier for researchers. If these challenges are not addressed, the initial enthusiasm surrounding the partnership could weaken. Nevertheless, he stressed that **the current moment offers a critical opportunity to strengthen cooperation with trusted partners**, particularly in areas such as technological sovereignty, industrial policy, and emerging dual-use technologies.

Carole Mancel-Blanchard emphasised the long-standing tradition of research collaboration between Europe and Canada, noting that Canada's association to Horizon Europe reflects a clear commitment to strengthening this partnership.

As an associated country, Canada contributes financially to the programme and can participate in many Horizon initiatives.

From the perspective of the European Commission, international participation is essential to bringing together the best researchers and institutions to address global challenges.

At the same time, she acknowledged that several practical challenges remain. In particular, **awareness among Canadian institutions about the opportunities available** within Horizon Europe still **needs to be strengthened**.

She also noted that the scale and complexity of the programme can make participation difficult for newcomers. To address this, mechanisms such as the nomination of experts involved in evaluation processes can help institutions better understand programme requirements. Strengthening networks between European and Canadian research communities will be essential to building successful project consortia and expanding long-term research partnerships.

Liliana Pasecinic presented the role of the Joint Research Centre (JRC), the European Commission's in-house science and knowledge service, which provides scientific evidence to support EU policymaking.

She explained that the JRC's research infrastructures and facilities are open to international partners, including Canadian researchers, universities, and start-ups. Through its work, the JRC contributes directly to the **development of evidence-based European policies**.

Partnerships play a central role in the JRC's activities, particularly as demand for scientific expertise in policymaking continues to grow. **Strengthening collaboration with Canadian institutions can therefore help address shared regulatory and societal challenges**, including artificial intelligence governance and climate resilience.

Pasecinic also highlighted several initiatives designed to deepen academic collaboration. These include **hosting visiting scientists from partner countries** and **developing joint doctoral programmes**, in which PhD candidates conduct part of their research at the JRC under joint supervision. Such initiatives contribute to building long-term connections between European and Canadian research communities.

Cecília Roque reflected on the role of European universities in translating the opportunities created by EU–Canada cooperation into concrete research collaborations.

At NOVA University Lisbon, **international cooperation is a central component of institutional strategy**. The university participates in the EUTOPIA European University Alliance, illustrating the growing importance of transnational academic networks and the concept of “universities without borders.”

Roque noted that Portugal and Canada already share strong academic links, supported by programmes such as Erasmus+, which facilitate mobility and institutional partnerships.

She also highlighted several research areas where Canadian expertise is particularly valuable for European collaborations, including Arctic and ocean research, climate change, clean energy, public health, and Indigenous knowledge systems.

At the same time, she stressed the **importance of building trust between researchers when forming international consortia**. University networks such as UNICA can therefore play a key role in facilitating matchmaking between institutions and helping researchers identify potential partners.

During the discussion with participants, several questions focused on the **practical organisation of EU–Canada research cooperation**, including how partnerships can be structured and how institutions can identify appropriate collaborators.

Participants highlighted the importance of building partnerships based on strong research alignment, often **starting with targeted bilateral relationships between universities that share similar research priorities**. These collaborations can gradually expand into larger international consortia once trust and mutual understanding have been established.

Overall, the discussion confirmed that EU–Canada research cooperation is still in a formative stage, but that **it holds significant potential**. While challenges remain - including administrative complexity, differences in funding systems, and the need to increase awareness of available opportunities - **the strong alignment of values, research priorities, and institutional cultures provides a solid foundation for expanding collaboration in the coming years**.



Session 3

EU–Canada cooperation for climate action, urban resilience and global sustainability

Chair: Charline URBAIN, Advisor for Sustainable Development in Teaching and Research, Université libre de Bruxelles



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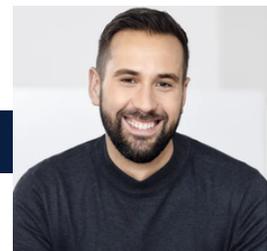
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The third session of the UNICA Days 2026 conference explored how collaboration between European and Canadian institutions can contribute to societal challenges including **advancing climate action, strengthening urban resilience and supporting sustainable development** at both local and global levels. Bringing together representatives from academia, policy institutions and research organizations, the session highlighted how universities and innovation ecosystems can jointly contribute to addressing environmental challenges while fostering sustainable societal transformation.

Chair **Charline Urbain** emphasized the importance of combining research excellence, policy engagement and educational innovation in order to **translate knowledge into meaningful action**. Speakers reflected on how universities are increasingly positioning sustainability at the core of their institutional strategies - through research initiatives, curriculum transformation, campus operations and partnerships with regional and international stakeholders.

At the same time, the session explored the **opportunities and challenges presented by emerging technologies**, particularly artificial intelligence, in supporting sustainable development. While AI holds significant potential for improving efficiency, modelling environmental systems and supporting urban planning, it also raises important questions regarding energy consumption, data governance and responsible technological use.

François Gélinau highlighted the **scale and urgency of the climate challenge**, noting that the increasing frequency of climate-related disasters illustrates the growing economic and societal costs of inaction. He emphasised that investment in sustainability should not be seen as a burden, but as a strategic necessity, given the **significant long-term economic and social returns of climate action.**

He outlined **five key roles that universities can play in advancing sustainability**. First, **universities act as knowledge engines**, producing the scientific data and analytical tools needed to address the climate crisis. At Université Laval, for example, the university manages one of the largest university research forests in the world, functioning as an open-air laboratory and contributing to carbon absorption.

Second, **universities serve as educators and mobilisers**, preparing students and communities to engage with complex sustainability challenges. Third, they must **lead by example as sustainable institutions**, integrating climate objectives into their governance and operations.

Fourth, **universities act as catalysts for societal transformation**, fostering interdisciplinary collaboration and supporting systemic change. Finally, they play a **key role in ensuring the responsible and ethical use of technology**, including artificial intelligence, aligning innovation with sustainability goals.

Aurélie Jeantet focused on the internal transformation required for universities to contribute effectively to ecological transition. She underscored that Higher Education Institutions must lead by example, integrating sustainability into governance, teaching, and daily institutional practices. At Université Sorbonne Nouvelle, students play a central role in this transformation. Initiatives such as **citizens' conventions involving students have created opportunities for participatory dialogue on environmental issues** and helped integrate sustainability into the academic curriculum through transversal courses.

Jeantet also highlighted practical institutional measures aimed at **reducing the university's environmental footprint**. These include promoting train instead of air travel when possible and expanding vegetarian meal options for students. At the same time, she stressed that while local engagement is essential, international collaboration remains crucial for addressing global environmental challenges.

Exchanges with Canadian institutions can offer valuable perspectives, particularly regarding the relationship between societies and the natural environment. Strengthening such exchanges can help universities **develop new approaches to sustainable development and ecological responsibility.**

Jonas Scholze presented the policy perspective on climate action and urban resilience from the standpoint of the European Urban Initiative. He noted that **cities face a growing and never-ending range of challenges**, including climate-related shocks, demographic pressures, and the need to transform infrastructure and governance systems.

In this context, urban resilience should not be understood only as the ability to respond to crises, but also as the capacity to **adapt to long-term structural transformations.** Urban planning therefore plays a critical role in guiding cities toward sustainable and climate-resilient development.

Scholze stressed that **effective urban resilience strategies require integrated approaches combining climate policy, governance innovation, and cross-sector collaboration.**

Universities can contribute significantly to these processes by providing scientific expertise, developing new policy tools, and supporting collaboration between researchers, public authorities, and local communities. Strengthening cooperation between European and Canadian institutions can therefore support the exchange of knowledge and policy approaches, helping cities on both sides of the Atlantic develop more effective responses to climate and sustainability challenges.

Benjamin Proud'homme presented the perspective of the MILA Quebec AI Institute, highlighting the **role of artificial intelligence research in climate change and sustainable urban development.** He noted that successful AI ecosystems rely on three key components: **data, talent, and infrastructure.** Universities play a central role in all three areas by training highly skilled researchers, providing trusted data environments, and creating spaces where interdisciplinary collaboration can flourish.

At the same time, he stressed the importance of **responsible and sustainable approaches to AI development.** Large-scale AI models often require substantial computational resources and energy consumption, raising concerns about their environmental impact.

Proudhomme therefore advocated for greater attention to “**frugal AI**” approaches, which prioritize smaller, more **efficient models capable of delivering practical benefits while reducing energy consumption**. In this context, collaboration between universities, public institutions, and policymakers is essential to ensure that AI technologies contribute to reducing carbon emissions rather than increasing them.

He also highlighted the importance of **improving data access and infrastructure**, particularly through partnerships with public agencies that can share datasets with researchers while ensuring appropriate governance and ethical safeguards.

The session highlighted the important role that universities and research institutions play in advancing climate action and supporting more resilient and sustainable societies. Speakers emphasized that addressing environmental challenges requires **coordinated efforts across disciplines, sectors and countries**, with universities acting as key drivers of knowledge, education and societal engagement.

A recurring theme was the **need to connect research and innovation with real-world implementation**, particularly in urban contexts where sustainability transitions are most visible. Strengthening collaboration between universities, policymakers and innovation ecosystems can help translate academic expertise into practical solutions for cities and communities.

Overall, the session reaffirmed the value of EU–Canada cooperation in supporting shared efforts on climate action, sustainable development and responsible innovation. Strengthening collaboration between research institutions and policy actors on both sides of the Atlantic will remain essential for **developing effective responses to global environmental challenges**.





Session 4

Global Education for Global Citizenship: Universities Mission in a Changing World

Chair: Romiță IUCU, President of the Board of Trustees, University of Bucharest



**Larissa
BEZO**

President & CEO,
Canadian Bureau
for Higher
Education



**Romiță
IUCU**

President of the
Board of Trustees,
University of
Bucharest



**Serge
JAUMAIN**

Co-Director of AmericaS,
Advisor to the Rector for
Cooperation to
Development, Université
libre de Bruxelles



**Daniel
JUTRAS**

Chair of U15
Canada and Rector
of the University
of Montréal

The fourth session focused on the **evolving mission of universities in promoting global citizenship education in a context of rapid geopolitical change** and increasing societal expectations. The discussion explored how higher education institutions can equip students with the skills, values and perspectives necessary to navigate an interconnected and uncertain world.

Opening the session, Chair **Romita Iucu** emphasized the importance of strengthening international collaboration between universities, particularly between European and Canadian institutions. **Global citizenship education** requires not only academic knowledge but also intercultural understanding, ethical awareness and the ability to engage constructively with complex global challenges. Universities therefore have a critical role to play in fostering dialogue across borders and **developing educational models that prepare students for active participation in democratic societies.**

Speakers reflected on the changing expectations placed on universities, highlighting the need to **connect teaching, research and societal engagement** in ways that support inclusive and sustainable development. The discussion also addressed the importance of mobility, international cooperation and engagement with diverse communities in shaping globally minded graduates.

Larissa Bezo highlighted the **growing importance of international education in a world marked by geopolitical tensions** and social transformations. While the traditional pillars of higher education - teaching, research and service - remain central, **universities increasingly operate as global actors** with responsibilities that extend beyond national borders.

Mobility programmes and international academic exchanges play a crucial role in **fostering global citizenship by exposing students to different cultures and perspectives**. Such experiences help prepare graduates to contribute to more inclusive and peaceful societies while strengthening people-to-people connections between countries. In the case of Canada, universities have long been key actors in building these international ties and promoting academic collaboration.

Bezo also emphasized the importance of **addressing historical and social contexts in international education**, particularly with regard to relationships with Indigenous communities. Universities are increasingly engaging with processes of reconciliation and exploring ways to incorporate Indigenous perspectives into educational practices. These initiatives contribute to broader efforts to **build more inclusive and culturally aware academic environments**.

Overall, she stressed that international education cannot be pursued solely at the national level. **Universities must work together across borders** to strengthen partnerships and create opportunities for students to engage meaningfully with global challenges.

Serge Jaumain reflected on the relationship between universities and the societies in which they operate, emphasizing the importance of defending academic freedom and democratic values. Universities, he argued, increasingly face pressures related to misinformation, political polarization and declining public trust in institutions. In this context, **it is essential for universities to communicate more effectively with society and explain the value of academic research and education**.

Jaumain also highlighted the growing expectations placed on universities to engage in public debate and contribute to societal development. Higher education has expanded significantly over recent decades, **transforming universities from institutions serving a small elite into central actors in modern democratic societies**. This transformation requires universities to remain closely connected to citizens and demonstrate the societal impact of publicly funded research.

He further emphasized the **importance of developing international partnerships that go beyond traditional North–North collaborations**. Experiences of cooperation of the Université libre de Bruxelles with institutions in Africa, for example, demonstrate the potential for mutually beneficial partnerships that enrich teaching, research and student experiences. Such initiatives help students develop new perspectives and reinforce the role of universities in building more inclusive and globally connected academic communities.

Daniel Jutras focused on the concept of global citizenship education and its growing relevance for contemporary universities. Drawing on discussions within international organizations such as UNESCO, he described global citizenship education as the **development of the capacity to understand diverse perspectives**, collaborate across cultures, and address challenges that transcend national borders.

While international mobility is often considered a central component of global citizenship education, Jutras noted that **mobility programmes reach only a relatively small proportion of students**. Universities therefore need to ensure that global perspectives are integrated directly into curricula and learning environments, allowing all students to develop the knowledge, skills and attitudes associated with global citizenship. This includes encouraging interdisciplinary learning, critical thinking, and openness to different viewpoints.

He also highlighted several **structural constraints affecting universities**. Many academic programmes are shaped by professional accreditation frameworks, which can limit the flexibility required to introduce interdisciplinary components or new forms of learning. At the same time, increasing emphasis on applied research, economic impact and financial returns on investment risks overshadowing the broader educational mission of universities.

To address these challenges, Jutras underlined the importance of reinforcing the three core missions of universities - teaching, research and service to society - and **creating opportunities for students to engage more directly with research activities and community-based initiatives** throughout their studies.

Such approaches can help connect academic learning with societal engagement while strengthening the humanistic foundations of higher education.

Finally, he stressed that **universities themselves must embody the values they seek to promote**. Academic freedom and intellectual openness are essential for cultivating global citizenship. Developing these qualities requires what he described as **“epistemic humility”** the **willingness to question one’s own assumptions and engage constructively with different perspectives**. Professors and researchers must therefore uphold and demonstrate the openness and critical reflection they expect from their students, recognizing that global citizenship education begins within the academic community itself.

The panel discussion explored practical ways of integrating global citizenship education into university strategies and academic programmes. Participants emphasized that **global education should not be treated as an additional activity but rather embedded structurally within institutional frameworks**.

Speakers acknowledged that achieving this integration can be challenging, particularly within decentralized university systems where academic programmes are often defined by disciplinary boundaries. At the same time, **interdisciplinary initiatives and collaborative programmes can help foster dialogue between students and researchers** from different backgrounds.

Audience contributions also highlighted the **importance of engaging students as active participants in the learning process**. Universities increasingly recognize that knowledge creation is not a one-directional process; students themselves contribute valuable perspectives and experiences that enrich academic discussions.

Finally, participants reflected on the role of universities in public debate and democratic discourse. While academic institutions must **preserve intellectual independence and academic freedom**, they also have a **responsibility to engage with societal challenges** and contribute to informed public discussion.

Speakers emphasized that strengthening partnerships between European and Canadian universities provides important opportunities for advancing these goals. By integrating global perspectives into teaching, research and community engagement, universities can contribute to building more inclusive, democratic and interconnected societies.

Ultimately, the discussion reaffirmed that **global citizenship education is not an optional addition to university programmes but a fundamental component of the contemporary mission of higher education**.



Session 5

Shared Values, Shared Futures: A Roadmap for EU–Canada Academic Cooperation

Chair: Giorgio MARINONI, Manager of Higher Education and Internationalization Policy and Projects, International Association of Universities (IAU)



**Sorin
COSTREIE**
UNICA President



**Tim
EVANS**
Vice-President
Research,
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Impact, Concordia
University



**Bill
FLANAGAN**
President & Vice-
Chancellor,
University of
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**Marie
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Institute



**Ksenija
VIDMAR HORVAT**
Vice-Rector for Study and
Student Affairs, University
of Ljubljana, and Member
of the UNICA Steering
Committee

The closing session of UNICA Days 2026 focused on the **future of EU–Canada academic cooperation** and the role that universities need to play in addressing global challenges while upholding shared democratic values. Building on the discussions of the previous sessions, the panel aimed at reflecting on how transatlantic collaboration can evolve in a rapidly changing geopolitical and technological landscape.

Opening the session, Chair **Giorgio Marinoni** highlighted the **strong sense of shared commitment** that had emerged throughout the two days of discussions. Particular emphasis was placed on the growing importance of academic diplomacy, the defence of academic values and the role of universities in promoting democratic principles and global citizenship.

Speakers also reflected on the **opportunities created by current global transformations**, highlighting how international academic partnerships can contribute to innovation, resilience and shared prosperity.

Sorin Costreie reflected on the role that European university networks can play in strengthening transatlantic cooperation with Canadian partners. He emphasized that **periods of crisis often contain opportunities for transformation**, noting that current global uncertainties create space for universities to rethink how international collaboration is organized.

Drawing on a metaphor, he described **universities as “atoms”, networks as “molecules”,** and **broader alliances as “super-molecules”,** highlighting the different scales at which cooperation can occur. While bilateral collaboration between institutions remains the most natural form of partnership in research and education, many **contemporary challenges require more structured and coordinated forms of cooperation** that can only be achieved through networks and alliances.

In this context, he pointed to the European University Alliances initiative as an example of an emerging model that allows institutions to move beyond individual collaborations toward deeper strategic integration in education, research and civic engagement. Strengthening connections between such alliances and Canadian partners could **create new opportunities for transatlantic cooperation** and help reinforce the role of universities as key actors in shaping resilient and democratic societies.

Tim Evans addressed the evolving role of universities in renewing the “social contract” with society in a context marked by geopolitical uncertainty, technological transformation and shifting public priorities. He noted that **universities are increasingly operating in an environment where traditional funding structures and political support cannot be taken for granted**, making leadership and strategic collaboration even more important.

Despite these challenges, he highlighted several opportunities for international cooperation. **Students**, in particular, **represent a powerful source of energy and innovation**, bringing both expectations and concerns about the future of education and society. At the same time, global technological developments, labour markets and demographic trends are increasingly interconnected, **reinforcing the need for international partnerships.**

Evans also pointed to the importance of shared values such as **diversity and ingenuity**, which he described as fundamental drivers of knowledge creation and societal progress. In this context, EU–Canada collaboration offers important opportunities to co-lead research initiatives and develop solutions to global challenges, particularly in areas such as sustainability and public health, where international cooperation is essential.

Bill Flanagan emphasized the importance of building transatlantic partnerships that generate meaningful value for both European and Canadian institutions. Rather than expanding networks for their own sake, he argued that collaboration should focus on initiatives that produce concrete outcomes in research, education and innovation.

A central element of this approach is the shift from individual research projects toward **strategic co-design of research agendas**, particularly in areas where European and Canadian institutions possess **complementary strengths**. Global challenges such as climate change, food security, public health and artificial intelligence were highlighted as key domains where such cooperation can have significant impact.

Flanagan also stressed the importance of developing a **two-way talent ecosystem**, including joint doctoral programmes and expanded researcher mobility. Such initiatives can strengthen both research capacity and long-term institutional partnerships. Ultimately, he argued that EU–Canada cooperation should aim to be **transformational rather than transactional**, grounded in shared values such as academic freedom, research excellence and the commitment to science serving the public good.

Marie Gruber offered the perspective of a leading artificial intelligence research institute on how EU–Canada cooperation can contribute to **responsible technological development**. She explained that Mila was created through collaboration between universities in Montréal and has maintained a strong academic identity, bringing together more than a thousand researchers working on the development of AI technologies.

She emphasized that **artificial intelligence is increasingly shaping the structures of contemporary societies** and should therefore be evaluated not only in terms of technological performance but also according to its broader societal impact. In this regard, the success of AI systems should be measured by the extent to which they contribute to the public good and democratic values.

Gruber highlighted the **importance of transparency and accountability in AI systems**, cautioning against the development of opaque “black-box” technologies that cannot be properly understood or evaluated. Universities, she argued, have a critical responsibility not only to advance knowledge but also to **ensure that technological innovation remains aligned with societal needs**. This includes engaging with historically marginalized and Indigenous communities to ensure that new technologies respect their rights and respond to their specific contexts.

Ksenija Vidmar Horvat focused on the role of universities in upholding and promoting shared democratic values through international cooperation. Referring to the overarching theme of the conference — shared values and shared futures — she highlighted the close relationship between academic principles and democratic political systems.

She noted that the traditional ethos of academia, including principles such as **universalism, communalism, critical thinking and intellectual independence**, is closely aligned with the foundations of democratic societies. However, both academic and political institutions are currently facing pressures that challenge these principles.

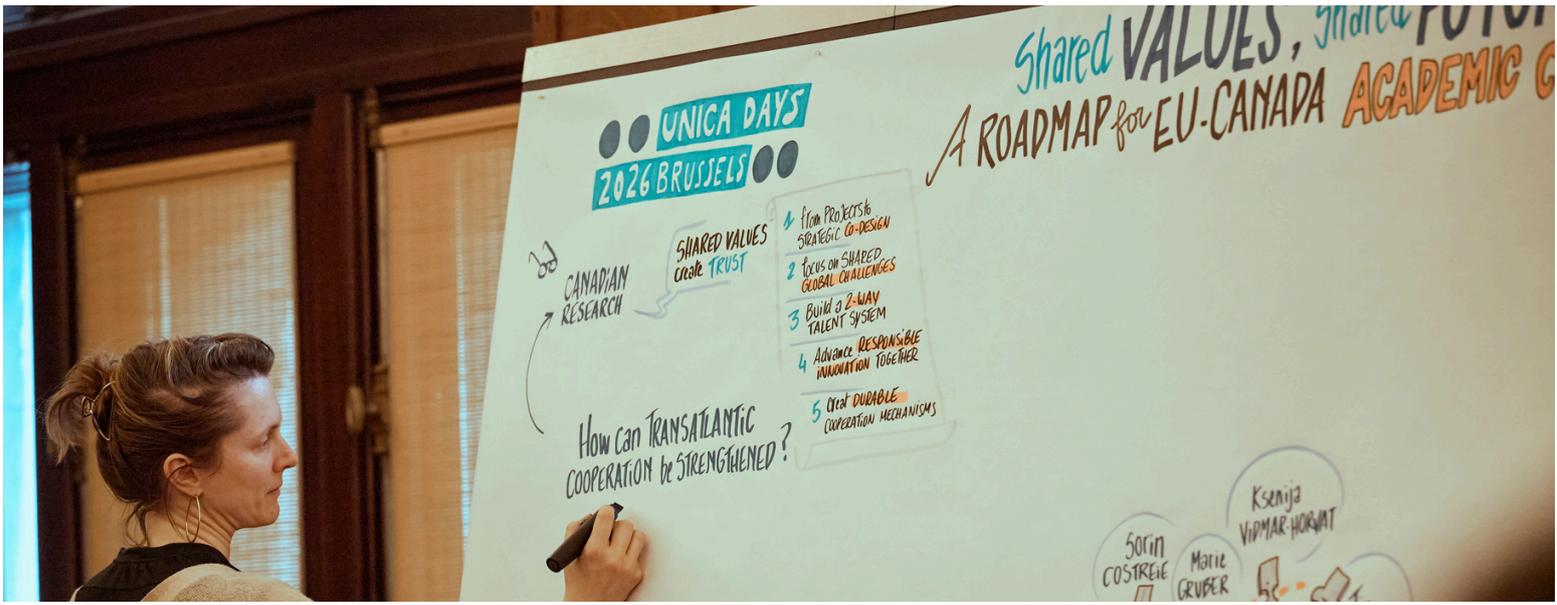
In this context, **international academic collaboration can act as an important stabilizing force**. Partnerships between European and Canadian universities can reinforce commitment to shared values and support the development of research, teaching and dialogue that contribute to democratic resilience. At the same time, she cautioned that universities must actively communicate and reaffirm these values within their academic communities in order to maintain trust and mutual understanding among scholars, students and societies.

The session highlighted the importance of strengthening EU–Canada academic cooperation at a time of geopolitical uncertainty and rapid societal change. Speakers emphasized that **universities share a set of core values** - including academic freedom, openness, diversity and commitment to the public good - **which provide a strong foundation for deeper transatlantic collaboration.**

A key message emerging from the discussion was the need to **move from project-based collaboration toward more strategic and long-term partnerships**, including through university networks, alliances and joint research initiatives. Strengthening talent mobility, co-designing research agendas and fostering shared innovation ecosystems were identified as important ways to reinforce cooperation.

Participants also stressed that universities have a critical role to play in shaping the future of technological innovation and societal transformation. Ensuring that advances in fields such as artificial intelligence are aligned with democratic principles and societal needs will require **strong collaboration between research institutions, policymakers and international partners.**





CONCLUSION

The discussions throughout UNICA Days 2026 highlighted the **growing strategic importance of transatlantic academic cooperation in addressing global challenges** and **strengthening the societal role of universities**. Across all sessions, participants emphasized that collaboration between European and Canadian institutions represents a particularly strong model of international partnership, as it is grounded in shared commitments to academic freedom, research excellence, democratic governance, and responsible innovation.

The conference demonstrated that **universities are increasingly expected to act** not only as centers of knowledge production, but also **as active contributors to public policy, scientific diplomacy, and societal transformation**. In areas such as climate action, global citizenship education, and research and innovation partnerships, Higher Education Institutions play a critical role in connecting scientific expertise with policy processes and public debate.

Participants also highlighted the growing **relevance of EU–Canada cooperation within the evolving global research landscape**. This development creates new opportunities to deepen joint research initiatives, strengthen institutional partnerships, and facilitate the mobility of researchers, students, and knowledge across the Atlantic.

Looking ahead, strengthening EU–Canada academic collaboration will require sustained efforts to **move beyond individual project-based cooperation towards longer-term strategic partnerships** involving universities, research networks, policymakers, and societal stakeholders. Such partnerships can contribute to reinforcing the science-policy interface, supporting innovation ecosystems, and promoting evidence-based approaches to global challenges.

In a rapidly evolving and often uncertain geopolitical environment, **universities will remain essential actors in fostering international dialogue**, strengthening democratic values, and advancing sustainable development through collaborative research and education.

The discussions at the UNICA Days 2026 conference reaffirmed that deeper cooperation between European and Canadian higher education institutions can serve as an **important pillar of transatlantic relations** and a catalyst for addressing shared global priorities.



FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Building on the insights from UNICA Days 2026, participants underscored the **importance of sustaining momentum in EU–Canada higher education and research collaboration**. Continued dialogue, innovative joint initiatives, and closer engagement between universities, policymakers, and international organizations are essential to **unlock the full potential of this partnership**.

Drawing from these discussions, **five future directions have been identified to guide policy cooperation**. These priorities aim to **strengthen institutional collaboration**, promote scientific diplomacy, and enhance the capacity of universities to address shared global challenges.

1

STRENGTHENING LONG-TERM INSTITUTIONAL PARTNERSHIPS

Participants emphasized the importance of moving beyond project-based cooperation towards long-term strategic partnerships between European and Canadian universities. Such partnerships could involve joint research platforms, co-developed academic programmes, and shared innovation initiatives addressing global challenges such as climate change, digital transformation, and democratic resilience.

2

REINFORCING THE SCIENCE–POLICY INTERFACE

Universities can play a key role in strengthening the connection between scientific knowledge and public decision-making. Participants highlighted the importance of supporting platforms that facilitate dialogue between researchers, policymakers, and civil society actors.

This includes promoting initiatives that encourage evidence-based policymaking, science communication, and knowledge brokerage, ensuring that academic expertise contributes effectively to addressing societal challenges.

3

EXPANDING MOBILITY AND TALENT EXCHANGE

Enhancing the mobility of students, researchers, and academic staff was identified as a crucial element for strengthening transatlantic cooperation. Participants stressed the importance of developing flexible mobility frameworks, joint doctoral programmes, and collaborative research training opportunities between European and Canadian institutions. Such initiatives can help foster long-term academic networks, promote interdisciplinary collaboration, and strengthen the next generation of globally engaged scholars.

4

SUPPORTING UNIVERSITY NETWORKS AND ALLIANCES AS COOPERATION PLATFORMS

Academic networks and international university alliances were recognised as important facilitators of collaboration between institutions. By connecting universities across borders, these networks can support knowledge exchange, policy dialogue, and the scaling of collaborative initiatives. Participants highlighted the role of organisations such as UNICA and the International Association of Universities in fostering dialogue and enabling new forms of international academic cooperation.

5

PROMOTING UNIVERSITIES AS ACTORS OF SCIENTIFIC DIPLOMACY

Finally, participants underscored the growing role of universities as key actors in scientific diplomacy. Through international research partnerships, academic exchanges, and collaborative knowledge production, universities contribute to strengthening dialogue between countries and promoting shared solutions to global challenges.

In an increasingly complex geopolitical context, strengthening EU–Canada cooperation in higher education and research can contribute not only to scientific progress but also to reinforcing democratic values, international cooperation, and sustainable development.



BEYOND THE REPORT

This report is an outcome of the session of the UNICA Days.

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2026 edition:

- [UNICA Days 2026 official webpage](#)
- [UNICA Days 2026 photos](#)

Previous editions:

- [UNICA Days 2025](#)
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52 UNIVERSITIES | 38 EUROPEAN CAPITALS

Founded in 1990, UNICA is an institutional network of universities from the capitals of Europe committed to acting as a catalyst in the advancement, integration and cooperation of its member universities throughout Europe. Its vision is to be a driving force in the development of the European Higher Education and Research areas, and to empower its member universities to unlock their full potential, putting knowledge, Research, and Innovation at the service of the needs of society and of the coming generations.

The cultural diversity and “living lab” aspects of Capital cities, the proximity to governing bodies, their technological, cultural and innovative capacity, and the opportunities they provide as powerful economic and commercial centers, create a special environment for UNICA Members. Building on the diverse profiles of its members, UNICA aims to widen and strengthen international collaborations, engage academic leadership, and facilitate networking among academic communities. Activities are prepared by relevant seven UNICA working groups in cooperation with the UNICA Steering Committee and the UNICA Secretariat in Brussels.

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Shared VALUES, Shared FUTURES

A ROADMAP for EU-CANADA ACADEMIC COOPERATIONS



EU & CA are BOTH UNLIKELY PROJECTS

QUALITY EDUCATION is LIKE a VIRUS... let's keep on SPREADING it



SUSTAINABILITY: let's GET AHEAD!

A LOT of OPPORTUNITIES!

How can EUROPEAN UNIVERSITIES contribute to RENEWING the SOCIAL CONTRACT?

WHICH SHARED VALUES? EU VALUES keep us SAFE

ETHOS: NEUTRALITY & CRITICAL THINKING

CA FUNDING IS PROPPING UNIVERSITIES PRIVATE SECTOR

OPENAI HAS MORE FUNDING FOR RESEARCH than UNIVERSITIES

UNIVERSITIES LOST their RANK as KNOWLEDGE INSTITUTIONS

WE need JOINT ACTION

SHARED FUTURES

Building COMPETENCES around MUTUAL UNDERSTANDING

TAILWINDS

HEADWINDS

DIVERSITY IS KEY for LEARNING!

INGENUITY

STUDENTS are our CLIENTS

EU & CA have SIMILAR DEMOGRAPHICS

TRUMP forces us to COLLABORATE and STAND UP for our OWN!

We need to UP OUR GAME!

improve EFFICIENCY

NEW FORMS of INSTITUTIONAL COOPERATION

How can we ENSURE that INNOVATION is DEVELOPED? RESPONSIBLY

MILA

TECHNOLOGY to ADVANCE the PUBLIC GOOD

SOCIAL CONTRACT

DEVELOP AI that BRINGS VALUE

TRANSPARENCY

DEMOCRATIC, SOCIETAL VALUES

CLIMATE

HUMAN RIGHTS

INCLUSIVE

* Ksenija VIDMAR-HORVAT

* Sorin COSTREIE

* Marie GRUBER

* Bill FLANAGAN

* Tim EVANS

How can TRANSATLANTIC COOPERATION be STRENGTHENED?

SHARED VALUES create TRUST

- 1 From PROJECTS to STRATEGIC Co-DESIGN
- 2 focus on SHARED GLOBAL CHALLENGES
- 3 Build a 2-WAY TALENT SYSTEM
- 4 Advance RESPONSIBLE INNOVATION TOGETHER
- 5 Create DURABLE COOPERATION MECHANISMS

CANADIAN RESEARCH

EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY NETWORKS

USE what we have!!

ATOMS, MOLECULES, NETWORKS...

it's NATURAL to create NETWORKS

CREATE ALLIANCES

We have to STICK TOGETHER

WE need to UP OUR GAME!

improve EFFICIENCY

DANGER vs OPPORTUNITY?

