



GLOBAL

## G7 university presidents to tackle global challenges

**Jane Marshall and Brendan O'Malley** 08 June 2019

Under its presidency of the G7, France is launching U7, an international alliance of elite universities committed to tackling five global challenges, as part of a strategy to promote the multilateral role of universities.

Countries belonging to the Group of Seven advanced economies are Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the United Kingdom and the United States. The European Union is also represented.

The U7 Alliance of World Universities is a French initiative supported by 13 higher education institutions. It will hold its first summit meeting in Paris in July, under the patronage of France's President Emmanuel Macron, attended by presidents of 46 universities\*.

As well as from the G7, institutions have also been invited from Morocco, Senegal, Côte d'Ivoire, Kenya, Nigeria, Ghana, South Africa, Australia, India, South Korea, Singapore, Mexico and Argentina.

Altogether, presidents from 46 universities will attend the summit, representing more than two million students across the world.

### Action on global challenges

The university presidents will commit their institutions to hold discussions and take action at local, regional and international levels, on five major global challenges: the key role of universities in a global world; climate change and cleaner energy; inequality and polarised societies; technological transformations; and community engagement and impact.

According to a statement posted by the U7 Alliance, the world's leading universities recognise they have a unique responsibility as global actors, in fields well beyond academia, to take concrete action both together and within their institutions for a local, regional and global impact.

The five working groups will agree proposals to be presented to Macron for the G7 Summit, which will take place in Biarritz in France at the end of August.

Macron himself is a strong advocate of multilateralism – and only last week, at the 75th anniversary celebrations of D-Day, made vehement calls for the US to re-engage with the

principles of multilateralism.

“The U7 Alliance will confirm that higher education institutions also have things to say on world affairs,” said Frédérique Vidal, France’s minister for higher education, research and innovation.

Frédéric Mion, director of the institute Sciences Po and chair of the U7 French universities’ steering committee, said: “In a shifting geopolitical context, academic exchanges and relations between universities have become essential international channels for dialogue.”

The founding members of U7 have agreed to hold an annual summit to discuss a common agenda and establish a space for universities’ action in today’s global landscape, according to a statement from the alliance. They aim to create norms for the higher education sector and beyond.

For this 2019 inaugural summit, institutions from G7 countries due to attend include 13 from France, five each from Canada, Germany and the UK, four from Japan, three from Italy and one from the US.

The **statement** by the U7 Alliance said the forum was being set up for three reasons.

These included a need to ensure G7 support for universal access to primary education is followed by action to increase access in higher education to meet demand, which has been rising for the past 20 years.

In addition, in the major industrialised countries higher education faces common significant challenges related to funding, digital technology, ability to promote access to employment in a globalised environment, responding to growing demands for mobility, and supporting scientific research to address existing and as yet unknown great global challenges.

Also, it was felt that in a changing geopolitical context, academic discussions and relations between universities are essential to leverage international dialogue. In this context, universities have gradually become diplomatic and political actors.

### **Advancing universities’ role as global actors**

Although not by any means the first university leaders’ forum or network, it claims to be the “very first alliance of university presidents aimed at structuring and advancing their role as global actors across the multilateral agenda”.

Professor Stephen J Toope, vice-chancellor of the University of Cambridge, one of the UK members of the alliance, told *University World News*: “This new partnership will help us share resources and research expertise with other global research organisations, allowing us to jointly tackle global issues including chronic disease, global food security and climate change.”

Professor Michael Arthur, president and provost of University College London or UCL, another UK member, added: “The U7 Alliance brings together more than 30 leading universities, who all have a passion for sharing knowledge, finding solutions and making a

positive difference to the world.”

He said universities are uniquely placed to bring together research, expertise and best practices and the collaboration will stimulate discussion and ideas, “with a view to making long-lasting commitments and taking concrete action”.

This would “positively affect our local, national and international communities” and “further demonstrate the public good of universities”.

\*The 46 universities that will attend the inaugural U7 Alliance summit are:

- *French steering committee*: Aix-Marseille; Bordeaux; Côte d’Azur; École Polytechnique; Grenoble Alpes; HEC Paris; Lyon; Paris Diderot; Paris Saclay; Paris Sciences et Lettres; Sciences Po; Sorbonne; Strasbourg.
- *Canada*: British Columbia; McGill; Montréal; Ottawa; Toronto.
- *Germany*: Freie Universität Berlin; Heidelberg; Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich; Mannheim; Technical University of Munich.
- *UK*: Cambridge; Imperial College London; University College London; Edinburgh; London School of Economics and Political Science.
- *Japan*: Hitotsubashi; Keio; Osaka; Tokyo.
- *Italy*: Universita Bocconi; Naples Federico II; Sapienza of Rome.
- *US*: Columbia, New York.
- *Australia*: Australian National University.
- *Côte d’Ivoire*: Institut National Polytechnique Félix Houphouët-Boigny.
- *Ghana*: Ashesi.
- *Mexico*: Universidad Nacional Autonoma de Mexico.
- *Morocco*: Mohammed VI Polytechnique.
- *Nigeria*: Ibadan.
- *Senegal*: Cheikh Anta Diop.
- *South Africa*: Cape Town.
- *South Korea*: Seoul National University.
- *Singapore*: National University of Singapore.

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