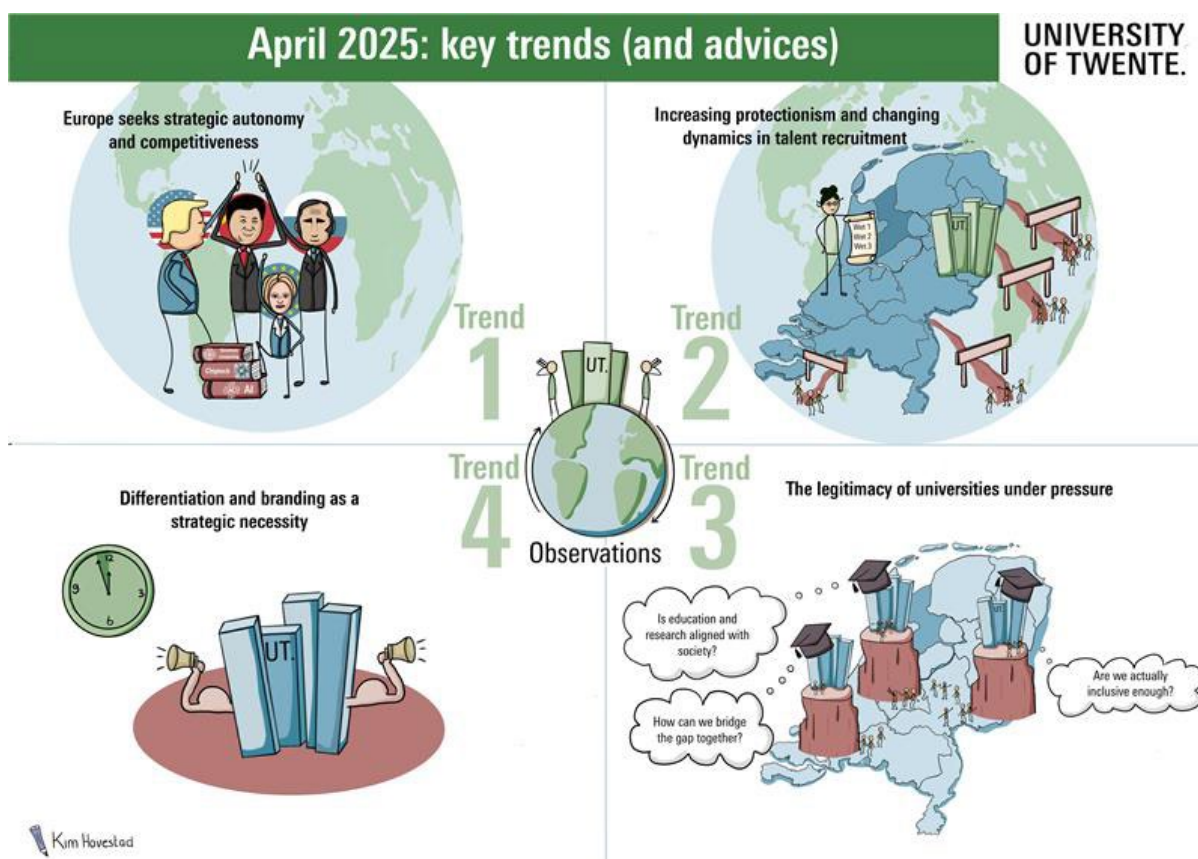

Policy Brief Signalling Outside in: April 2025: key trends & advices

L.S. For this briefing, over 160 observations and developments collected from October 2024 to February 2025 were examined to determine how they relate to one another, as well as their relevance to ongoing trends. In this policy brief, we will discuss the most significant trends and provide advices for actionable steps that can be taken by UT. It is the third in [a series](#); this edition was produced by colleagues from BMS, FIN, M&C, SBD, S&P and SU.

The aim of this briefing is to provide inspiration for a sustainable and proactive university with *key trends & advices*. The next one is scheduled for October 2025. We are always happy to expand the team. After all, the broader the view, the more observations and the sharper the advice! Comments are most welcome via Lisette Woud (l.a.Woud@utwente.nl) or Inge Broekman (i.broekman@utwente.nl).



Several trends identified in previous briefings are endorsed by observations from the period under focus here. Indeed, they seem to have been reinforced by recent geopolitical and economic developments. The European Union (EU) is trying to position itself as a stronger geopolitical actor, while at the same time nationalist tendencies are increasing in several countries. This contradiction manifests itself, for example, in the dynamics surrounding talent recruitment (on the one hand, we need international talent; on the other, barriers are being erected). What all perspectives have in common is a stronger need for differentiation and profiling. In this policy brief, we discuss the most relevant trends for the University of Twente (UT) and offer strategic advice.

Trend 1: Europe seeks strategic autonomy and competitiveness

We live in a VUCA (Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, and Ambiguous) world. There are interrelated variables but where causal relationships are not always clear. For the first time since World War II, an unprecedented shift of geopolitical panels is taking place in which tensions, such as the conflicts in the Middle East and the power struggles between major powers such as the US, China and Russia, have a direct impact on international collaborations. At the European level, Trump's re-election and negotiations like the one between Trump and Putin on Ukraine, in which the EU is sidelined, show how vulnerable we are. All this underlines the importance of keeping an open mind and a broad perspective.

The EU has increasingly clear ambitions to position itself as a geopolitical and economic superpower alongside the US, China and Russia. This was also endorsed at Davos 2025.¹ The EU's ambitions translate into large investments in strategic technologies, such as AI, quantum computing and semiconductors. It also translates into initiatives such as the Clean Industrial Deal and into European investment in its own defence and the industry needed for it. The focus is on reducing dependence on foreign technologies and raw materials, with the aim of making Europe more economically and technologically resilient. This is in line with Mario Draghi's report on the future of European competitiveness, which stresses the need for Europe to make substantial investments to boost productivity growth and remain internationally competitive.²

Advice to UT:

- Capitalise on choices in European funding programmes such as Horizon Europe and the EU Chips Act to strengthen strategic cooperation. The European multiannual financial framework being negotiated in the European Parliament will determine where the weight in investment in new technologies and talent will lie from 2027.
- Position UT as a partner for industry in key technologies and collaborate on innovation projects.
- Strengthen links with European partners in industry and science to promote joint applications and robust consortia.

It is important that UT knows how to communicate sharply what its *unique selling points* are compared to other partners. This is reflected in trend 4.

Trend 2: Increasing protectionism and changing dynamics in talent recruitment

While the EU is committed to cooperation and technological independence, at the same time we see an opposite movement within individual member states: growing protectionism and nationalism. This

¹ [World Economic Forum Annual Meeting 2025 | World Economic Forum](#)

² [The Draghi report on EU competitiveness](#)

manifests itself in stricter immigration rules, a focus on domestic industries and discouraging international cooperation. In the Netherlands, for example, we see this reflected in the debate on internationalisation in higher education. Measures such as the *Wet Screening Kennisveiligheid* aim to ensure that our knowledge and technologies do not fall into the wrong hands. How we do this determines, and sometimes conflicts with, goals such as transparency, collectivity or student influx for labour market shortages.

Universities face changing dynamics in talent recruitment and development (from students to PhDs and academic staff). The EU and the Netherlands recognise the importance of talent development for the knowledge economy, but it seems that external factors are increasingly playing a role in the success of university recruitment and selection. The *IND-norm*, geopolitical tensions and emerging legislation such as the *Wet Screening Kennisveiligheid* may exclude certain international students and researchers. It is important to realise that the influx and stay-rate of talent may (further) decrease due to the *Wet Internationalisering in Balans*, demographic shrinkage and impact of geopolitical developments.

However, the uncertain future of attracting international talent also offers universities the reorientation to other target groups. Through training professionals, for example, we can still continue to contribute to society's labour market issues, for example. Indeed, the labour market is changing rapidly, driven by technological innovations and demographic shifts. Traditional education models increasingly do not match employers' demand, especially in sectors with shortages such as engineering and healthcare. This leads to an increasing need for flexible forms of talent development focused on skills (skills-based learning³) and retraining.

Advice to UT:

- Stay in close contact with policymakers in The Hague and Brussels to influence laws and regulations affecting talent mobility and research collaboration.
- Evaluate strategic partnerships, thinking critically about their geographical distribution (regional, Euroregional, national, European, global).
- Since it seems that employers are placing less value on diplomas and more on (academic) competences (within the popular skills/skills concept⁴), it is important that UT explores with employers how we can flesh this out.

Trend 3: The legitimacy of universities under pressure

The social position of universities themselves is also increasingly questioned. In the Netherlands, criticism of academia is growing: universities are more often seen as elitist institutions with insufficient connection to wider social groups. This is bad for achieving diversity within universities: precisely what is needed to contribute to different perspectives and connection with society. This criticism also leads to political pressure and budget cuts. And this in turn runs counter to society's increasing demand to

³ [Union of Skills - European Commission](#)

⁴ [Union of skills - European Commission](#) & [CompetentNL](#)

show how universities contribute to societal challenges such as sustainability, technology and social inequality.⁵

An important new perspective in this debate is offered by Mark Bovens in his farewell speech on *verzuiling* within education.⁶ Whereas this *verzuiling*, compartmentalisation, used to be determined by religion and ideology, we now see a separation based on education level with corresponding ideological differences. This leads to a growing gap between universities and society; between theoretical and practical or non-educated people. The gap is social, economic and ideological and expresses itself politically in critical attitudes towards higher education. This, in turn, can lead to budget cuts and regulations that limit universities' autonomy.

This development raises fundamental questions: Are universities sufficiently inclusive? Do research and teaching connect with the wider society? And what role can universities play to bridge the gap between university and society?

Advice to UT:

- Strengthen dialogue with society and state more clearly where and how UT is actively pursuing social impact.
- Contribute actively to the dialogue on this by engaging in equal cooperation and information exchange; after all, in the *waaier* we are not the same but equal.
- Seek further connection with the region and commit to strengthening broader cooperation with society. Work with HBOs, MBOs and companies to make the education and research ecosystem more widely accessible.

Trend 4: Differentiation and branding as a strategic necessity

Building on the previous trends, we see a trend emerging that argues for the need for strong profiling of universities. It is more important than ever for universities to be clear to themselves and the world what they focus on in terms of teaching, research and impact. This is necessary to remain visible and successful in the competitive academic market. European and national funding frameworks are steering more frequently towards themes such as Artificial Intelligence (AI), chip technology and sustainability, for example. Sectors such as defence are also becoming more relevant within the academic playing field. This is in line with the observations of the Draghi report, which states that universities play a crucial role in Europe's global competitiveness.

As an example, we explored developments in AI a little. The EU and the Netherlands lag globally in AI development compared to the US and China, but actually excel in ethical and responsible AI applications. Europe is likely to invest in both the fundamental development of AI and its ethical and

⁵ For the direction of the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, see the Policy Letter on Further Education, Research and Science: [Aan de Tweede Kamer - Beleidsbrief vervolgonderwijs, onderzoek en wetenschap | Kamerstuk | Rijksoverheid.nl](#).

⁶ [Afscheidsrede Mark Bovens: Opleiding als verzuiling - Nieuws & Agenda - Universiteit Utrecht](#)

responsible application. While some institutions are already focusing on fundamental development, UT's expertise lies mainly in the application-oriented side of AI. In addition, it is crucial that UT not only commits to these applications, but also actively raises their visibility to strengthen its positioning within the AI landscape.

Advice to UT:

- Further strengthen UT's profile *within* the four impact domains. Do not limit profiling to the designation of impact domains, but profile UT on the distinctive expertise we have within these impact domains. Indeed, we see other universities and 'Toegepaste Onderzoek Organisaties' (TO2) focusing on similar themes. It should be clear what UT's unique selling points are within the impact domains.
- Increase the visibility of UT's unique selling points and attractiveness to work with UT through strategic communication and lobbying activities.

P.S. This briefing is the result of a joint process in which we used reading reality, the 'iceberg model' and system thinking. With this briefing, we fulfil our role of providing the UT with relevant information from outside the UT that can influence the (longer-term) strategy and policy of (parts of) the UT. English translation based on DeepL.