



Prof Marie-Hélène JOBIN

Vice-Rector for Partnerships and International Relations of the University of Luxembourg
Member of the Executive Committee of the Bridge Forum Dialogue

Dear Professor Nanz,

Distinguished guests,
Ladies and gentlemen,

It is both a privilege and a pleasure to address you today, especially as we look forward to the insights of Professor Patricia Nanz, whose work has shaped how we understand the role of science in society and the responsibilities of universities in today's world.

We gather at a moment of tension and uncertainty. European and international cooperation are under pressure.

- War has returned to Europe,
- the rule of law is being contested in several countries,
- borders are being reintroduced in Europe and
- the notion of truth, central to academia, is challenged daily by disinformation and institutional distrust.

Universities are, of course, affected by these dynamics. But I believe they are also uniquely equipped to respond and offer something society urgently needs.

There are three core missions that define the university and Professor Nanz will elaborate on this later in her keynote speech:

- the preservation and transmission of knowledge, the teaching
- the capacity to innovate and fuel progress, the research
- and the so called third mission which encompass many actions creating impact in the community, the public and the economic ecosystem.

However..., there is also another mission that is often overlooked but is increasingly vital in this geopolitical context: scientific diplomacy. I want to elaborate on this.

Scientific diplomacy is built on the idea that science and higher education are not only tools for discovery, but instruments of cooperation and peace.

When we hear “diplomacy,” we may think of embassies, ministers, or treaties. But today, diplomacy extends beyond formal statecraft. It may include culture, NGOs work, tourism, and indeed, universities.

Universities are often among the few institutions that maintain relationships across divides when other channels are blocked.

As Nobel Prize Ahmed Zewail wisely said, “*The soft power of science has the potential to reshape global diplomacy.*”¹ This insight is more relevant than ever today.

Without treaties and agreements, researchers are co-authoring papers, mentoring students, and attending conferences with colleagues from all over the world, even in times of crisis.

Scientific diplomacy operates on three levels:

¹ <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2010-jun-27-la-oe-zewail-science-20100627-story.html>

- The first, involves state-to-state agreements or funding instruments like Erasmus+, Horizon Europe, and bilateral agreements that enable mobility and large-scale cooperation & research. This is the official infrastructure.
- The second, involves institutional partnerships, which reflect shared missions and scientific complementarity. Such agreements are often showcased or involved official signing with politics and diplomatics attending. They can warm relationships between countries.
- The third, is the individual connection: between professors, doctoral students and researchers. These ties, grounded in mutual respect and intellectual trust, can quietly sustain dialogue when the two other levels are not anymore possible.

In times of conflict, maintaining these informal channels becomes even more essential. Scientific diplomacy is people-to-people diplomacy. It helps preserve dialogue, trust, and the hope of reconciliation.

However, we must not be naive. Scientific diplomacy is not always benign (B9). Universities can become political instrument and could aligned with authoritarian regimes.

- How can we support researchers who may have very different point of view?

At the University of Luxembourg, we regularly face visa denials that affect our ability to welcome speakers in conferences and attract talent for Ph.D. or a postdoc.

These restrictions reflect legitimate security concerns, but they also challenge our commitment to openness.

We do support the state's role in ensuring national security. But as a university, we also uphold our core values: openness, academic freedom, and international collaboration.

University of Luxembourg is ranked among the most international universities in the world, with students and staff from over 140 countries. This diversity is not incidental, it's intentional.

Indeed, scientific diplomacy is not limited to international projects or formal agreements.

Our 2 campuses is also labs of scientific diplomacy in action.

For our students and staff, diversity is a daily reality, not just a tag line. It shapes how students encounter complexity and cooperation.

We should educate not just experts, but global citizens, people capable of critical thinking and carrying values like peace, reason, and cooperation into the world.

In this perspective, I am pleased to highlight our recent inclusion in The Guild of European Research-Intensive Universities. This selective alliance brings together some of Europe's most respected research institutions, from King's College London to Bologna University, and provides a strong voice in policy discussions.

Joining The Guild is a recognition of our academic maturity. More importantly, it's a commitment: to shape Europe's scientific future, defend academic freedom, and enhance the University's role as a diplomatic actor.

For example, The Guild's cooperation with African Universities provides an alternative to growing authoritarian influence in Africa, where Western engagement is declining.

Not all threats come from authoritarian regimes. Even in democratic contexts, such as the Trump administration's attacks on Harvard, academic institutions can be destabilized.

I'm sure that Professor Nanz could provide a more substantial view on this.

We are witnessing a growing number of displaced scholars, academics in exile, or unable to travel due to sanctions.

Many of them reject the views of their own government.

Some have fled; others resist from within. We must find a way to make space for them, because their contributions and courage enrich us all.

Universities can be viewed as Embassy of knowledge, and safe harbours for scholars.

We must also recognize the diplomatic access universities could have.

In my career, I've had several occasions of meeting with ministers, ambassadors, and delegations from all around the world. These interactions are part of a "soft" diplomacy. They are opportunities for relationship-building, agenda-setting, and dialogue.

Of course, when universities are invited at the table it's because they bring value, but we also bring along values such as:

- Academic freedom and
- Scientific integrity

However, the geopolitical context is a stress test for universities. We must acknowledge that higher education institutions are vulnerable in this context.

Uncertainty and geopolitical tensions can destroy long-lasting relationships and fruitful partnerships in a wink.

We can witness it with the situation unfolding in United-States right now.

On the other hand, we are essential in those times of tension because it is our mission:

- to preserve, share and advance knowledge.
- It's our role to educate the leaders of tomorrow.

- Our contribution is also to inform public debate.

We must embrace our roles as bridges across cultures and across borders.

And in a time when formal diplomacy is damaged, these informal scientific ties may be the last bridges left standing.

By supporting them, we are not only advancing science. We are keeping hope alive.

I am really looking forward to the inspiring vision that Professor Nanz will present in a few minutes.

Thank you to being with us today. We need your inspiring vision.