

Trinational education & knowledge as a pillar of a labour market without borders

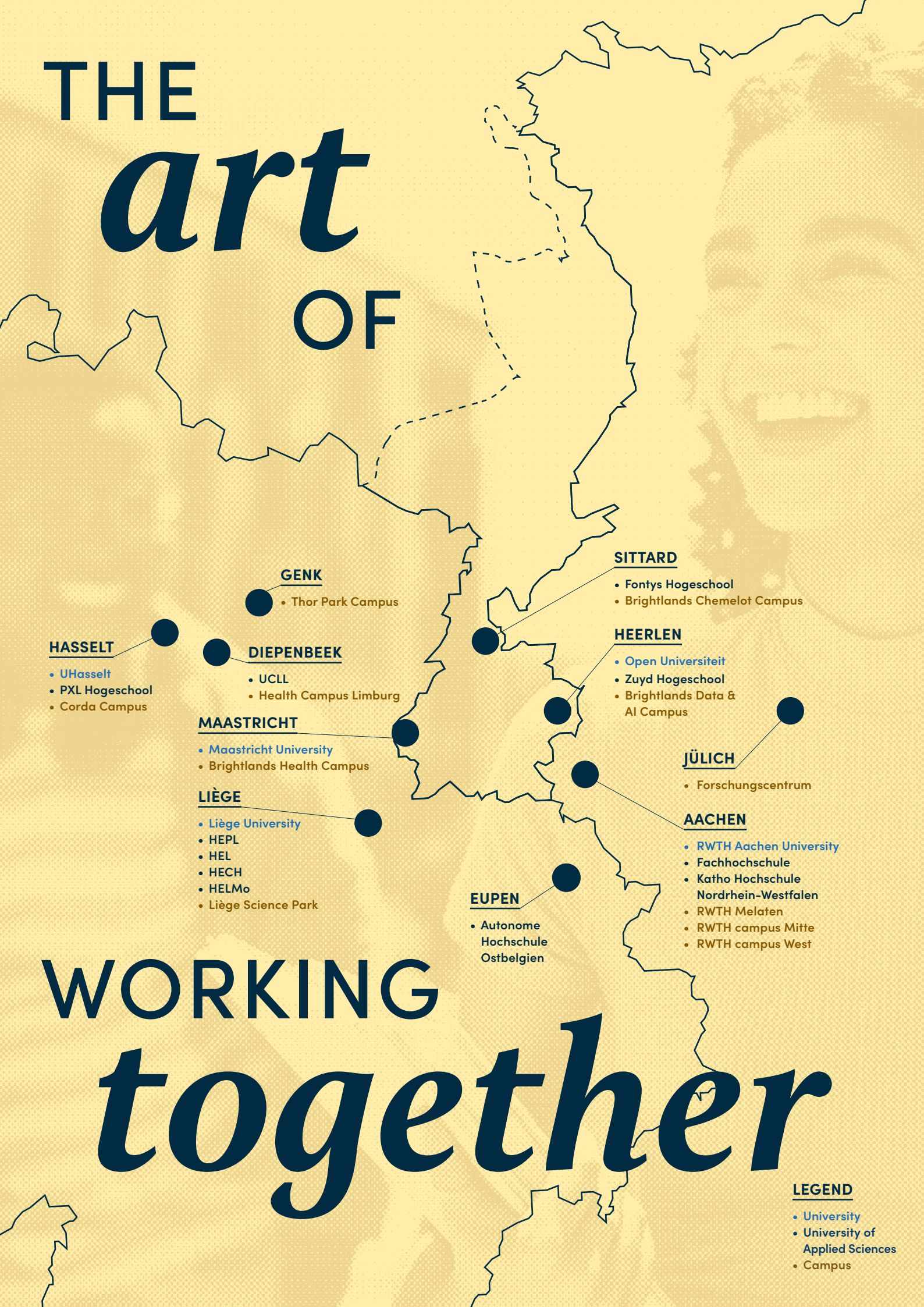
provincie
Limburg

Trinational thinking: from obstacles to opportunities

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THE *art* OF WORKING *together*



SITTARD
- Fontys Hogeschool
- Brightlands Chemelot Campus

GENK
- Thor Park Campus

HASSELT
- UHasselt
- PXL Hogeschool
- Corda Campus

DIEPENBEEK
- UCLL
- Health Campus Limburg

HEERLEN
- Open Universiteit
- Zuyd Hogeschool
- Brightlands Data & AI Campus

MAASTRICHT
- Maastricht University
- Brightlands Health Campus

JÜLICH
- Forschungscentrum

LIÈGE
- Liège University
- HEPL
- HEL
- HECH
- HELMo
- Liège Science Park

AACHEN
- RWTH Aachen University
- Fachhochschule
- Katho Hochschule Nordrhein-Westfalen
- RWTH Melaten
- RWTH campus Mitte
- RWTH campus West

EUPEN
- Autonome Hochschule Ostbelgien

LEGEND
- University
- University of Applied Sciences
- Campus

The regional knowledge and education institutions (universities, higher professional education and secondary vocational education) in Limburg play a key role in strengthening the quality of life, earning capacity and social cohesion in the region.

In a border region where large multinationals are relatively scarce, these knowledge institutions invest in fundamental and practice-oriented research, craftsmanship, and vocational education.

They train the talent that is indispensable for the regional and Euregional economy and collaborate intensively with the business community.

With a cross-border orientation and close connection to the Brightlands campuses, these institutions contribute not only to innovation and broad prosperity in Limburg, but also to the national interest of a strong, futureproof knowledge infrastructure.

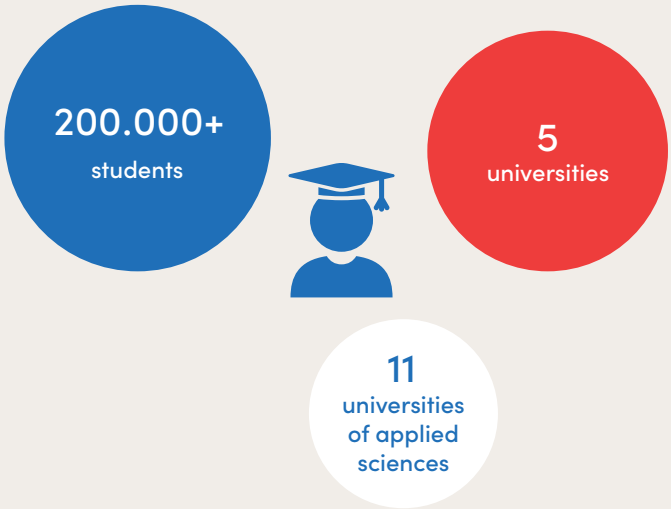
Limburg named Smartest Region for 2026

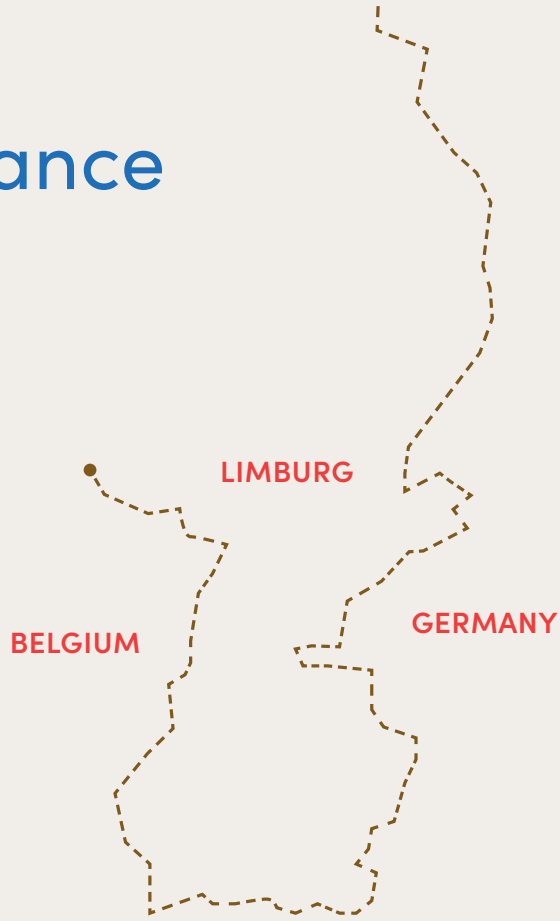
On 16 October 2026, Limburg was chosen by the Intelligent Community Forum (ICF) as the 'Smartest Region in the World' for 2026. The ICF views Brightlands Limburg as a global example of cooperation between government, businesses and knowledge institutions.

That collaboration, also known as the triple helix, helps to develop solutions for major societal issues. The four interconnected Brightlands campuses in Heerlen, Maastricht, Sittard-Geleen, and Venlo form important drivers of the Limburg innovation network.

The proposition at a glance

Limburg lies at the heart of one of Europe's most dynamic knowledge and labour market regions. Within a radius of approximately thirty kilometres around South Limburg, there are five universities and eleven universities of applied sciences, with a combined total of more than 200,000 students. These institutions form part of a dense network of knowledge centres, campuses and innovation clusters in the Netherlands, Belgium and Germany. The Brightlands Campuses in Limburg are linked to, amongst others, the RWTH Aachen Campus, Forschungszentrum Jülich, Corda Campus in Hasselt, Thor Park Campus (Genk), Health Campus Limburg (Diepenbeek) and the Liège Science Park. In this region, education, research, entrepreneurship and innovation come together in a unique way.





One interconnected ecosystem

Economically, Limburg also holds a special position. The Province of Limburg forms part of a cross-border labour market comprising roughly 8 million people and approximately 3.5 to 4 million jobs within an hour's drive. Every day, thousands of people cross the border for work, study or cooperation. For students, businesses and knowledge institutions, this border region effectively forms a single coherent ecosystem of talent, knowledge and economic activity. Particularly at a time of labour market shortages, technological development and international competition, this proximity to knowledge and labour offers significant opportunities for the Netherlands.

At the same time, this potential is still not being fully exploited. Education, the labour market and regulatory frameworks are largely organised at national level, whilst the reality in the region is cross-border in nature. Differences in funding, recognition of qualifications, internships, labour law, social security and taxation make it difficult to effectively organise education and employment across borders. National policy decisions relating to internationalisation and education funding can also have a disproportionately large impact in border regions. As a result, talent mobility remains limited and it becomes more difficult for educational institutions and employers to develop structural solutions together.

The region takes responsibility for this itself. Limburg educational institutions collaborate with businesses and social partners on continuous learning pathways, practice-oriented education, and initiatives for Lifelong Learning (LLL). Students undertake parts of their studies across the border, businesses are involved in work-study programmes, and campuses serve as hubs where education, research and innovation converge. The Province of Limburg supports these developments by connecting parties, organising governance and stimulating cooperation.

These bottlenecks occur in a region that is simultaneously dealing with demographic decline. The number of young people is decreasing while the demand for qualified personnel is increasing. That is precisely why it is essential for Limburg to make better use of the proximity of the Belgian and German education and labour markets. Not as an end in itself, but as a way to maintain educational programmes, develop talent and support economic growth.

However, in order to make this change a permanent feature, the central government's involvement is also required.



The Province of Limburg is asking the central government for four steps

Policy scope
to better align education and the labour market with a trinational reality, for example regarding funding, diploma recognition, internships and multilingual study programmes.

Long-term guarantee
for cooperation between educational and knowledge institutions, businesses and international partners, which requires a perspective of ten to twenty years.

Interdepartmental National Management
because issues concerning education, the labour market, the economy, and cross-border cooperation are currently fragmented across multiple ministries.

Structural financial resources
needed to sustainably organise programme management structure, governance and knowledge development.

By means of this proposition, Limburg is inviting the central government to a project partnership. Not to create a special status, but to make better use of the agglomeration opportunities offered by this international knowledge region.
By strengthening the connections between education, knowledge and the labour market, and by investing in talent development, Limburg can become an example of how a border region contributes to the economic strength and innovative future of the Netherlands. Moreover, this ambition is closely aligned with the new national Talent Strategy and can contribute to the government's stated aim of becoming Europe's strongest economy, with structural growth of 1.5 per cent per year.

1. Limburg, an international education and knowledge region with barriers and opportunities

Limburg has a unique position within the Netherlands. A province in the heart of a border region that connects Belgium, the Netherlands and Germany. Its distinctive characteristics give rise to specific challenges and opportunities in terms of education (and the labour market). With the support of the Province of Limburg, core municipalities and other partners, Limburg's educational organisations published an Education Manifesto in 2024. In this document, they drew the national government's attention to a number of bottlenecks and related issues.

1. There is an urgent need for financial flexibility and stable, structural funding to maintain the current range of programmes, despite the demographic decline, thereby also contributing to the affordability of small-scale programmes that are crucial to the region.
2. It is essential to secure a permanent exemption for Limburg within the proposed internationalisation policy, with tailored measures for regions experiencing population decline and border regions. This means more scope for English, German and French-language degree programmes to attract and retain sufficient talent for the region, particularly in sectors facing staff shortages. In macro-efficiency assessments, the international context and the social needs of our border region should be given explicit consideration.
3. It is important to establish structural funding aimed at cooperation within the education sector and with the regional business community, rather than one-off grants and tender schemes involving high administrative burdens. The scope and appropriate funding to develop, together with our cross-border and regional education partners and businesses, an innovative range of educational programmes that, first and foremost, meet regional needs, transcending the boundaries between institutions and levels of education (educational spectrum), but also extending beyond the borders with neighbouring countries.
4. There needs to be structural support for the lifelong learning (LLL) initiatives offered and developed by public educational institutions, by making lifelong learning part of their public remit, so that we can ensure the retention of knowledge and employment opportunities for everyone.
5. The public transport infrastructure in and from the region should be improved (from the rest of the Netherlands to the Province of Limburg, within the Province of Limburg and across the borders). The recently introduced Three-Country Train is a good first step; additional cross-border Intercity services are desirable, in conjunction with unravelling the railway congestion around Eindhoven.
6. Provide scope for consolidation and growth in consultation with our regional and civil society partners (invest in regional development and the multi-purpose use of training infrastructure on a long-term rather than ad hoc basis) and the Brightlands Campuses.

In short, a wide-ranging, bespoke approach (including the necessary investment) is required to maintain a healthy vocational, higher professional and university education system in Limburg. The content of the Education Manifesto remains fully valid even now, including the urgent call to central government to work on this together.

But there is more to it than that, because Limburg's unique position not only gives rise to bottlenecks and challenges, but also offers genuine opportunities in the fields of education, knowledge and the labour market. This is certainly the case if we succeed in utilising its distinctive international location to the benefit of the Province of Limburg and the border region, as is already happening with the Einstein Telescope project, i.e. by looking beyond national borders – that is, on a trinational basis – at the education, knowledge and labour markets. And by creating the scope for experimentation needed to capitalise on the agglomeration opportunities.

A rich and diverse range of educational programmes
Just consider: the Euregio Maas-Rijn, to which South Limburg also belongs, boasts a remarkably rich and diverse range of educational opportunities. Within a radius of around thirty kilometres of South Limburg, there are no fewer than five universities, eleven universities of applied sciences and a large number of secondary vocational education institutions. Universities and universities of applied sciences alone have a combined total of over 200,000 students. Linked to these are a large number of campuses and institutes where, within a one-hour travel radius of Limburg, knowledge is translated into innovations – ranging from key technologies to practical applications and valorisation.
In addition to its own four Brightlands Campuses in Limburg, these are:

- Corda Campus (Hasselt)
- Thor Park (Genk)
- Health Campus Limburg (Diepenbeek)
- RWTH Aachen Campus: Melaten, West and Mitte (Aachen)
- Forschungszentrum Jülich (Jülich)
- Liège Science Park (RISE, Research, Innovation, Support, Enterprises, part ULiège)

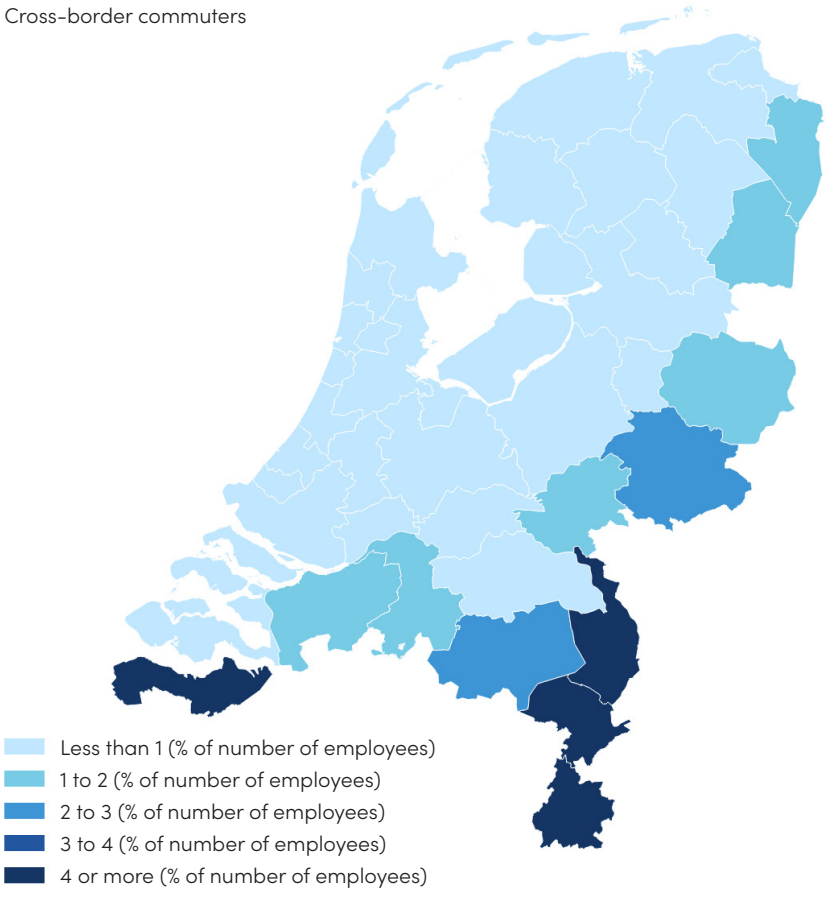
In addition, the region is home to other interesting campuses, such as the Max Planck Institute for Chemical Energy Conversion (Mülheim an der Ruhr) and The MecaTech Cluster (Saarlee, near Namur).

Whilst the four Limburg Brightlands Campuses collaborate on a project basis with the above campuses and innovation centres, there is as yet no structural Euregional pooling of educational, knowledge and innovativeness, meaning that agglomeration opportunities are not being sufficiently exploited. Moreover, this collaboration is not limited to education alone. The region is building a joint Euregional knowledge agenda, including the development of a strategic alliance in the field of artificial intelligence and a Euregional research centre around the Einstein Telescope. This further strengthens the connection between education, research, innovation and economic development, and enables Limburg to contribute to the resilience of the Netherlands.

Cross-border labour market

The Province of Limburg forms part of a cross-border labour market comprising roughly 8 million people and approximately 3.5 to 4 million jobs within an hour's drive. The number of cross-border commuters from Belgium and Germany to the Netherlands has been rising for four consecutive years. For the inhabitants of the vast Limburg border region, cross-border traffic is commonplace when it comes to, for example, shopping or recreation. But it becomes far more difficult if you live on one side of the border and want to study, work or do business on the other side.

Cross-border commuters



That causes hassle in all sorts of ways, for example regarding tax legislation and insurance, but also the recognition of diplomas or acquired experience. This prevents people from broadening their horizons and means that Limburg and the surrounding region are far from having the appeal they could have – in terms of talent, opportunities and businesses. The international concentration of knowledge manifests itself throughout the entire province. The Brightlands campuses in Maastricht, Heerlen, Sittard-Geleen and Venlo, the logistics corridors and the links with North Rhine-Westphalia and Brainport Eindhoven, amongst other things, are helping to create a single, coherent provincial knowledge and labour market system. Furthermore, the strength of the Limburg Euregio also lies in interlinking and allowing the knowledge and developments in the Eindhoven–Leuven–Aachen triangle in the fields of artificial intelligence and semiconductors to 'breathe'. In this way, we make the Netherlands (and Europe) stronger.

Border barriers from different perspectives

For students, the current situation means that they are educated within a single national system, while their career prospects often lie in another country. An education in the Netherlands can lead to work in Germany or Belgium, but recognition of qualifications (particularly at secondary vocational education level), internship requirements, language expectations and access to further education are not automatically aligned. This creates uncertainty and barriers, particularly at a stage when young people have to make decisions about their future. As a result, they move away from the area instead of taking advantage of the opportunities offered by the border region.

For educational and knowledge institutions, this means that structural cross-border cooperation is complex and risky. Joint curricula, dual tracks, or cross-border internships are possible, but often only through temporary projects, exemption schemes, or additional financing. Funding follows national student flows, while societal challenges are regional and cross-border. This means that cooperation remains fragile and difficult to scale up. Knowledge development is also linked to this: where possible, institutions on either side of national borders collaborate, but a truly structural approach, based on a coordinated cross-border strategy, is still lacking.

For employers and employees alike, there is potential talent in the border region, but that potential cannot be fully exploited because the education system and the labour market do not function as a single, coherent system across the three countries. Mobility of labour is hampered by differences in regulations, social security and tax treatment (for example, regarding working from home). Both the complexity of these differences and the uncertainty deter people from working across borders. Employees who do take this step become discouraged and will limit their next career move to their country of residence.

At the same time, it is true that major economic and social opportunities and challenges – ranging from the energy transition and high-tech manufacturing to healthcare, logistics and digital innovation – are unfolding on an international scale right on Limburg's doorstep. The province is connected to neighbouring countries, both literally and figuratively. However, this reality is insufficiently recognised at national administrative and legal level. Education systems, funding, qualifications, labour law, social security and tax rules are organised at national level and are only loosely aligned with one another.

Furthermore, Limburg is facing structural demographic decline, as also highlighted in the Education Manifesto. The number of young people is decreasing, while the demand for qualified personnel is increasing. For educational institutions, this puts pressure on their ability to maintain study programmes, for employers, it means a persistent labour shortage, for the region as a whole, it poses a risk of losing vitality and earning power. At the same time, recent research by Hasselt University (December 2025) shows that the Dutch Province of Limburg "exhibits a clear counter-trend profile: sectors that are contracting nationally often grow in Limburg, and vice versa. Strong growth is visible in sectors such as Information & Communication, Business Services, and Trade. This points to a structural reorientation: a shift from traditional industry to knowledge and service sectors." Such a shift also calls for a reorientation regarding the labour market: new skills are needed in a context that is, moreover, changing ever faster due to digitisation. In this context of contraction, scarcity and change, the proximity of the Belgian and German education and labour markets is not a luxury, but a necessary condition for maintaining services, training programmes and employment.

This proposition describes the opportunities that arise when trinational thinking and acting become part of the development of education and knowledge in the Limburg border region. For example, in developing curricula that allow students to study in three countries simultaneously, or connecting innovation campuses across national borders. This is fully in line with the principles of the National Programme for Vibrant Regions (NPVR), which includes North, Central, and South Limburg. As the central government itself states: "The National Vital Regions Programme focuses on regions on the periphery of the Netherlands and cooperation with neighbouring countries." Education, knowledge development, and labour market development can (must!) play a central role. In the case of Limburg, by addressing the bottlenecks in the Education Manifesto, while simultaneously leveraging the international character of the region as its greatest asset. The agglomeration opportunities that arise when national borders pose less of a barrier are numerous and diverse and open doors to new markets and developments that make Limburg attractive to businesses and talent: a stronger foundation for a vital region.



It is important to note that this proposition does not present trinational cooperation as a universal solution. Not every educational programme needs to be cross-border, not every innovation needs to be developed internationally, and not every student will work across the border. The challenge is more focused in nature. where labour market relevance is evident and where the national scale falls short, there must be scope to organise education and knowledge development on a cross-border basis. This is particularly true in a region that is experiencing population decline whilst, at the same time, being part of a large, nearby labour market. In current practice, cross-border coordination and cooperation is already taking place where possible. There are joint research programmes and innovations (e.g. the Einstein Telescope and in the field of AI) in which educational institutions and employers collaborate across borders. These initiatives prove that it can be done. At the same time, they remain project-based and dependent on temporary resources. As a result, there is a lack of stable prospects for students, institutions and employers to build on in the long term.

Anchoring trinational opportunities

The crux of the task is therefore to embed trinational opportunities. The aim is to link up and scale up what works, reduce structural barriers and create scope for better alignment between education and the labour market in a tri-national context. Without taking this step, the Province of Limburg risks losing talent, having to cut back on study programmes and leaving economic opportunities untapped. By taking this step, however, this same reality can be turned into a strength: a region that demonstrates how education and the labour market can function sustainably and with a view to the future within a European cross-border context.



Limburg is located in the heart of one of the largest labour market regions in Europe, with millions of jobs, an extensive knowledge infrastructure, and a large pool of students and employees.

2. A booster for every curriculum vitae

What is happening in Limburg is not a regional anomaly, but a sign of a wider national trend. The Netherlands is facing structural labour market shortages, demographic shifts and a growing need to organise talent, knowledge and labour more effectively. In this context, border regions are not peripheral areas, but strategic links. Limburg shows what happens when national systems fail to align sufficiently with a cross-border reality.

The Dutch labour market is increasingly dependent on international mobility. In sectors such as healthcare, engineering, logistics, education, and the high-tech industry, the demand for personnel structurally exceeds the national supply. At the same time, Limburg lies in the heart of one of the largest labour market regions in Europe, with millions of jobs, an extensive knowledge infrastructure, and a large pool of students and employees. This potential is of direct significance to the Netherlands, but can only be exploited if the education system and the labour market are actually able to operate across borders.

Cv booster

It is precisely here that the situation in Limburg takes on national significance. If talent in the border region cannot be effectively trained, deployed and retained, job vacancies in the Netherlands will remain unfilled, investment will be held back and the pressure on public services will increase. Conversely, better alignment between education and a trinational labour market not only strengthens Limburg, but also helps to resolve national bottlenecks in the labour market. In addition, the international competitive position of the Netherlands plays a role.

Major economic and social challenges – ranging from the energy transition and digitisation to healthcare and security – call for cross-border knowledge networks and talent ecosystems. The Limburg border region brings all these elements together. It is home to universities, universities of applied sciences, vocational training programmes, campuses and businesses operating within international value chains. A well-functioning trinational education, knowledge and labour market system, alongside addressing the bottlenecks identified in the Education Manifesto, will help to fully realise the potential of these ecosystems. Not only for society at large, but also, for example, for the individual student who, with relatively little effort, could study in three countries simultaneously. This is a huge CV booster that not only enhances prospects on the labour market but also produces a workforce accustomed to thinking and acting in an international context. That strengthens the power of the region and of the Netherlands (as well as Belgium and Germany).

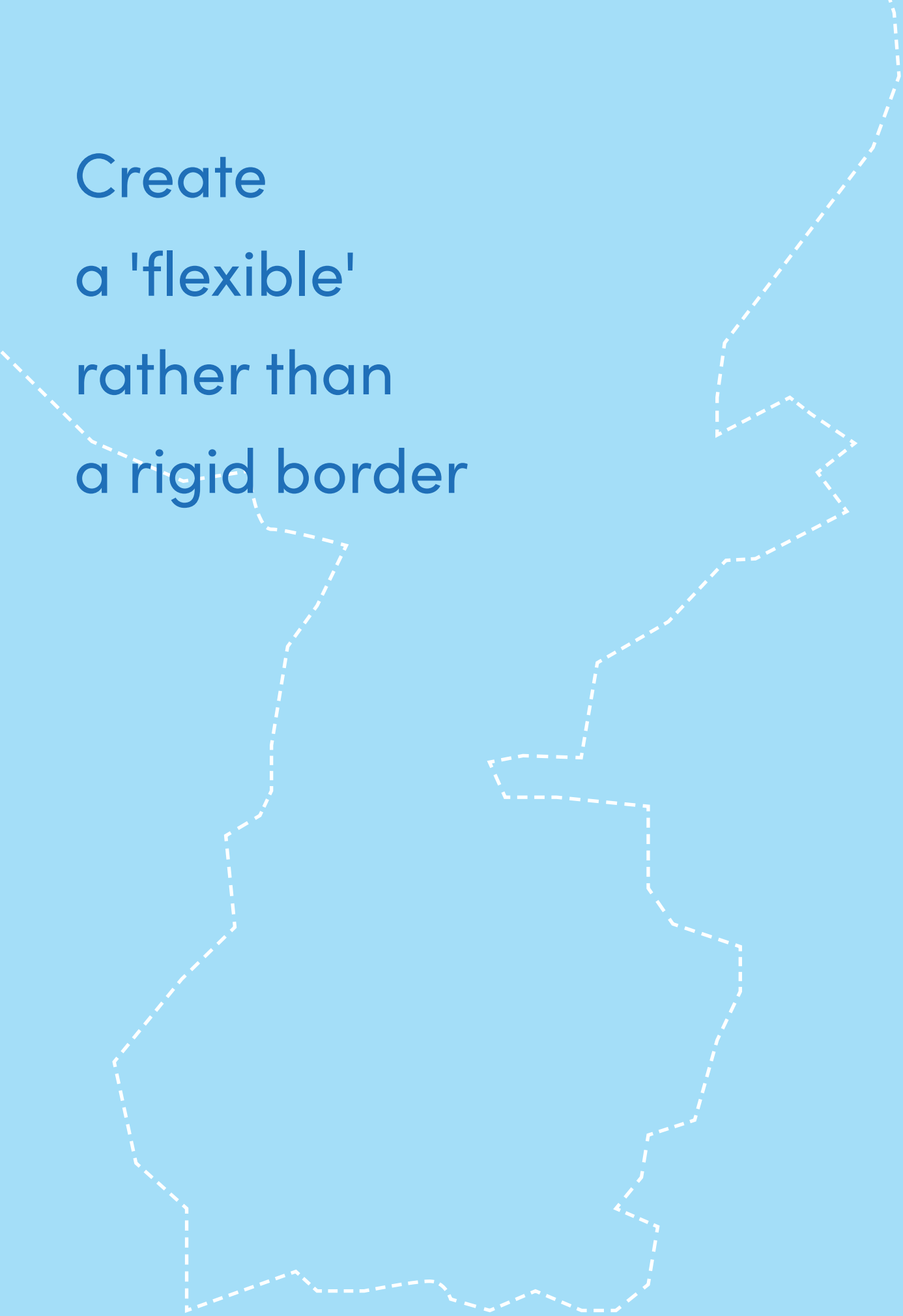
Whereas growing urban regions often find their scale within national borders, this is not the case for Limburg. Here, the cross-border scale is not an option, but a necessary condition for maintaining educational programmes, amenities and economic vitality. If national frameworks fail to take sufficient account of this reality, it will lead to inequality between regions and a loss of social value. This task will therefore also touch upon the way in which the Netherlands addresses regional disparities, and thus upon the core principle of Every Region Counts! and the National Programme for Vibrant Regions. A uniform national system does not work out the same way everywhere. In border regions, the same rule can have different effects than in the centre of the country. Limburg demonstrates that a tailored regional approach is a prerequisite for achieving national objectives, such as a well-functioning labour market and a strong knowledge-based economy. And to achieve even more than that. When national borders become dotted lines, opportunities arise for Limburg to forge international links that help the Netherlands innovate more quickly and develop new markets. This is in line with the conclusions of the Wennink report, which, for example, identified innovative circular chemistry and the development of a medtech cluster in Limburg as promising areas. Precisely because of the connections with neighbouring countries and ecosystems. It is no coincidence that South Limburg is designated as a growth region in the Spatial Policy Document, with the potential to make significant leaps in both population growth and economic development.

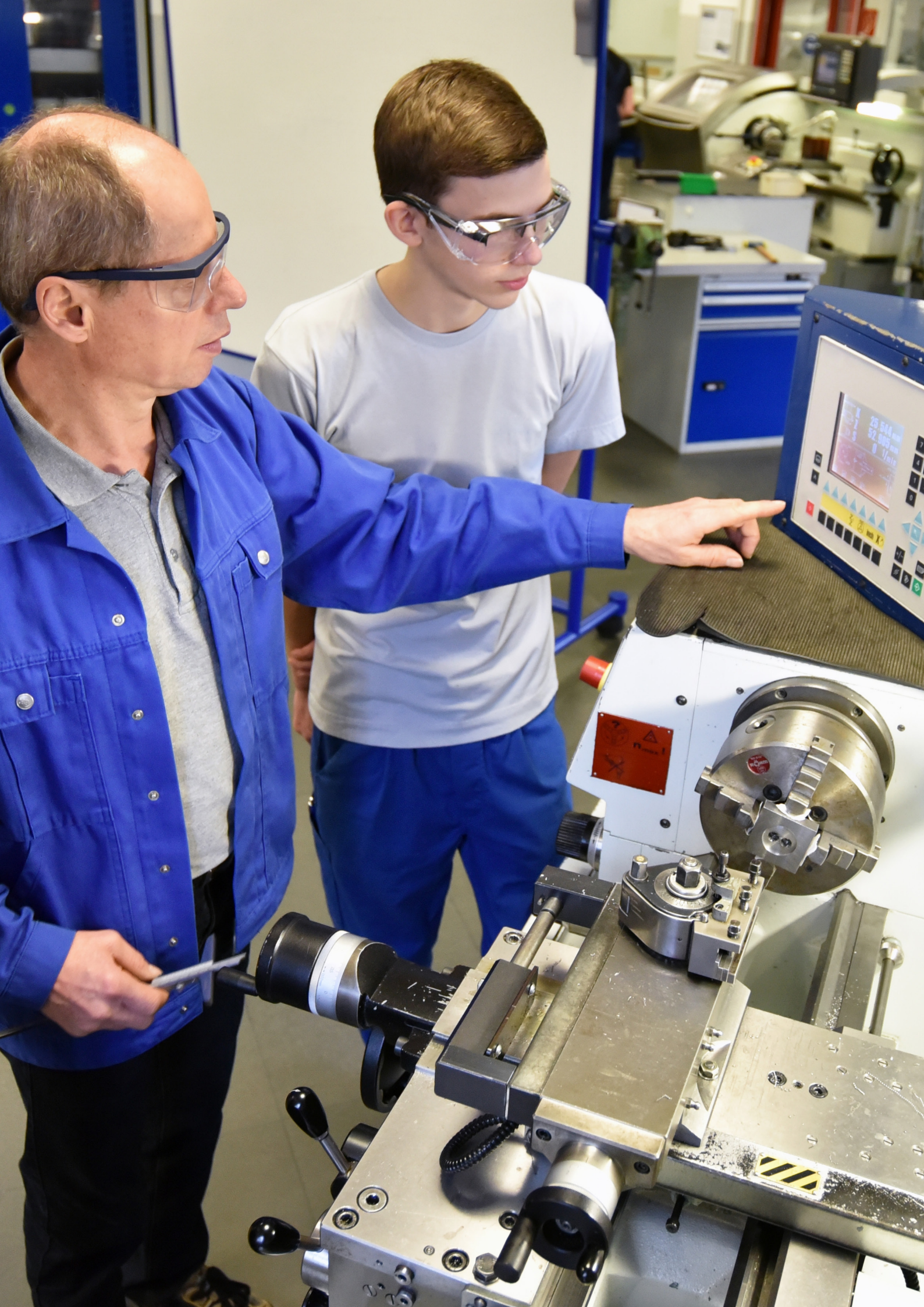
The region as a pilot
Finally, Limburg offers an opportunity for the Netherlands to learn. The combination of a large cross-border labour market, a strong education and knowledge infrastructure, and specific regulatory bottlenecks makes the region ideally suited as a pilot. The solutions developed here for cross-border education, qualifications and labour mobility are relevant to other border regions and to the Netherlands as a whole in an increasingly integrated European economy.

This offers opportunities, also in light of the recently adopted national Talent Strategy. The commitment to attracting, training and retaining talent for the future prosperity of the Netherlands is closely aligned with the ambitions set out in this proposition. This involves ensuring there is sufficient talent to tackle the tasks where the challenges are greatest, and strengthening the knowledge power required for groundbreaking research and innovation.

In short, trinational education, knowledge development, and a trinational labour market are not a regional experiment, but a national challenge with regional implementation. Limburg offers a context in which the Netherlands can demonstrate how national systems can adapt to a cross-border reality.

Create a 'flexible' rather than a rigid border





3. Vision: education, knowledge and the labour market as one coherent system in our Euregio

At the heart of this proposition is a different way of looking at education, knowledge development and the labour market; not as separate worlds, but as components of a single, coherent system in which decisions made at the outset have direct consequences further down the line. What students learn, where they learn, in which language, with what practical experience and with what outlook on work, determines to a large extent whether and how the labour market can function. This is truer in a border region than anywhere else. Traditionally, education and the labour market are organised along different lines. Education focuses on curricula, qualifications and student intake; labour market policy focuses on employment, matching and social security. This division no longer works in today's world, certainly not in a trinational context. Students do not orient themselves towards a single national labour market, employers do not recruit within a single country, and sectors operate on a scale that transcends national borders. Anyone who continues to treat education, knowledge and the labour market as separate entities creates friction precisely where cohesion is needed. So create a 'flexible' rather than a rigid border.

In this context, trinational cooperation is not an end in itself, but a means of forging stronger links between education, research, knowledge development and valorisation. This creates a cross-border ecosystem in which talent is nurtured, knowledge is developed and applied to drive social and economic innovation. Limburg's vision is therefore based on the principle that education must be relevant to the labour market at the level at which the labour market actually operates. This does not mean that every educational programme must be cross-border, but it does mean that educational institutions must have the freedom to tailor programmes, learning pathways and practical experience to a trinational labour market where this demonstrably adds value. In sectors with structural labour shortages or strong cross-border regional cohesion, this is not an additional requirement, but a prerequisite. In this vision, the learner takes centre stage, but is not detached from his or her future working environment. Students develop not only knowledge and skills, but also language proficiency, cultural awareness and mobility. Practical learning, work placements and work-study programmes play a crucial role, as they form the bridge between education and work. In a trinational region in particular, these links are key to success. They make the difference between a degree or PhD of national value and a career that offers cross-border prospects.

At the same time, this approach calls for a different way of collaborating between institutions and employers. Educational institutions cannot shoulder this task alone. Employers, sector organisations and public partners are needed to jointly determine where labour market demand lies, what competences are required and how education can align with these needs. In Limburg, this is already happening through various partnerships, but all too often in a fragmented and project-based manner.

The challenge is to make this collaboration a permanent feature and to embed it in joint arrangements and long-term plans.

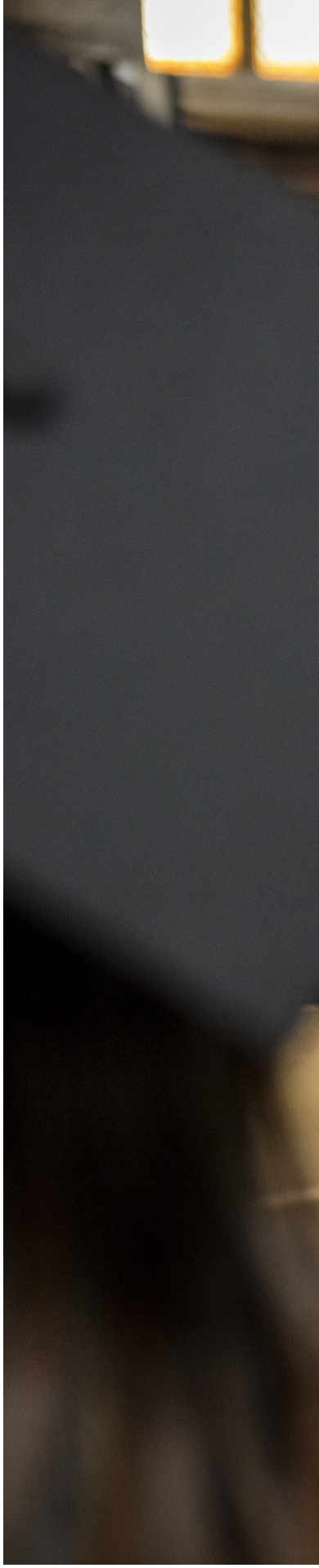
A key principle underpinning this approach is that trinational cooperation is a means to an end, not an ideology. The region does not opt for trinational solutions simply because they sound international, but because they are effective in specific situations. This pragmatic approach is essential to maintain support among educational institutions and to stay focused on quality and feasibility. This vision also implies that governance and responsibility must be clearly defined. Educational institutions remain the owners of their educational content and quality. The labour market remains primarily the domain of employers and social partners. The region's role is to connect these different spheres, organise coherence and create the framework within which cooperation can flourish. The province supports this process by facilitating coordination, knowledge-sharing and continuity, without undermining the autonomy of institutions.

Opportunities to make better use of talent

In a broader context, this vision aligns with the development towards a more integrated European labour market. Talent mobility, mutual recognition of qualifications, and cross-border cooperation are becoming increasingly important. Limburg is leading the way in this regard, driven by ambition, but above all by necessity. It is precisely for this reason that the region can serve as a model for how education and the labour market can be sustainably linked within a cross-border context. By treating them as a single system, scope is created to make better use of talent, reduce shortages and offer young people prospects in a region that is European in its day-to-day reality. This is the basis on which the further elaboration of this proposition rests. Moreover, this commitment ties in with the urbanisation challenge set out in the Limburg Centraal proposition.

An attractive environment in which to live, work and thrive is an essential prerequisite for retaining international talent in the region in the long term. Through joint investments, Limburg and the Euregio are transforming themselves into an attractive, forward-looking region where young people want to stay, work and grow. 'People do not choose a province or region. They choose a future.' High-quality trinational education is therefore essential for retaining talent, creating opportunities and strengthening the region in the long term.

This is particularly important for a border region like Limburg. The proximity of international educational and research institutions offers opportunities to attract, train and retain talent for both the region and the Netherlands. Moreover, this same knowledge infrastructure supports new societal challenges, including dual-use innovations and the further development of the Limburg Defence Agenda.




Faculty of Law


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Temp. Control Unit

4. The Limburg trinational practice, its opportunities and its limits

In the Limburg education, knowledge and labour market region, cross-border cooperation has been taking place wherever possible for quite some time. One example is the four Limburg Brightlands Campuses, which have developed over the past fifteen years. The Greenport Venlo Campus focuses on healthy and sustainable food, future-oriented agriculture and the bio-circular economy, and has links in particular with the German hinterland. In Sittard-Geleen, the Brightlands Chemelot Campus, situated at the heart of one of Europe's largest integrated chemical clusters, is working on the development of innovative chemistry, biotechnology and circular materials. Given its direct links with industry, this is by its very nature an international endeavour.

The same applies to the Maastricht Health Campus, where ground-breaking innovations in the fields of health and medtech are becoming a reality, often in close collaboration with research institutes in Belgium and Germany. Meanwhile, AI applications are being developed at the Brightlands Data & AI Campus in Heerlen, in collaboration with, for example, RWTH Aachen University and the associated research institute in Jülich. These are all examples of connections that extend beyond national borders and help to accelerate and deepen innovation, and thus represent one of the ways in which the opportunities offered by the agglomeration are already being harnessed.

Examples of agglomeration opportunities

When national borders become dotted lines, opportunities arise for neighbouring countries to develop and grow together. This is not only because pooling resources in the fields of education and knowledge development leads to accelerated innovation, but also, for example, because greater freedom of movement for businesses creates incentives to operate on a more international scale. This expands their market, provides access to a larger pool of talent, and challenges businesses to innovate from a new perspective. Below are a few examples of agglomeration opportunities that arise when trinational thinking and action become the norm.



Lifelong Development

In a rapidly developing economy, it is vital to ensure that everyone remains fit for the labour market. This requires opportunities for lifelong development. To this end, the Netherlands has a range of programmes at both national and regional level, which are being further strengthened by the recently formed government. A trinational approach would offer residents of Limburg access to training courses and direct career opportunities across national borders. Conversely, the same would apply to people from Germany and Belgium in our country. If we can open up and align supply and demand in this context on a trinational basis, this will not only strengthen the position of individual employees, but also expand the pool of talent from which businesses can recruit and retain staff.

Working together on the Einstein Telescope

A fine example of trinational cooperation is the efforts to submit a bid for the Einstein Telescope in the Meuse-Rhine border region. Designated by the Netherlands as a project of national importance, it brings together research institutions and public authorities from the three countries involved. But there are already opportunities for companies developing high-quality, innovative technologies and materials that will be needed for the construction of the telescope. A trinational approach could lead to incentive programmes that link the companies involved across national borders and enable them to work together to achieve even greater involvement in the project. Innovating together, pushing boundaries together. That will continue to be of lasting value, even if, contrary to expectations, the Einstein Telescope were not to come to our region.

Border Information Points

Together with central government, the border provinces, including Limburg, are investing in a network of Border Information Points (GIPs). The Border Information Points, located along the Dutch-German-Belgian border, offer free, independent and personalised support to employees, employers, jobseekers, trainees, students and pensioners. Whether it's an internship in Aachen, a job in Hasselt or moving to a neighbouring municipality just across the border: the Border Information Points

help people get started by providing practical information on taxes, social security, health insurance, studying and more.

The Border Information Points thereby contribute to strengthening the economic and social connections between citizens of the Euregio. Between 2019 and 2023, the Border Information Points handled over 45,000 enquiries, held nearly 35,000 face-to-face advisory sessions and welcomed more than 4.4 million visitors to the joint website www.grenzinfo.eu. Despite the enormous demand, funding is allocated on a four-year basis each time and is therefore not structurally guaranteed or organised. As a result, not all agglomeration opportunities offered are being utilised, as there remains uncertainty regarding continuity.

Investments in knowledge infrastructure

Due to the national systems in place, each country invests separately in campuses, laboratory facilities and expensive infrastructure. Limburg does the same, for example through the four Brightlands Campuses. Cooperation with institutions on the other side of the border is established on the basis of content, but not on the basis of a joint cross-border innovation strategy. This is inefficient and unnecessary. By sharing information on the infrastructure available in each country and – even better – by linking these resources more closely, investments can be deployed and utilised more efficiently and effectively. Furthermore, collaboration offers the opportunity to scale up in terms of both usage and impact.

Studying in three countries at the same time

Those who break down national borders give talented people the space to develop more fully and, in doing so, become even more valuable to a region such as Limburg. Five universities from the Euregio Maas-Rijn (Maastricht University, Hasselt University, Université de Liège, RWTH Aachen, and the Open University) have signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) to develop trinational education under the banner 'The art of working together'. Following the example of the universities, the eleven universities of applied sciences in the Euregio Maas-Rijn also signed an MoU on 27 May 2026. Trinational curricula will give students the opportunity to study at five universities in three countries simultaneously, all within a single degree programme, right at the heart of Europe. For more information, see the text box in paragraph 5.

CrossCircular, Next 3 and Agrofood

Through the Interreg projects CrossCircular, Next3 and Agrofood, the concept of trinational cooperation is also being put into practice across several areas. At CrossCircular, universities and companies from the three participating countries of our border region are jointly developing a new education programme. This programme helps students to learn more about circularity, both in their own country and across borders, through lectures and work placements with companies. In this way, they gain a great deal of practical experience and learn to collaborate with people from other countries. The project also ensures that qualifications are recognised more widely, which is useful for students who wish to work in another country.

Next3 focuses on the joint development of a cross-border higher professional education curriculum for mechatronics, tailored to the specific needs of local businesses and directly linked to innovative projects such as the Einstein Telescope. This cooperation makes it more attractive for students to remain in the region and strengthens the link between education and the labour market.

Globally, the importance of the Agrofood sector is growing, and our region holds a strong position within this sector. There is a great need for professionals, both in traditional roles such as food technologists and in new roles relating to future agricultural methods. Trinational Education in Agrofood focuses on developing a joint undergraduate curriculum in the fields of food technology and new agricultural methods in the Euregio Rhine-Meuse-North. The partners involved are HAS green academy, Maastricht University, Hasselt University (a partner outside the region), Hochschule Niederrhein and the Euregio Rhine-Meuse-North.

At the same time, current practice remains fragile. Many initiatives are organised on a project basis, dependent on temporary funding or exceptional arrangements As a result, there is a lack of scale, continuity and predictability for students, institutions and employers. What works is too often limited to pilot schemes. Current practice shows that this cooperation is possible, the question is how it can be enshrined in a structural framework.

One of the main challenges in this regard concerns funding and finance. Education is funded at national level, whilst the social benefits of education in Limburg often extend beyond the region's borders. Students who study or undertake work placements partly across the border do not always fit within the existing funding framework. This makes institutions reluctant to set up permanent trinational programmes, however great their relevance to the labour market may be. A second challenge concerns qualifications and the recognition of diplomas. The latter is particularly relevant at the secondary vocational education level. But in a broader sense too, educational structures, levels, cultures and accreditations differ between countries. It takes a great deal of time and resources to harmonise the different systems, despite the fact that structural support is available for this through, for example, the Centres of Expertise for International Qualification Recognition and Nuffic, the Dutch organisation for internationalisation in education. For students and employers, this leads to lack of clarity and uncertainty, which hinders the mobility of talent.

In addition, rules regarding internships, work-study programmes and social security play an important role. Work-based learning is essential for bridging the gap between education and the labour market, but it is precisely here that the systems clash. Differences in employment law, insurance and tax treatment make cross-border learning pathways complex and risky, for both students and employers. Internationalisation policy is also a source of tension. National decisions that may be acceptable from a national perspective can have disproportionately significant consequences in border regions. For Limburg, where multilingualism and international migration help to sustain educational programmes and the labour market, this tension is particularly acute. This echoes the concerns expressed by Limburg's education stakeholders in their Education Manifesto: a uniform policy does not have uniform regional outcomes.

Finally, there is a lack of structural governance and long-term certainty. Cross-border cooperation requires trust, fixed points of contact, and joint investments. As long as initiatives depend on temporary funding and ad hoc arrangements, they remain vulnerable. This hinders the development of a sustainable system in which education and the labour market reinforce one another.

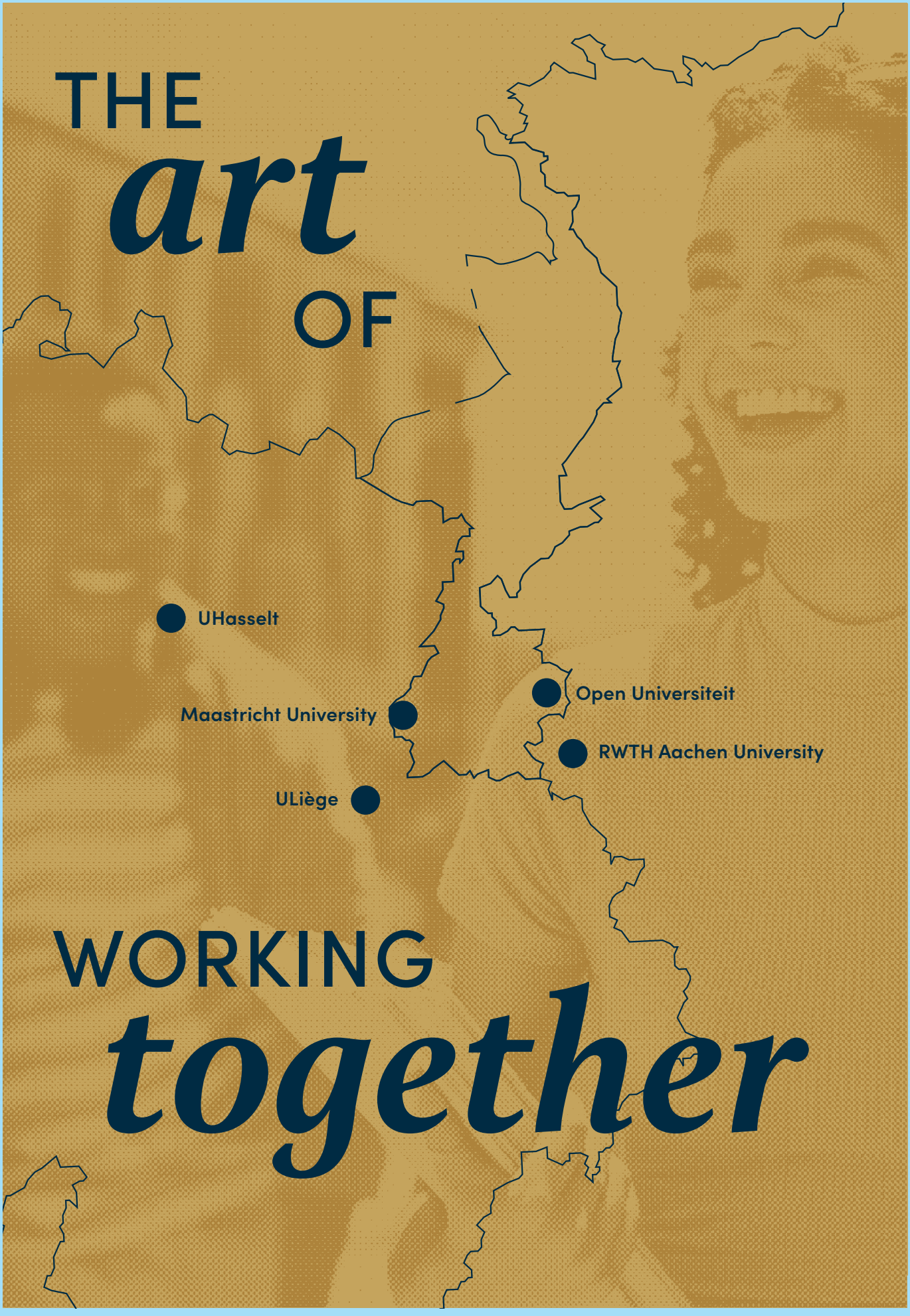
These bottlenecks make it clear that the next step cannot be taken through new pilot schemes alone. What is needed is scope to embed existing practices, to better align rules and to organise long-term cooperation. Without taking that step, the trinational practice in Limburg will remain fragmented and underexploited. By taking that step, the trinational practice can develop into a robust example of how education, knowledge infrastructure and the labour market can function effectively in a cross-border context. Limburg wishes to work with the national government to explore how this step can be taken.

5. What Limburg organises itself

The Limburg region is taking responsibility for the tasks it is capable of undertaking itself. This begins with creating coherence in a reality that does not organise itself automatically. Educational institutions, employers and public partners each operate according to their own roles and responsibilities, but they need one another to ensure that education and the labour market are effectively aligned within a trinational context. The Province of Limburg organises this cohesion by structurally linking the various parties, as part of a joint regional initiative. Educational institutions from secondary vocational education, higher professional education and university education collaborate with employers and sector organisations to create a shared understanding of labour market demand and talent development. This approach is not based on a single national perspective, but on the actual scale at which the labour market functions: cross-border regional and, where relevant, trinational.

Strengthening continuous learning pathways

A key part of this initiative is to strengthen lifelong learning pathways, not only for young people but also for those in work. In a rapidly changing labour market, where mobility across sectors and national borders is on the rise, Lifelong Learning (LLL) is a crucial link. Limburg therefore encourages initial training, further training, retraining and workplace learning to be logically linked, even when learning and work experiences take place partly across the border. This enables people to remain employable throughout their careers in a trinational labour market and allows employers to respond more effectively to changing skills requirements. To this end, the region is investing in cooperation between educational institutions and employers regarding flexible learning pathways, modular programmes and practice-oriented learning. LLL is explicitly not regarded as a separate policy area, but as an integral part of the system in which education and the labour market reinforce one another. In this context, employers are not merely consumers of talent, but actively contribute to the development of education, work-based learning and Lifelong Learning programmes. Particularly in a region facing an ageing population and labour shortages, utilising and developing existing talent is at least as important as attracting new talent. Lifelong Learning therefore focuses not only on young people entering the workforce, but also on those already in work, jobseekers and career changers who need to adapt to a changing labour market throughout their careers.


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Agreements on first trinational curriculum finalised

Five universities from the Euregio Maas-Rijn (Maastricht University, Hasselt University, Université de Liège, RWTH Aachen, and the Open University) signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on 14 March 2025 to develop trinational education under the banner 'The art of working together'. Trinational curricula will give students the opportunity to study at five universities in three countries simultaneously, all within a single degree programme, right at the heart of Europe.

The five universities involved in the border region – which together have more than 100,000 students – have long-standing partnerships, but trinational education offers new innovative opportunities. The goal is to educate students not only academically but also internationally, and to increase cross-border cooperation between the universities. In the future, students will be able to live in one region and pursue their studies in three countries – an opportunity that is also accessible to students on a tighter budget thanks to excellent public transport links, such as the Three-Country Train.

Strengthening the competitive position
Trinational education is a real boost to the CVs of students who can study in three countries, and as such it can help strengthen the competitive position of our border region. In this context, the national border is not an obstacle, but an opportunity to make international experiences more accessible to both students and professionals.

In the years ahead, the universities will explore what forms of cooperation are possible. This initiative is in line with the EU's broader objectives and is a response to the findings of the 2024 Draghi report, which highlights the problem of stagnation in Europe's competitiveness. Innovation is a key concept, and trinational education, combined with the cross-border regional knowledge infrastructure, offers a unique opportunity for European students to gain experience in three countries without incurring a greater financial risk.

The trinational education model can provide a significant boost to future developments, such as making Chemelot more sustainable, energy innovations and other strategic initiatives that strengthen the region. This is further reinforced by cooperative efforts at other levels of education.

Trinational education and the labour market in the EU context
The ambitions set out in this proposition are in line with broader European developments in the fields of education, knowledge development and talent mobility. The European Union encourages cross-border cooperation and better use of talent and knowledge within Europe, with the aim of strengthening the EU's international competitiveness. The Euregio Maas-Rijn offers an environment in which these ambitions can be put into practice. As a result, the region offers opportunities not only for education and the labour market, but also for European cooperation, innovation and financing.

In addition, the Province of Limburg helps to foster links between education, research and innovation. Brightlands Campuses, knowledge networks and partnerships provide venues where initial education, lifelong learning, research and the labour market come together. This creates a learning environment in which students, professionals, researchers and employers work together to tackle social and economic challenges. This infrastructure is essential for keeping the region attractive to talent and for embedding innovation sustainably. The Province of Limburg plays a facilitating and connecting role in this regard. It brings parties together, supports knowledge-sharing, assists in organising governance and ensures continuity across administrative terms. In doing so, a conscious decision has been made to adopt a role that respects the autonomy of educational institutions. Substantive decisions regarding education and lifelong learning remain with the institutions themselves; the regional focus is on framework conditions, coherence and long-term sustainability.

A focus on learning and refinement

It is also important that Limburg focuses on learning and refinement. Trinational cooperation and lifelong learning require experimentation, but also reflection. The region organises monitoring and joint evaluation to identify what is effective for different target groups (students, workers and employers) and where adjustments are needed. This creates a learning system in which education, lifelong learning and the labour market gradually become better aligned.



Particularly in a region facing an ageing population and labour shortages, utilising and developing existing talent is at least as important as attracting new talent.





6. What Limburg asks of the central government

The Limburg region takes responsibility for what it can organise itself. At the same time, it is clear that the next step cannot be taken without the involvement of central government and the authorities in neighbouring countries. In order to facilitate a truly cross-border education and labour market system, changes are required which, in the Netherlands, can be implemented only by central government, often following joint consultation and decision-making with Flanders, Wallonia, East Belgium and North Rhine-Westphalia. The challenge at hand concerns not only regional bottlenecks, but also the exploitation of agglomeration opportunities that are, in fact, already present in and around Limburg. In day-to-day practice, education, knowledge development, the labour market and the economy operate on a scale that transcends national borders. As long as national frameworks fail to recognise this scale, opportunities will remain untapped and the region's potential will not be fully realised, with consequences that extend beyond Limburg alone.

Greater policy flexibility for cross-border education and labour market policy

First and foremost, Limburg is calling for policy flexibility. Education, lifelong learning and the labour market have the potential to operate across borders within the region, whilst the frameworks within which they are organised do little to facilitate this. There is a need for flexibility to better align educational arrangements, continuous learning pathways and work-based learning with a trinational education, knowledge and labour market where this demonstrably adds value. This flexibility relates, amongst other things, to funding, recognition of qualifications, multilingual and modular courses, work placements and work-based learning programmes, and the transition between initial education and lifelong learning. The emphasis is explicitly on bespoke solutions within clear parameters, so that institutions can operate at the actual scale at which the labour market and the talent ecosystem function.

Long-term safeguarding of cross-border cooperation

In addition, the task requires long-term safeguarding. Cross-border cooperation takes time to develop and yield results. Trust between educational institutions, employers and governmental bodies does not develop within the duration of a project. The Province of Limburg is therefore calling for a ten to twenty-year timeframe, during which cooperation can be built up, deepened and refined. Only with that certainty can institutions invest in structural learning pathways, can employers make a long-term commitment to training and lifelong learning, and can the region truly capitalise on its agglomeration benefits.

Interdepartmental national coordination body for coherent cross-border policy

A third element is interdepartmental national coordination. Trinational education, together with a cross-border knowledge infrastructure and labour market, has implications for education policy, labour market policy, economic development, border issues and internationalisation. As long as these areas are addressed in isolation, initiatives will remain fragmented and complex to implement. The Province of Limburg is calling for a coherent national approach in which these policy areas are considered in relation to one another and in which the region has a single recognisable point of contact. This will make it possible to link regional initiatives to national objectives and to remove the barriers that currently prevent proximity, scale and complementarity from being exploited to the full.

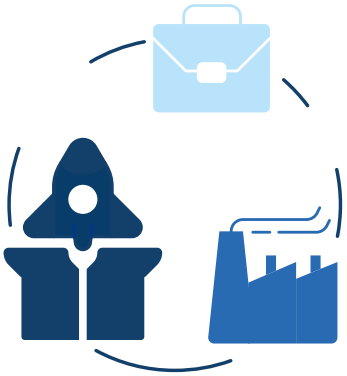
Organising cooperation sustainably

Finally, structural financial resources are necessary to organise the cooperation sustainably. Not as project grants for individual initiatives, but as a basis for joint governance, programme management, knowledge-building and monitoring. The region aims to develop an agreement supported by the authorities and a multi-year programme to which educational institutions, employers and public authorities commit themselves for the long term. Without a robust financial foundation, this organisation remains vulnerable and dependent on temporary initiatives, whereas stability is precisely what is needed to build a cross-border talent and labour market system that is in line with the scale of the region.

Together, these four strands constitute an invitation to central government |to recognise and capitalise on agglomeration opportunities where these are already emerging in practice. By allowing scope for this scale of operation, central government can not only strengthen Limburg, but also demonstrate how the Netherlands, within a European context, can make better use of the proximity, knowledge and talent of the approximately 200,000 students who contribute to the national strategy. Limburg thus presents itself as a region where this approach can be developed and applied in practice.



Education



Labour market



Government

One region, three countries, boundless opportunities. By bringing together education, knowledge and innovation, we are building the future together.





What is being developed here is not only relevant to Limburg. It offers prospects for other border regions and for a Netherlands that is increasingly intertwined with its wider environment.

7. In conclusion

The challenge outlined in this proposition essentially revolves around ensuring that the reality that already exists functions as effectively as possible. In and around Limburg, education, the knowledge infrastructure, the labour market and the economy effectively form a single cohesive whole that extends beyond national borders. This proximity and scale offer agglomeration opportunities which, if harnessed, can contribute to solutions for structural national issues: labour market shortages, maintaining the range of educational programmes, innovative capacity and broad prosperity. However, as long as national systems fail to adequately recognise this reality, these opportunities will remain largely untapped.

Limburg demonstrates that cross-border cooperation works when it is underpinned by substance and partnership. In recent years, educational institutions, employers and public partners have been building connections that align with the actual labour market and the development needs of students and professionals. This movement does not represent a break with existing policy, but rather a deepening of it within a specific context. It demonstrates how education, lifelong learning and the labour market can reinforce one another when approached as a single system, thereby increasing the trinational opportunities for the Netherlands.

At the same time, practical experience shows that the next step does not follow automatically. Structural embedding requires scope and coherence. It requires national frameworks that adapt to regional realities, long-term safeguards that foster trust, central government coordination that breaks down compartmentalisation, and long-term resources that underpin organisation and continuity. Without these preconditions, cooperation remains dependent on temporary initiatives; with these preconditions in place, it can develop into a sustainable system.

This proposal is therefore an invitation to form a partnership. The Province of Limburg is not asking the central government for exemptions, but for recognition of scale and proximity where these demonstrably add value. By providing this scope, the Netherlands can demonstrate how border regions contribute to national objectives and how agglomeration opportunities can be better exploited in a European context.

What is being developed here is not only relevant to Limburg. It offers prospects for other border regions and for a Netherlands that is increasingly intertwined with its wider environment. By investing in cohesion now, the border can shift from being an obstacle to an opportunity – for the region and for the country as a whole.

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