

Oxford joins university group aiming to tackle Europe's woes

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Oxford University will this week become a founder member of a new, pan-European network of future leaders, aiming to tackle the continent's problems and "step over" the immediate disruption of Brexit, the scheme's British originator says.

Oxford and St Andrews are among 13 elite institutions to have signed up to a scholars' programme run by the Europaeum, an association of leading European universities, that asks postgraduate researchers for practical solutions to social and political issues such as human trafficking, youth unemployment and regional separatism. Andrew Graham, the former master of Balliol College, Oxford, told the Guardian he had the idea for a type of Rhodes scholarship for Europe in the wake of the Brexit referendum.

Graham said he found himself "pushing at an open door" when he first proposed the scheme to the universities involved in 2017, and again in his entrepreneurial fundraising efforts to meet the roughly €10,000 (nearly £9,000) cost for each scholar.

"Brexit was absolutely part of it, but universities in Helsinki and Madrid and Prague, and elsewhere, face issues that are just as intractable.

"There's the rise of the far right in Germany, the disputes in Catalonia, the tension around migration, and high rates of youth unemployment in places such as Greece and Portugal," Graham said.

"These are European problems, not just EU or eurozone problems alone. But it was Brexit that made me think it was time for something fresh."

By identifying and training future leaders for Europe, Graham – who worked in Downing Street as an adviser to Harold Wilson – wants the programme to show that universities can act to overcome the causes that provoked Brexit.

"The Brexit result clearly had a lot to do with a fundamental absence of leadership. But it was also about opposition to evidence, and an information barrier among large parts of the public," he said.

"As academics we have to think, what happened to the values of the Enlightenment and the insights from the scientific revolution? What the hell did we do wrong?"

The 30 hand-picked scholars will take part in the first classes in Oxford this week, with a further seven modules in 2018 and 2019 in venues such as Leiden, Geneva and Prague. The group includes four graduates from Oxford and three from St Andrews.

The scholars will divide into groups and take specific problems to solve over two years. For the pilot programme to be a success, Graham said, its outcomes will have to be meaningful policy initiatives.

"The results of their efforts have got to have value. I don't necessarily mean monetary value, but value for society. They can be idealistic, but they also have to be pinned into reality – ideally something that could be implemented in one form or another," Graham said.