

THE UNIVERSITY IN THE THIRD MILLENIUM: WHICH REFORMS ARE NEEDED?

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The Lisbon strategy of the European Union identifies the University as an important moving force for achieving the central European goal of establishing the knowledge society in the European Union. This choice brings forward the importance that Europe assigns to Universities; at the same time, it brings forward the need for modernization of the model of the European University, so that the latter can successfully play its role. The thoughts set out in the sequel attempt to contribute to the process of reflection on the directions of the required reforms, a process that has already started.

In ancient Greece, Universities were a solution to the problem of resolving the intellectual curiosity of the non-working rich as well as to the problem of equipping their children with capabilities necessary for a subsequent political career. Examples are the moving academies of the Sofistes, Socrates's school, Plato's Academia, Isocrates's School, Aristotele's Lykeio, and many more philosophical schools. In Alexandrian times, Universities, such as the Library of Alexandria, were an attempt to increase the esteem of the state. In Roman and Byzantine times, Universities, such as the higher education institutions in Reims, Toulouse, Nice and Byzantium, were the solution to the problem of creating capable high level administrators to be employed by the public administration system of the empire. In medieval times, Universities, such as the first European Universities of Bologna and Paris, were forms of organization of the students and the professors that aimed at claiming and protecting their rights in society against state and church domination. During the renaissance, Universities were places where knowledge could be acquired, knowledge that was thought to be the ultimate goal of the human being, according to the humanistic standards. The University of London in the 19th century was an institution that provided professional training to people of any social and financial class. It was the response to the need for improving the competitiveness of the country. Wilhelm von Humboldt believed that the University is the central pillar of a national effort to rejuvenate the nation, the reservoir of the national spirit and the vehicle of the national pride.

It seems, therefore, that the answer to the question "What is a University" is neither easy nor unique, as it changes with time. However, according to the Magna Carta Universitatum, that was compiled in 1988 on the occasion of the 900th anniversary of the establishment of the University of Bologna, which is considered to be the oldest European University –wrongly, as the University of Constantinople was established in AD 425 by the emperor Theodosios 2nd, it operated until AD 1453, when the city fell to the Turks, had 30 professors and offered education in medicine, literature, philosophy and law- real Universities are centers of civilization, research and

knowledge. They are institutions dedicated to the preservation, assessment and diffusion of scientific knowledge to the next generations, through teaching and to the production of new knowledge through research. They are institutions that, respecting the humanistic tradition, facilitate the application of scientific knowledge towards enhancing the capabilities of mankind. They are institutions dedicated to serve society by educating its members, while at the same time preaching respect to the need for harmony between the environment and human life.

There are four main characteristics that a University in the third millennium should have: Institutional autonomy, indivisibility of teaching and research, academic freedom and international orientation.

The Universities are autonomous institutions that develop and operate in societies that are organized differently, because of their different geographical location and historical heritage. In order for them to be able to respond to the needs of the world that surrounds them, their research and teaching must be ethically and intellectually independent of any and all political powers and authorities. The principle of institutional autonomy was first established for the European Universities of the 12th century and has been respected ever since.

Real institutional autonomy means financial autonomy. Are the Universities asking for privileged treatment when they ask for financial autonomy? Certainly not, if we consider that financial autonomy is the only way to achieve development using diverse development models. Of course, financial autonomy does not imply absence of accountability; quite the contrary. The Universities seek, in line with their financial autonomy, the opportunity to prove to the society the effectiveness and the appropriateness of their choices.

Real institutional autonomy means managerial autonomy. Crucial decisions pertaining to the operation of the University must be taken by the University itself, as it is the University that is best equipped to make the best informed decisions, it is the University that will have to live with the results of the decisions and it is the University that will have to implement the decisions.

Real institutional autonomy means academic autonomy. It is inconceivable that any issue pertaining to the academic practice and operation, like the process of selecting academic staff, may be subject to the direct or indirect control and/or intervention of agents external to the University, such as the state.

Direct threats against institutional autonomy are the increasing state intervention, some times through intermediary bureaucratic structures, as well as the movement of the decision-making process towards more centralized structures within the University, a movement that makes difficult or even impossible the wide participation of the members of the academic community to this. Less direct but equally important threats against institutional autonomy are the dependence of state support on compliance to specific policies – of a scientific or other nature- as well as the definition, by the marketplace, of research priorities targeted at solving specific current problems. We should not forget that some times, unpopular ideas and ideas difficult to comprehend were proved to be very important years or even centuries after their conception, long after their originators had passed away. The benefits of such

ideas cannot be evaluated on a “here and now” basis, nor should our long-term obligations towards the next generations be traded with short-term financial gain.

The principle of indivisibility of research and teaching appears for the first time in the history of Universities with Humboldt’s reform. Humboldt believed that the main reason for which University teachers should also be engaged in research is that this improves both research and teaching. Indeed, teaching is improved by neighboring with research because this is the only way for new research results to be quickly integrated into the curriculum. Teaching, on the other hand, is not only advantageous for the student, but to the teacher as well, who comes in contact with new and fresh views, ideas, and perspectives. Therefore, quality research cannot exist away from teaching. Further, the student does not simply attend classes in order to accumulate knowledge, something that s/he could do on her/his own or by distance learning, but also to see in practice ways in which knowledge can be used as well as to learn how knowledge can be sought, found and assimilated. Therefore, it is necessary to increase our teaching outside classrooms, in libraries, research laboratories and places where research results are applied and transformed to professional practice.

Academic freedom, meant as freedom in teaching and research, is a fundamental principle of academic life; its origins again can be found in Humboldt’s reform. Both governments and Universities must ensure respect to this fundamental requirement. Open always to dialogue, the University is an ideal place where teachers, capable to transmit their knowledge and adequately equipped with the capability to develop it through research and innovation on the one hand and students, with the right, the ability and the will to enrich their minds with this knowledge on the other can meet. It is self-evident that the concept of the academic asylum is geared towards protecting academic freedom as opposed to any kind of ill-meant liberality.

The European University is the guardian of the European humanistic tradition. Its continuous pursuit is to conquer global knowledge. In order to achieve its mission, it exceeds geographical and political borders and it verifies the vital need for different civilizations to know each other and to influence each other. Further, the links that Universities maintain between them, throughout the world, are among their most crucial characteristics. In order for a University to join or remain within the networks of international excellence, it has to stimulate and support the mobility of its students and staff, as well as the mobility of information and knowledge, beyond national borders.

Today, the Universities face a change of eras. Therefore, the interactions between the Universities and society, as well as the internal University structures have to be re-examined. The birth of the European Union, the process of globalisation of knowledge and its acceleration through the formation of the European Higher Education Area and the European Research Area, will very soon bring extensive changes to the mission of the Universities. Are we talking about a radical change or just about change? Radical change could also mean replacing Universities with something else, as Universities –according to Caratheodory- are sensitive live organisms that react with unpredictable ways to any external intervention. But this is not the case. The University knows that it has to change within the next decade more than what it did during the previous one, when it was called upon to face vast

increases in student numbers without changes in its operation model and its decision-making process.

The University is, and must so remain, an institution to which society entrusts the fulfillment of a public operation, an institution serving the nation and the society at a local, regional and national level, an institution involved with the establishment of an international system of education and research within the European framework that defines education as a “public good and public responsibility”.

Therefore, changes in the legal form of the University are not allowed, even if they may be dictated by the need to reorient the directions and the nature of public expenditure. It is naïve to think that it suffices to change the character of the University from public to private in order to transform problems to opportunities, inefficient choices to reasons of change and shortage of resources to increase of competitiveness. It is utopia to believe that leaving behind the public nature of the University suffices to solve all of its problems.

Equally wrong is the view that the only way leading to the breaking up of the self-definition of the University system is the total opening of the Universities to the marketplace. The marketplace can indeed do many things in other nations, because the national dimensions are different, the culture is different, the movement of wealth is wider and faster and the rules of the game widely different than those that we know today in Greece, as the marketplace there has a tradition of self-management and self-regulation. The product of the University cannot be subjected to the fundamental rule of the marketplace, namely the reduction of cost. This is because the quality of the service is not immaterial, but rather a dominant characteristic of the service itself. We should not be looking upon our students as clients waiting to become lure of the voracious Universities. Besides, in Greece there is no market for University products in specific fields of knowledge, fields that we invariably have to continue to foster if we wish to preserve our national identity and our cultural tradition.

If, on the contrary, we look upon the market as an example, we can immediately see the need for improving and enhancing the quality of education and research, by introducing into the system appropriate mechanisms that stimulate competition and differentiation between Universities. In order for a University to achieve and maintain a position among the best institutions in the world, it has to intensify its relations with other economic entities, with industry and trade, it has to strengthen its role at local and regional level and to provide, beyond education and research, additional services useful to third parties.

This practice also strengthens the links between the University and society. However, the University cannot and should not transform to an enterprise, as this transformation would make it divert from its main mission. The competitiveness of a university is related to its quality, to the creation of areas of scientific excellence, to the degree of responding to the requirements of society, to the ability of long term improvement, to the ability to be involved in projects and to implement investments, as well as to the degree of appreciation of the financial cost associated with its operation. Such a University is a competitive advantage at a local and regional level, as it acts as the locomotive of the local and regional societo-economic systems, because it has the

ability to assist these systems by providing locally scientific knowledge that is available internationally.

The relation between Universities and the world of business is of strategic importance for the University. However, this relation cannot and should not be unbalanced; it must be a creative relation between peers. Its existence is a necessary but not sufficient condition for developing excellence in the University. A main element that should not be overlooked by any of the parties in this relation is that basic research is a sine qua non ingredient of high quality applied research.

The decision making process within the University must be re-examined under the prism of the need of responsibility to exceed representation, towards maintaining the sensitive balance between the nature of the University as an academic community and the need for more reliability and transparency.

In order to have Universities capable to join on equal terms the European Higher Education Area and to be internationally competitive, we must introduce an authentic policy for assessing the results of the efforts of the Universities. This policy has to become part of the culture of the academic community, as the quality of a university will always depend upon the quality of its human resources and upon its ability to attract the best students. This assessment must pertain to the educational, the research and the administrative functions of the University and must relate the degree of achievement of pre-set goals with the subsequent resource allocation. It must be carried out by an independent authority, which must consider all aspects of University life and examine its activities in a way that allows the assessment of not only the quality of the scientific work and the effectiveness of the management, but also whether these activities serve the need for cultural and scientific development and the educational needs of society. Hence, the evaluation process can only be a combination of measuring quantitative indices and of a qualitative analysis of the relations between goals, resources and results.

The University must exercise its autonomy to achieve maximum quality. The state has to trust it, while at the same time it has to monitor its course. We should not forget that the cost of high quality teaching and research is ever increasing. This means that the resources required by Universities will increase. This is why it is extremely important to establish and maintain trust to the University by the society, the politicians, and the workplace. This trust can only exist when the activities of the University are known, understood and transparent. The University must be able to prove that it can make structural decisions, even unpopular ones, on its own. It wishes to be judged rightly and fairly, on the basis of the decisions it makes exercising its autonomy.

What do our students ask from us? And what can we guarantee to them? An environment in which they can develop as human beings, an opportunity to fulfill their cultural interests, an opportunity to become familiar with the interdisciplinary approach of the problems that society faces and to acquire competencies that will allow them to occupy positions of responsibility. An environment in which they can be taught that, in order to occupy these positions, it is necessary not only to learn to solve problems, but also to enhance their competencies and capabilities by continuing to learn, throughout their lives, using the methods they have been taught at University.

Finally, and most important, an environment that except for providing the above, forms ethically responsible citizens, without compromises and exceptions. Or, as Disraeli said, “a place of light, freedom and learning”.

In the era of globalisation, the era when the measure of comparison is not our neighbor, but the international practice, the University may not remain indifferent to the outside world. On the contrary, it must open its horizons and make its decisions not on absolute terms but in harmony with what happens to the world around it. The European Union is today a live reality. The European constitution places the Universities among the players of research and technological development that will lead Europe to the knowledge society and economy. But we should not forget that the University, except for a lever of development, is, at the same time, the guardian of our cultural tradition and of our national identity. Being by nature open to international relations and multi-cultural dialogue, it may also become a strategic partner of the state in matters of foreign policy.

At the dawn of the third millennium, in a changing world, it is important for the University to be able to say clearly what it is, what it does and what makes it different from other institutions of higher education. The preservation, evaluation, transmission and production of knowledge are certainly its fundamental functions, but its real role is the rational management and use of knowledge towards achieving creative goals. This role must be explained, in words and actions, so that it becomes understandable by the public. Because only if we manage to attract the support of the majority of society to our effort to better ourselves intellectually and culturally will the University be able to face successfully the problems of today and to develop its full potential tomorrow.