

Science and Technology in Society
Fourth Annual Meeting
October 7 – 9, 2007
Kyoto, Japan

“The role of universities in the 21 century”
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Kyoto STS Forum, Plenary Session: Science and Society

Ladies and Gentlemen,

This is a great pleasure and honour to have another opportunity to stand and speak before such a distinguished audience. I am grateful to the Chairman Omi for this invitation to present my thoughts concerning the role of universities at the beginning of the 21 century. This subject is of great importance, particularly from the perspective of contemporary material and spiritual culture, which determines the destiny of our global civilisation. It is also important for me personally - serving as science and higher education minister I am responsible for universities in Poland. Furthermore, serving once as the rector of a large Polish university I was dealing first hand with many problems weighing on higher education.

Introduction

I would like to begin with the reflection that the history of universities goes back to a millennium ago in Egypt, and in Europe to the middle ages, when at the onset of modern scientific discoveries institutions supporting research and creation of intellectual elites, were established. They did have meaningful influence on the shape of contemporary Europe. In the late middle ages, and later during the Renaissance, universities were rapidly expanding, promoting wisdom, nurturing talents and ethical attitudes. This concept of creation, development and diffusion of knowledge was spreading onto other continents, setting examples for building similar institutions on other continents.

It needs to be underlined that the educational activity of European universities was right from the beginning rooted in an axiological basis, due to predominant influence of the Christian vision of the world and of mankind. For this reason, the crucial element of universities' mission included, besides the spreading of knowledge, formation of attitudes based on the respect for the truth and human values.

Evolution

Development of universities, lasting for several centuries, evolved in diverse political and cultural contexts. This inevitably influenced their internal processes, and not always in a positive way. Rapid growth of material culture, the ever expanding pluralism of values, and in particular the erosion of fundamental values were penetrating intellectual structures of the universities. Excessive faith in the power of technology encompassing everyday life and the drive for continuous improvement of our material culture did have a significant bearing on university behaviour.

As a result of these processes, a dominant feature of universities became academic education accompanied by scientific research, with the objective to shore up a globalizing economy. This was by all means necessary. It cannot be ignored, however, that the equally important mission of universities, encompassing the formation of ethical attitudes and citizenship, was pushed out onto a distant stage. Universities became geared to the 'production' of highly qualified specialists, who are economically efficient and able to win in a fierce competition.

On the way, the preparation of a young man and woman for 'quality life' has lost its original meaning. Universities are missing an important goal, which requires understanding that, apart from acquiring technical excellence there are higher values, indispensable for full development of an individual and a society, or – in the broader perspective – of our whole civilisation.

Another significant feature in these developments is exponential growth of universities and the student population. This process commenced with the termination of the Second World War, and had its climax during the last decade. It raises the intellectual level of society and stimulates many positive social changes. However, this trend carries also a risk to lower the quality of academic teaching.

However, there is no doubt that universities have to continue their educational mission, striving to maintain the high quality of teaching and a broad access to academic education, based on criteria of knowledge and ability. This issue is related to the way universities are financed, and to the cost of studying. Student's welfare and international mobility of staff and students alike also play an important role. Performance of research and development at universities is another key aspect.

Finally, I would like to emphasize that universities must link industrial with basic research in a harmonious way, serving the economy and supporting culture. They must be active in building and pursuing the academia-industry collaboration. For this however, a strong and innovation hungry industrial organisations need to exist. In some countries such industry is not yet at enough advanced stage.

Need for reform. The Bologna Process

As I have said earlier, first universities were created in Europe, and there they experienced the most formidable expansion. Great majority of students gained their degrees in Europe, and there most promising research was carried out. They were a magnet for talents from around the world. However, the just gone by 20 century, witnessed the end of this pole position.

Various rankings around the world tell us that the biggest rival for European universities are American schools, who took most of leading positions. Competition is also coming from the best South-East Asian universities. In particular, we have to mention high level of Japanese universities, and the dynamically growing higher education sector in China and India. Other ambitious, large states are also taking determined steps in this direction.

We have to ask then what is the source of the strength of the American universities. It is in the fact that they are spending on education and university infrastructure much more money than their European originators, thus acquiring the capacity to conduct research at the highest level. They publish the best scientific papers and attract the best people. They are collaborating with industrial research centres, and are quite successful in commercialisation of research results.

On the other hand, most European universities preserved their traditional structure, which isolates them from the surroundings. This contributes to the unfortunate fact that public funds for universities are by far inadequate, not allowing for necessary expansion. Lack of research coordination between universities and other research institutions results in dispersed research potential. Furthermore, weak links with industry are not serving well the exploitation of outcome of scientific endeavours.

In the need to improve this situation, deemed as unsatisfactory by academic and political circles alike, the EU member states undertook joint efforts to introduce a reform programme, named the Bologna Process. The main objectives of this programme include a wide ranging

support for organisational and legislative activities, aiming to facilitate integration and collaboration.

These actions include support for mutual convergence of national academic systems through promotion of comparable scientific degrees and titles, harmonising of educational standards, sharing the best management practices, introduction of a three-stage study: bachelors, masters and doctoral levels, and creation of joint teaching programmes. They also include an expansion of collaborative research, joint establishment of large, interdisciplinary research teams, formation of networks of universities and research institutes. I should also like to mention the drive to create conditions favourable to students' mobility, through an expansion of the European-wide evaluation system, promotion of joint diplomas at the master and doctoral levels.

European universities are in need of internal competition, as well as rivalry against non-European schools, with the emphasis on quality, and readiness to eliminate schools which are below an acceptable level.

However, the most difficult for European universities is the problem of financing. The funds should be coming from a variety of sources, but so far these from private sources, both individual and institutional, are remarkably small. Europe needs to build the tradition of attracting financial support from alumnae who feel attached to their *Alma matter* and recognise an interest in its high prestige as their own. This development though must be associated with clear and transparent financing rules and accounting practices. Equally important is an effective management of funds earmarked for education and research, development of academic staff and infrastructure. In dealing with these issues it is important to recognise the presence of a conflict between two different interests – that concerned with the education mission and that of knowledge based economy.

However, the view that the issue of financing cannot be satisfactory resolved without a broad introduction of tuition fees, is increasingly popular. Such a solution is already in force in some EU member states, notably in the United Kingdom.

Conclusions

The Bologna Process constitutes an attempt to find an answer to the question concerning the role of universities from the European perspective. But can it be a panacea for all the ills during the globalization era? In particular, when brain drain to American universities is not receding and when financing is so blatantly inadequate.

Universities carrying out academic education and scientific research should serve the economy and strive to fulfil material requirements. However, I strongly believe that they should not be driven by these objectives only. A necessary and significant element of a university's mission should also be concerned with the cultural formation.

Facing the spectacular development of scientific research, it is even more necessary to underline the axiological aspect of education and creation of knowledge. The material gains coming from these activities should not blur universities' responsibility for the ethical formation of students and professors, for ethical aspects of scientific research, which is often finding itself under pressure from various lobbies.

Thus universities cannot restrict themselves to the provision of responses how to perform efficiently in the surrounding world. But they should also be a place for reflecting on mankind's eternal question of the sense of life.