

STS forum 2007

Plenary Session in Parallel: „The Role of Universities in the 21st Century“ (204B)

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Discussion Points – Universities at the Core of Science Systems Worldwide

Mr Chairman,
Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a pleasure and a privilege to be part of this meeting. Thank you for the invitation. I would like to put forward seven theses on the nature and role of universities in the 21st century.

I. Universities in the 21st century are at the heart of national and international science systems.

All over the world, universities conserve and hand down existing knowledge and create and generate new knowledge. Universities have, since their foundation over 800 years ago, prepared young people for their leading role in society. Through the unique interrelation between study, research and knowledge transfer, higher education institutions are placed at the centre of national innovation systems and global competitiveness. Universities are – and will remain – at the “heart” of our science systems.

II. Universities in the 21st century are prepared for new challenges.

All institutions have to constantly adapt and renew themselves in order to remain competitive and relevant to the needs of individuals and societies as a whole. This is especially true for universities: They are agents of change; while they are undergoing change processes themselves. Now more than ever higher education institutions are facing tough competition and are increasingly also competing with each other. At the same time, expectations from business and the general society towards universities are rising.

With a view to enabling universities to fulfil their mission the German university presidents and rectors consider it of paramount importance that both, the funding and legal frameworks support universities in fulfilling their mission. Universities need autonomy in determining and developing their academic profile, student profile, staffing requirements, internationalisation strategy and research and development strategy in order to remain on top. In return, universities are accountable towards the government and the tax payer. We are glad to see the relationship between government and universities slowly, but surely shifting from a strongly hierarchical one – this is at least true in the German and mostly also in the European context – to a relationship between partners.

III. Universities in the 21st century are diverse.

The unity of research and teaching is still essential to the German universities of today. Just as Humboldt's principle is part of the idea of "universitas", so is a wide and diverse spectrum of academic subjects.

The German university presidents and rectors have been promoting the diversification of the higher education system – within and between different types of higher education institutions – for a long time. Ideally, each and every institution will be able to find its adequate role and place within a diversified system. This requires a system of academic institutions with highly diversified profiles, based on equality of esteem for different missions. However, we need to take a close look, ensuring that the overall system is fit to cope with the challenges of international competition. This process can only be fair and beneficial for our universities within a framework of sustainable state funding.

IV. Universities in the 21st century are innovative and entrepreneurial.

Alexander von Humboldt was a well-travelled man. In a lecture in Berlin in 1827 he held the view that national systems of higher education and research on the one hand and business and industry on the other hand are highly interdependent and would have to face international competition in a concerted effort in order to thrive and prosper.

Higher education and research systems must be further oriented towards the transfer of technology and applications for research. Teaching must be far more connected to actual practice. But the orientation towards ultimate application in research should not be understood as weakening pure research, it should rather be seen as better utilisation.

Cooperation between companies and universities can assume many different shapes: from informal cooperation to contractual agreements or even to the establishment of joint research centres. But most importantly, in order to enhance cooperation between industry and academia mental flexibility and a vision with regard to the application potential of research results and the protection of intellectual property rights is called for on both sides. Only when trust has been built up and fair "rules of the game" have been established, a win-win situation can be created. Above all, our highest commodity – our academic freedom – is to be protected.

V. Universities in the 21st century are socially responsible.

Universities accept their public responsibility for promoting social equity and an inclusive society. They have to make every effort to widen access to all members of society and to provide opportunities to succeed to all those who have the potential to benefit from higher education. This requires partnership with governments and other parts of the educational system.

Our university graduates shall not only be well-trained experts with specific competencies, but open-minded, true international citizens with an understanding of local, regional and global issues who are ready to take on responsibility.

In this context, lifelong learning is one of the core tasks for universities in the years to come, both with regard to continuing education and training for well-qualified graduates and to initial education for various societal groups.

VI. Universities of the 21st century are international.

Higher education institutions have “open doors” to the world. Since their beginnings, universities have been acting in an international context. Nowadays, just as in the past, international collaboration enriches research, teaching and study. Therefore, the mobility of students, teachers and researchers is a prerequisite for the successful operation of universities and the competitiveness of national science and research systems.

Different rationales for the internationalisation of higher education exist: Demographic shifts call for new ways of human resource development, for instance by attracting students and researchers from all over the world – the difficult issue of brain drain and brain gain. With increasing competition, higher education institutions try to enhance their academic quality and to gain a competitive edge by forging international strategic alliances. While some focus on the power of mobile students and researchers to enhance mutual understanding and intercultural communication, others also have a clear-cut commercial interest in fee-paying international students.

Higher education is not a commodity. Nevertheless, universities worldwide are, in fact, competing for excellent students and researchers. Rather than re-acting to external globalisation forces, universities must become actors themselves, striking a balance between cooperation and competition.

VII. Universities in the 21st century are creative workshops for the future.

Universities are key players for a successful transition to a knowledge-based economy and society. They offer the institutional structure that allows both, the creative development of the individual, curiosity-driven research effort as well as strategic research initiatives. At the same time, they serve as centres of applied research in close cooperation with industry and business.

Acceptance of the fact that future growth and jobs depend on a well functioning system of research and innovation and on a well educated work force has grown in Europe in the aftermath of the Lisbon meeting of European heads of state in the year 2000. They declared their intention “to make Europe the most competitive knowledge-based economy in the world”. It is obvious that investment into universities at the core of the European science system and investment into the brains of young Europeans is key to the achievement of this ambitious goal.

At the same time, universities need to preserve their responsibility as “guardians” of research knowledge as a public good. The open access to and dissemination and preservation of scientific data are of central importance for the competitiveness of higher education and research systems worldwide.

Universities worldwide contribute to the development of our societies and life on our common planet. Climate change, energy issues, increasing longevity, the rapid pace of technological change, growing global interdependence and rising economic inequality: All these issues require investigation, fundamental research as well as technological and social innovation, solving problems as they arise and ensuring economic success combined with social stability. This is not only about teaching, it is also – and more importantly – about educating our young people, enabling them to shape our future world actively, confidently and responsibly. Thank you.