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Challenges and Opportunities for Higher Education and Higher Education Institutions – a European perspective

The context:

Klaus Schwab, Director of the DAVOS World Economic Forum began his introductory address talk this year by saying that never before, or at least in the last 50 years, could he remember a time when the world need to address so many challenges at the same time.

It seems to me that the same can be said for the world of universities, faced as they are with greater global competition for students and researchers, in an increasingly interconnected and interdependent world, that is changing rapidly, and where the status quo of the European higher education and research knowledge system is being challenged, by the destabilising and disruptive forces of globalisation, of demographic change and migration, and not least rapid technological change..

These changes are already impacting our universities, the way we teach and learn, our capacity to innovate and to conduct research, and also the way in which institutions need to be governed and managed in this new era.

The first question I would like to raise is, - bearing in mind the great diversity of European universities, - which are going to be the most important elements determining future success?

Of the many answers one could give to this question my priorities are the following:

1. **The importance of a clear institutional profile**, whatever that profile might be, and including building the necessary, key strategic alliances and partnerships that are relevant for that chosen institutional profile
- **Why? Both cooperation and competition between universities are intensifying.** Hence the importance of strategic local, regional and international partnerships, and; also in many countries of mergers and other

concentration measures, considered to be important ways of consolidating profile, achievements and impact. At the same time, of course, competition is growing between institutions, for example, to attract the best students and young researchers worldwide.

- **Another element of institutional profile for a growing number of institutions, is a trend towards increasing and broadening access** to higher education. Overall it means a greater diversity in the profile of students entering higher education, including both those with no formal qualifications but also a larger number of international students, thus promoting inclusiveness, which is important for growth and societal cohesion, but which has an impact on the types of study programmes on offer and the support services needed.

2. Student success depends to a large degree on providing the necessary support to university teaching staff

- Over the last five years another growing trend is that of new ways of thinking about learning and teaching and student support. Across the continent there is evidence of new and innovative approaches to respond better to the needs of students; even if progress is patchy, and greater attention needs to be paid to supporting student centred learning and the introduction of learning outcomes.
- Other positive developments – following an analysis of over 400 universities that responded to our recent TRENDS survey – relate to improved institutional support for students, for example as far as opportunities for library use, access to digital tools etc. are concerned. Institutions also report significant improvements in student support services offered, be it career and other forms of counselling services, the

acquisition of additional competences and skills, including language courses, introduction to interdisciplinary skills, digital literacy etc...

- There has also been considerable progress in the introduction of institutional quality assurance processes and procedures that – thanks to the Europe wide accepted European Standards and Guidelines for QA in the EHEA - are becoming more generalised. These include in the meantime elements such as the use of student questionnaires, the regular evaluation of study programmes and all sorts of formal procedures that have to be followed in case of problems. Importantly, more and more universities have created central planning and data collection services thus increasing strategic capacity at institutional level. There is more and more research on teaching and learning taking place, and the number of dedicated courses on offer designed to improving teaching competence is on the rise. Evaluation systems based on peer evaluation are also emerging in some systems. All these elements represent important progress in supporting student learning and student success.

3. Digital Innovation and the impact of new technologies

- The use of new technologies is one important way of introducing pedagogical innovation, of acquiring new competences and of preparing students for new digital employment opportunities. At the same time there is an impact on universities themselves, through transformations such as the introduction of mixed and blended teaching modes: a recent survey of EUA members showed that 70% of institutions already have a strategy in place or are in the course of developing their policy. Such transformations also mean rethinking internal organisational structures, for example with regard to the profile of staff needed to deal with these new challenges.
- Digitalisation takes many forms and one of the most important developments going on at present concerns open access and open science more broadly.

These fast moving developments will very likely to change the way we think about and conduct research, as well as the way scientists publish the results of their research, and will also have a major impact on the nature et quality of scientific careers in future.

4. Internationalisation and the importance of global engagement and global citizenship

- Internationalisation plays an ever more important role not only for European universities but also for universities around the world, and together with the digital revolution has become a central pillar, not only for developing cross border research cooperation but also for the teaching and learning process.

- 85% of the 400 EUA members who responded to a recent survey said that they already had an international strategy in place, based on student and teacher exchanges, short courses, work placements, generally in the context of well reflected strategic networks, including also increasing numbers of programmes offered in English and related, targeted marketing strategies.

- However the question is, if that is sufficient? One of the recent THE rankings focuses on the importance of internationalisation, and the criteria they have used to designate the world's most international institutions are a little different: they focus on the number of international students enrolled and the number of international researchers employed on campus, and finally, the % of publications with at least one author from another country. According to these criteria the most international universities in the world, by far, are to be found in the UK and in Switzerland, followed by a large number of institutions from other European countries.

- **The importance of internationalisation goes far beyond a debate on rankings and the criteria selected. In the interconnected world in which we live people, ideas and information circulate across national boundaries and move freely beyond borders.** This is the world in which today's students live their lives, pursue their studies and embark upon their future careers. The university has an important role to play in preparing students to become responsible citizens, of their own country as well as European and global level. This in turn means actively promoting intercultural understanding and providing students, through their study programmes, with the skills and competences they need to become the global citizens and leaders of the future...

Hence my next point:

5. **Taking responsibility for the education of European and global citizens of the future – where I would like to reiterate the main messages underlined in the Bologna Ministerial Communiqué adopted in May 2015**

The Bologna Ministers of Education, representing 47 + 1 education systems – with different political, cultural and academic traditions - emphasised the serious challenges facing the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) today referring specifically to: “continuing economic and social crisis, dramatic levels of unemployment, increasing marginalisation of higher education, demographic change, new migration patterns, conflicts within and between countries, as well as extremism and radicalisation; and on the positive side the importance of ‘greater mobility of students and staff, that fosters mutual understanding while the rapid development of knowledge and understanding plays an increasingly important role in the transformation of higher education and research’.

Given these challenges the Ministers further underlined the importance of their cooperation on the basis of open dialogue, shared goals and common commitments, specifically in relation to public responsibility for higher education, academic freedom, institutional autonomy and commitment to integrity. Furthermore the unanimously confirmed as priorities for the future the importance of trust in each other's systems, that will facilitate the

mutual recognition of qualifications, the importance of higher education in contributing to build inclusive societies, founded on democratic values and human rights, and where educational opportunities provide competences and skills for European and global citizenship, innovation and employment.

Since the Ministers met in May 2015 global instability has increased as have the migration and refugee crises we face. This new situation affects us all, and also has a direct impact on universities. It is a question that is much debated at European level, including in the context of the European Higher Education and Research Areas.

The call for action has been heard. All across Europe universities are taking action and developing innovative approaches to integrate those refugees able and interested in continuing their studies in the hope that this will help to remove the barriers and the walls that are going up around us. I invite you consult, and to contribute to the EUA's 'Refugees Welcome' initiative that is supported by all National Rectors Conferences across Europe and which will be launched formally at the end of February providing, online, information on hundreds of initiatives already underway to support refugees across Europe.

6. Governance and Funding : The importance of autonomy and of ensuring stable and efficient funding of Europe's universities

In order to make sure that we are able to achieve the transformations I have mentioned it is very important for universities to be able to act strategically, and in an autonomous manner, hence ensuring that they are able to respond flexibly to the rapidly changing circumstances in which they find themselves.

EUA has, over many years, collected comparative data on university autonomy in higher education systems across Europe, analysing 4 important elements: the capacity of the university to decide on its own organisational structure, on its academic programmes and research activities, on the recruitment and management of human resources and on the financial resources available to them.

These four elements have been compared across some 30 higher education systems, and proved helpful to decision makers in a range of European countries, bearing in mind that it is very difficult to compare situations given the enormous diversity that exists across Europe. Reforms have taken place in many places and, in general, advances have been made, even although in some countries the actual implementation of agreed reforms is sometimes presents challenges. However, at the end of the day, it tends to be financial matters that constitute the most pressing concerns, given years of economic downturn in many countries, often accompanied by a steady decrease in increase in funds attributed to universities. Hence our call for improvements in regulatory and funding frameworks and for making sure that sufficient funding is delivered, also to enable balance between accountability and institutional autonomy.

However, autonomy alone is not enough, and nor even sustainable funding – although both are prerequisites: - in the longer term the key to success in future for higher education systems across the European Higher Education Area will be the capacity of universities to innovate, both in terms of their mission, be it teaching, research or service to society, as well as in building the strategic leadership and management capacity, and strategic partnerships needed to ensure a creative environment, able to provide the best possible teaching for an ever more diverse student body and to drive excellent research and innovation that, ultimately is relevant for and benefits society.

Lesley Wilson, 17 February 2016