

University functions and identity: academic values and social commitment

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1. *An identity crisis*

In 1988, Europe was optimistic about its integration as a community of people: trade and exchanges were growing and, in 1985, it had been decided to reach the full implementation of the Treaty of Rome by 1992 when the free mobility of people, goods and capital would be achieved throughout member countries; from then on, it would be known as the European Union – rather than the European communities. This change of status would lead to new rules of shared behaviour that were written down in the Maastricht and Amsterdam Treaties. Simultaneously, discussions were pursued to create a European currency that all citizens would have in their pockets as a sign of their common belonging: this was to become the Euro – a policy finally implemented at the beginning of the new century.

In 1988 too, the universities proposed solemnly to recognise their shared heritage in drafting and signing a *Magna Charta Universitatum* at the occasion of the 900th anniversary of the University of Bologna, considered to be the oldest in Europe, if not in the world. Why was it felt necessary to reflect on the identity of the university and to lay down the principles of its action and presence in society?

First because the university was no longer what it used to be – after mass higher education had become the norm in the sixties and after the old institution had exploded during the 1968 student revolt – not only in France but also in Germany and Italy, not to mention smaller nations that were also affected by the wave of protest that submerged the Europe of the day. 1968 helped recognise a fundamental metamorphosis of the academic institution that had reached a point of no return after the reconstruction period that followed World War II.

Universities, rather than training a small elite of intellectuals and society leaders – not more than 4 to 8 % of an age cohort in most countries before the war – had been encouraged to open their gates to wider numbers of students. For instance, in 1963, the Robbins report in Britain considered that higher participation rates were needed to help develop society in a world characterised by economic growth: this supposed the creation of new institutions of higher learning and the expansion of existing universities. This was true all over Europe, however. The old models of academic organisation were questioned and, in Germany for instance, the old Humboldtian model was criticised as too focused to allow groups of students coming from low middle class or a workers' milieu to benefit from higher education: next to university enlargement, this led to the setting up of *Gesamthochschulen*, the so-called comprehensive universities that would combine academic education and professional training; simultaneously, *Fachhochschulen*, centred mainly on professional and technical competences were set up everywhere in the Federal Republic to cater for large groups of learners interested in general higher education rather than in the re-engineering of knowledge in academic centres. Professor-led institutions were asked to become more student-centred, i.e., to ensure that students got an education relevant to the material and intellectual needs of the society which they were to integrate after graduation. Indeed, with 20 to 30 % of an age cohort aiming at higher education, universities could no longer provide for the social elite only but had to

open training paths allowing also for socially useful employment – in trade, industry or in civil service. Universities were thus forced to adapt to new economic and social circumstances characterised by greater individual autonomy which, combined with higher equality in learning opportunities, could result in extended social mobility. This meant opening new areas of training to meet specific needs; this also implied paying attention to the students now asked to express their concerns and requirements – immediate, in the department they were attending, or long-term, for their future activities in society. In terms of organisation, the traditional collegial university composed of intellectual peers answering the call of science, usually for its own sake or its pedagogical value, had difficulties facing these new social obligations: laws, as a result, changed the academic systems of Europe, the French reorganising teaching around specialised departments combining training and research, the Dutch introducing a *democratic governance* system where students – the social demand – could have majority influence on their education path. In the late 60's, indeed, everywhere in Europe students were given advisory powers, if not an executive capacity in institutional decision-making processes. The *fragmentation* of disciplinary interests - encouraged by the expansion of higher education and by internal democracy – called for the professionalisation of university management in order to keep the institution as a single whole. Rectors were now chosen as much for their operational competences as for their intellectual prestige based on proven scientific ability. Leadership meant management. To the new university – more responsive to society's well being through research and development – corresponded a new brand of leaders, perhaps more pragmatic, more political in their approach of academic leadership, all the more down to earth that in the 1970's the governments of Europe, after the oil crisis of 1973, tended to reduce their financial support, if not in absolute terms at least in relative ones if account was taken of the fast growing inflow of students in most countries.

By 1985, the changes born out of the 1968 student revolt had been accepted, however; in fact, they had induced new balances of power – inside and outside the institution; European universities had adapted to a new institutional culture, sometimes unwillingly if not unconsciously. They were also entering a phase of growing internationalisation thanks to the launch of the ERASMUS programme that intended to open institutions to each other beyond traditional borders. Scientific or geographic. The system was again on the move.

In this context, were the traditional tenets of academia still of any significance in such a transformed situation? In other words, were the old values that gave sense to the academic profession still of relevance in the mass university of an integrating Europe? Could professors still refer to the Humboldtian model that gave the German university its lead in the early 20th century ... or was this just a myth, simple stories framing an institutional culture now void of meaning? The Magna Charta tried to give an answer to this doubt and self-doubt on university identity.

At a time when economy and trade were developing fast, at a time when universities were regaining a position in European society as accepted engines of its development, the question of university fundamentals could be asked again in a rather secure context. The 900th anniversary of the University of Bologna offered the opportunity to do so.

2. *The Magna Charta: beyond doubt and uncertainties*

The university, over the centuries, had both evolved and remained loyal to features of a core identity. To take a zoological metaphor, the snake had shed its skin many times, grown and transformed over the years in different ways and different places, but it was still a snake – and recognisably so. What was dead skin in the university, what was its live body? In other words, what were the essential features that still make the university what it is? These principles once determined, they could be written down and proposed for general acceptance

to the universities themselves. That was the purpose and intention of the Magna Charta drafting committee, a small group of academic leaders from ancient and prestigious universities in Europe who met in Catalonia in 1987 at the invitation of the University of Barcelona.

What are indeed the fundamentals of academic tradition? In the decades following its creation in 11th century Italy, the medieval university, after a preparatory education in the Arts¹, trained for the jobs structuring the society of the day (the professions covering physical wellbeing – *medicine*, social welfare – *law*, and spiritual development – *theology*) in the so-called major faculties. It organised around people, the students (Bologna model) or the professors (Paris model). Bologna, in today's jargon, reflected social *demand* while Paris focussed on academic provision – the *supply* of a given knowledge. In Bologna, for several centuries, students thus hired and rewarded the professors, controlled their performance and negotiated the university's place in the city: the rectors were thus students. In Paris, the teachers – with clerical status – ran the institution, ensured the ways of teaching and the quality of scholarship; they also selected the students – a model that was slowly to prevail everywhere in Europe from the 16th century onward.

At the Renaissance, the academic service of mankind moved to 'humanism', a way to *criticise inherited knowledge* by questioning the cosmological worldviews inherited from a long tradition. Universities, losing their sense of common belonging, took side in the religious feuds that were tearing Europe in the 16th and 17th century, often offering the intellectual justification for confessional oppositions. In the 18th century, however, universities like Leiden, Halle or Edinburgh searched for a rediscovered unity of knowledge, beyond ideological *a priori*. From the Enlightenment onward, they saw science as a field of *equal opportunity* for development while cultivating a new sense of *equity* that expressed in particular efforts made to educate for *social responsibility*; that meant training the individual to think *creatively* and *critically* in order to define his or her position in the world. That is what Humboldt was also aiming at when the University of Berlin was opened in 1810. Later, when the industrial revolution asked for the formation to those jobs re-engineering the world through *technological change*, the university *reshaped its assets* – training (its medieval focus) and rearranging knowledge (its Renaissance core) - to meet the new requirements of the 19th century. Thus it emphasised intellectual disciplines and technical skills – that multiplied over the years –, and set aside its earlier stress on people whose training was the institution's first purpose. For the writers of the Magna Charta, this organic adaptation goes on today, now that the 'knowledge society' has become the horizon for new technical developments supporting social growth: however, 'man' should remain at the core of the process.

This led the drafting committee to consider that, over the centuries, universities had best prospered as engines of social development and intellectual transformation when they were free to explore or spread knowledge and free to organise to do so, thus making the best of their staff and students' competences in order to contribute to society's needs and ambitions. In more traditional terms, academic freedom and institutional autonomy are the pivots of higher education and research : they allow for the provision of social change.

That is why the rectors who signed the document considered that *'at the approaching end of the millennium, the future of mankind depends largely on cultural, scientific and*

¹ The seven liberal arts were grouped into two areas: the *trivium* helped master individual expression through grammar, logic and rhetoric; the *quadrivium* helped master a sense of time and space through geometry, arithmetic, astronomy and music. Once the student knew how to relate to others through ordered speech and how to position him/herself in the cosmos, he/she could move to the major faculties of theology, law and medicine to learn a profession – i.e., conquer a place in society.

technical development ... built up in centres of culture, knowledge and research as represented by true universities'. Thus, *'to spread knowledge among the younger generation, universities, in today's world, must also serve society as a whole ... whose future not only requires ... a considerable investment in continuing education but also the respect of the great harmonies of the natural environment and of life itself.'*

Moving on from these considerations, the Magna Charta looks into the best conditions for their realisation by asserting the principles around which universities should structure: *'to meet the needs of the world around it, university teaching and research must be morally and intellectually independent of all political authority and economic power'*. In other words, institutional autonomy guarantees the critical mind that makes possible the changes still to be explored and explained by intelligence and reason, should society progress. Autonomy, therefore, points to the requirements of an open future. This implies that *'teaching and research in universities must be inseparable if their tuition is not to lag behind changing needs, the demands of society, and advances in scientific knowledge'*. Thus *'freedom in training and research is the fundamental principle of university life'*. Such an academic freedom is no support of personal dogmas since it *'rejects intolerance and is always open to dialogue as the university is an ideal meeting-ground for teachers capable of imparting their knowledge... and for students entitled, able and willing to enrich their minds with that knowledge'*. That is why the *'university is a trustee of the European humanist tradition, its constant care being to attain universal knowledge ... by transcending geographical and political frontiers, thus affirming the vital need for different cultures to know and influence each other'*. Indeed, the Magna Charta was endorsed from the first not only by European universities but also by other academic institutions that recognised in their organisation the cultural heritage represented by these ideas and developments – whole or partial.

Such is the core of the document signed by some 400 university rectors and presidents on 18 September 1988 on the *Piazza Maggiore* of Bologna, in the presence of social partners who were represented by the President of the Italian Republic, members of the national government, church prelates, city leaders or ambassadors from foreign nations. The Magna Charta was a solemn reaffirmation that, even as a mass university, the institution needed self-steering capacity if it were to meet its social obligations as a motor of change *'at the heart of societies differently organised because of geography and historical heritage'*.

3. ***Social accountability to science, students and society***

The Magna Charta insists on the universities' social accountability. That is why, in 1999, while envisaging greater compatibility and increased mobility between national systems of education, 29 European Ministers of Education quoted the Magna Charta as an essential step on the way to university self-awareness, a quality very much needed to create a European Higher Education Area by year 2010. For the Ministers, universities are *partners in the shaping of the new society of knowledge* and governments recognise institutional autonomy as the condition for an efficient and effective contribution of academia to the transformation of the community. But introspection, self-doubt and institutional awareness are no reason for feet dragging; on the contrary, they call for active responsibility for the future of society. This means that each institution, while facing its own constraints, should reflect on the need to

- re-organise its curricula (in order to combine professions and science),
- re-define its quality (by adapting Humboldt's heritage to purpose-oriented activities),
- re-shape its balance between education and research (by cross-fertilising personal and social responsibility for the management of a changing knowledge basis that is supposed to offer *meaning* rather than tools to development).

At present, the Bologna process of exchange and compatibility in higher education involves some 45 countries, from Lisbon to Vladivostok, from Reykjavik to Malta. However, at the inner core of that larger group, the Ministers of those countries that are members of the European Union go one step further by proposing universities to mobilise for long-term social objectives by betting on academic initiatives and the mobility of their graduates allowing for their contribution to *setting up of the world's most vibrant knowledge society*, if possible by 2010. In Europe, this is known as the *Lisbon agenda*, an ambitious target for development that was adopted by the heads of government of a EU summit organised in Portugal in year 2000. Since then, in recommendations passed by the Commission in Brussels, the universities were called twice to pick up the challenge and to enter a knowledge economy of which, by nature of their intellectual drive, they should become the axis. Interestingly enough, over the years, the concept has moved from a society of knowledge to a knowledge economy – not exactly the same thing – as if the Commission was shifting attention from the ends to the means, from theory to practice.

Income generation, in the re-organisation of academic goals and activities, should reflect the difficulties and opportunities met by higher education and its institutions – now required to develop accountable behaviour not as enterprises but *like* enterprises; if, in operational terms, the universities are to control the means to their redefined ends – and this means *integrity* -, they could need the support of *mediating structures* (such as buffer bodies) for the allocation of funds between various areas of academic work; simultaneously they need to *sustain general processes of change* in order to keep a balance of quality in all areas throughout their many activities; such quality would need to be assessed by *international accreditation* procedures supposed to expose through modalities of transparency the relative value of academic work processes. Does it imply the enslaving of higher education to long term targets that have not been defined with the help of its institutions or does the accountability process open on responsible choices – which the university can justify, be it in favour or opposed to, i.e., developments proposed by and discussed with its partners in society? To help judge the freedom of expression and organisation this all implies, the Observatory that, since 2001, monitors the implementation of university fundamental values and rights, also proposes to assess and balance the main functions of universities as centres of knowledge for the development of society.

4. ***Permanent university functions***

Academic institutions, in society, can act as

- think-tanks for the future,
- laboratories for innovative products and services,
- centres of qualification, or/and
- knowledge organisers.

These are the main roles universities are asked to play in today's world. Many contend that these four functions are being met - as well or even better - by other providers such as those institutions that focus on one of those roles only, be they public or private. Often, industrial labs, for instance, have proven more apt than universities for innovative design in applying research to development; or corporate schools more agile to train professionals with relevant expertise for the jobs required by the labour market. There is thus increased competition today between the universities and those firms that take over growing shares of the research and education market. Universities indeed have lost the monopoly of knowledge creation and dissemination.

What are then the unique features that make universities necessary - in and for the society of tomorrow? Their specificity lies in the fact that they bring together these various activities as *integral parts of a single body*, a set up built on the tensions and the cross-fertilisation of the varied functions of knowledge. This bridging role is essential as it puts man's various ways of appropriating information at the centre of social transformation. In other words, there is an added value to put under the same roof varied social roles – and that added value justifies the unique identity of universities. Do those different roles, however, feed or oppose each other, and does the institution flourish or suffer from their cross-fertilisation?

Said in other words, the university is the cross point of four 'searches' with an important social value: the searches for ORDER, MEANING, WELL BEING and for the NEW. Two of them require a culture of *dissent*, - the searches for meaning and for the new – while the other two build on *consent* – the searches for order and wellbeing.

A strong *capacity to question* is indeed required in order to re-arrange the 'known', to update and upgrade past understandings: thus, any received idea or any acquired concept can be revised, dropped or set in a different context. Such a reorganisation of knowledge to make contemporary sense of ideas past is often summed up under the term of 'scholarship'. That is the *search for meaning* of people like Diderot and d'Alembert in 18th century France when they launched the project of an *Encyclopaedia* to sort out, filter and re-visit the accepted truths of their day. They did not propose anything really new but their changed arrangement of knowledge was innovative enough to transform the understanding of man and society, so much so that Enlightenment ushered formidable revolutions in Europe, political in France, industrial in Britain. Thus, the university should not only be the archives of given knowledge but also its memory: archives collect everything while memory filters and chooses among existing notions so that acquired wisdom – once trimmed and re-organised - makes new sense of culture, of man's imprint on the world, that is. This is clearly an area of dissent for university action: '*no, this world picture does no longer make sense and needs to be revisited!*' That is why academic freedom is an essential feature of universities.

The ability to say 'no' is also fundamental in the *search for the new*, when universities are supposed to roll back the frontiers of knowledge, to explore the unknown by enlarging the scope of science and the arts. In older days, this was called the 'quest for truth' and was very much at the heart of the Humboldtian model of higher education in which research – i.e., the quest for truth – was at the heart of teaching. Universities are still asked to foster critical thought and independent minds – people able to stimulate man's venture into the ignored, thus opening to the unexpected. This is no easy task although institutional autonomy represents the best device to protect the dissent culture needed to free the new, which, if really new, can only be unauthorised by the powers that be, political, economic or – some times - academic.

Consent, however, is also a key of academic activities. For instance, in the *search for order* when universities qualify their students – giving skills, competences and knowledge that allow graduates to hold their place in society. Indeed, every time a degree is awarded, the university places a former student on the mobility ladder and gives him or her specific social prospects that may vary according to the value given to their 'paper'. This sesame to social success is what parents are looking for - much more than a thorough training in the sciences or the arts that they often do not understand. Universities are thus *machines of conformity* – conformity to expected norms and results: they are places of *social reproduction*. In that function, they have little reason to dispute the ranks and values they are training for – even if they do not simply mimic the past but also train the 'modernisers', a reference to society's aims for of a future that should bring about prosperity, peace and solidarity. Therefore it is

important for universities to know the political authorities' priorities if they are to meet the challenges of training.

Acceptance of the basic organisation of society is also a condition of the *search for wellbeing*, the fourth social function of universities. Even if change is at the heart of research and development, of professional efficiency – thus proposing new products and new services with strong academic content – the end of the process is improvement rather than revolution. This function is now considered to be central to academic growth – an investment in social transformation in order to cope best with new technologies, new materials, with health and energy challenges, or with environmental changes – i.e. social sustainability.

In the searches for meaning and the new, universities are called to be 'responsible'; they can then be made accountable for their choices – and *possible errors* – since freedom never ensures expected results. In their search for order or well being, on the contrary, universities are invited to be 'responsive'; they are made accountable for their failures, their inefficiencies much more than for their priorities since the latter are in fact chosen by the society outside. In a situation of dissent, universities are *social partners* taking enough distance from the problems of the day to offer alternatives to existing strategies. In a context of consent, universities are *social agents* meeting the urgent needs and present hopes of the society they live in. This corresponds to a narrow understanding of the university as a *public service*; that is why society should also be persuaded that, in the long term, critical thinking is a real *service to the public* that is worth investing in, since free academics in free institutions can best test and imagine the social environments of tomorrow.

In 1996, at a meeting organised in the Czech Republic, President Vaclav Havel told some 150 rectors from all over Europe that indeed the calling of their institutions is about the unity of knowledge, a knowledge that reflects man's fundamental unity as a person in society; after all, does not the name of the organisation say it all? The term *universitas*, indeed, joins the Latin *unum* (one) with *vertere* (turn to), a phrase that could mean *turn to the one*, or, put back to Latin, could offer higher education a splendid motto: *Ad unum vertere!* This is not only the *raison d'être* of the university – to link together² the various strands of knowledge – but also the motivation for its bringing under the same roof the tensions inherent to the four functions academia exerts for society in general. Therefore universities are normal platforms of discussions that feed on possible oppositions that are considered a way forward to new syntheses and continuously reformed perspectives. Tensions are the dynamics of a university life on the move. That is perhaps not by chance that the didactics of the early university in the Middle Ages was the *disputatio*, each point of an assertion needing to be argued back and forth until a consensus was reached on the veracity of the proposal: this meant both heated debates and tolerance of the other's point of view, since opposition was always a step toward understanding, even if the discussion was sometimes flirting with heterodoxy if not heresy. This required a strong organisational structure that protected dissent as a norm for progress - hence the need for institutional autonomy to support the freedom of expression on the way to innovation. The unity of knowledge implies institutional autonomy, today still.

5. ***Social commitment***

The Magna Charta addressed the identity of the universities after the 1968 revolt that deeply transformed the higher education system of many European countries. It took one generation to evaluate the changes, to reflect on them and to write down a document universities could refer to as a set of common principles that could apply to very diverse

² Interestingly enough, 'link together', in Latin, is *inter-ligere* – which is one of the etymologies for *intelligence*, after all an essential basis for good academic work.

situations. That was in 1988. Another twenty years have now passed. Is the charter still relevant to today's problems and developments?

The year after the signing of the Magna Charta in Bologna, Europe experienced a fundamental change when, in November 1989, the Berlin Wall fell, thus opening the way to the continental commitments that, in 2004 and 2007, led 12 countries from the Eastern part of Europe to join the European Union. Did the universities from the former Soviet Bloc refer to the same values and principles? In fact, when you enter the University of Vilnius, Lithuania, there is a red marble plaque where the text of the Magna Charta has been engraved in its Latin version. Why? Because, after the rector of that university had endorsed it, that text was used to ask from the government the institutional autonomy it considered essential: this led to the first political troubles that, a few months later, brought down Soviet presence in the area. Trouble having started at the university, the plaque is a reminder of that development. The engraved text is in Latin to remind of a time when intellectuals used the same language to understand each other, a time when Europe was a matter of fact in terms of cultural belonging if not in terms of political organisation. That is exactly what the Lithuanians of the early 1990's were claiming: we are of the same cultural breed even if we are not yet inserted into a common political structure. European compatibility thus became the standard of all reforms in what had been known as Eastern Europe; the strategic aim of change being for those countries to return to what they called a 'common European home'. It is difficult to imagine that this took some twelve years only and that, at present, the Baltic countries, although much poorer than average European nations, are among the fastest growing economies, now at the forefront of the knowledge revolution. In March this year, for instance, Estonia was the first country in the world to organise national elections using the web, thus reflecting the fact that 80% of the population already uses internet to do shopping, to pay taxes, to organise their free time and labour appointments.

Euro-compatibility was the reason for the European Union to launch in 1990 already the TEMPUS programme, thus re-opening working links between universities of parts of the continent that often had remained at a distance from each other since the 1930s or World War II. The effort consisted in helping universities to understand their common features in order for Eastern European institutions to join the mobility and cooperation projects that already existed in the older nucleus of the Union - the ERASMUS and SOCRATES programmes in particular. Today, TEMPUS still pursues policies opening the EU to neighbouring groups: TEMPUS-Tacis targets the countries from the Community of Independent States, i.e., the Republics that were part of the old USSR and have not joined the European Union yet – from Russia to Georgia, from Ukraine to Azerbaijan. As for TEMPUS-Meda, it focuses on academic relations with countries South and East of the Mediterranean, from Morocco to Lebanon, from Turkey to Egypt. In the last twenty years Europe has changed dimension, in terms of geographical outreach but also in terms of university development.

All those countries – in Europe and beyond – went through a further increase of the number of students in higher education. This translated into a growing diversification of the providers, on the model of what the US began as the first country coping with what Martin Trow called universal education, i.e., more than 30% of an age cohort taking post-secondary courses. Next to research universities, professional education centres or liberal art colleges, many community colleges were created to help new groups of learners, often from disadvantaged milieus, to benefit from a training in higher education, usually with a strong vocational focus. Europe followed the same trend, in its own way however. Institutes with a technological bias were created inside the universities in France, the IUTs; vocational schools were set up in Germany (the *Fachhochschulen*) or technology institutions in the Netherlands (the HBOs), thus turning higher education into a binary system of learning – a system that

was imitated in Austria, Finland, Norway or Switzerland. In Britain, on the contrary, the system was reorganised on unitary lines when, in the 1990s, the polytechnics - that had been set up in the 1960s to answer growing demands of higher education the universities could not cope with – were given university status, thus creating a system of more than 100 academic institutions spread all over the kingdom – with very different profiles and activities, several new universities insisting on their difference as first and foremost ‘teaching institutions’. As a result, in several countries of Europe, the participation rate in higher education has grown to more than 50% of the age group.

In such a context, it is no longer possible to claim that academic training is forming the cadre of tomorrow’s society. Indeed, more and more medical students do not find jobs in several European countries: the old dream of elite occupations is vanishing in universities that are now producing graduates for all levels of employment, in the public or the private sectors. Diversity of formations, diversity of institutions, diversity of structures, diversity of students, diversity of staff - the system of higher education is more and more complex and, at the same time, more present in society, by sheer fact of numbers. Finances, however, tend to decrease – at least in terms of allocation per student. Should then new forms of teaching – distance education, e-learning – or a more efficient pedagogy – problem based learning, group teaching, internships – be evoked to make the best of an inexhaustible demand for higher learning?

If we look at the four basic functions mentioned earlier, present trends stress the *well being* function – which translates into innovation through Research and Development – or develop the *order* role of higher education, training people for a given place in society, a framework for social reproduction even when the government stresses that some new areas of learning need to be developed in particular should the country face its future in good conditions. These are the functions referring to *consent*. They amount to a *utilitarian* understanding of the university: the institution is supposed to meet the urgent needs of the community, social and economic, and as efficiently as possible. The areas of dissent are not really essential in such a context that does not specifically call for the investment in *meaning* or in the *yet untold*, what was traditionally understood as the quest for truth – academia rolling back the frontiers of knowledge. Everywhere, when facing demand – in market or in centrally organised economies – the new century stresses the immediately useful. Re-arranging what is known, questioning the validity of accepted ideas and dominant scientific theory by putting aside the stale and obsolete – thus shaping the memory of the present generation while exploring the unexpected – is often perceived as a luxury, costly and secondary, when not illegitimate. As a result, institutions may simply pay *lip service to old ideals* considered prestigious but of no real use for tomorrow’s development. More dangerously, therefore, instead of training the critical mind of students and staff by doubting all ‘truths’, thus risking the unknown, universities may simply stutter accepted ideas and theories, playing some kind of *parrot role* in which words sound high but stay *void of real sense*: the slow appropriation by mankind of its place in the universe could consequently be at risk. This sounds somewhat of a paradox in an *emerging society of knowledge* where more than half the present population of students is promised to enter jobs that are yet unknown, where science has a constantly shorter half-way life, where old frontiers between generations, between territories, between concepts are supposed to break down to meet the unexpected.

In other words are people to be trained for a job or be educated for new functions? That is an ancient debate that comes back to the front of academic reflections – when our institutions and societies are forgetting the tensions that ground their vitality, thus betting on one aspect of their role only, immediate relevance. The danger is to turn universities into responsive rather than *responsible* institutions, to make them slaves rather than *partners* of the

political and economic leaders of their community, the exponents of the social commitments universities and higher education could take up in order to build society anew.

6. *A new balance for tomorrow*

In January this year, the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AACU) has published a report that turns the matter around by reminding that, at the core of education, innovation or research, universities are there first to train their students, of all ages and venues, for integration in the community they belong to. To do so, academics must put students at the centre of university work. This requires delivering an education that allows each person to develop, work and contribute in society to the best of his/her capacity: in other terms, the project of the university is to *liberate the student's potential* for development and commitment. Such a noble aim, typical of many academic institutions, helps define the essential *learning outcomes* any student should reach.

To build a well-rounded citizen, the universities' ambitions, according to AACU recent report, should be to develop:

- *knowledge* in science, the humanities, arts or technology – a usual view as this does refer to the normal courses and curricula given in traditional academic training;
- *intellectual skills* such as analytical inquiry, critical thinking, written and oral communication, quantitative literacy, information literacy, teamwork and problem-solving; these are tools on the path of knowledge – often considered as implicit spin off of its development;
- *personal and social responsibility* including civic engagement, intercultural competence, ethical reasoning, renewal capacity – to help face the constant adaptation to new lifelong learning needs.
- *integrative learning*, that is the capacity to make sense of varied and seemingly opposing facts and ideas, or the ability for *synthesis*, thus allowing for personal appropriation of individual unique educational experiences – in and outside the school or the university.

The changed perspective consists in placing 'man' (or 'woman') at the centre of the process of personal *and* social change by entrusting him or her social transformation. Society is no longer the first reference but the person, since all collectives could not exist without the individuals. Social needs, indeed, are defined by individuals: is this not the role of politicians when they determine the 'public good', a matter that, in a democratic set up, should be negotiated and debated with people as individuals. The question then is to trust the persons by making them free and responsible, i.e., partners in the development of the community.

Returning to the motto drawn out from the word *universitas*, '*Ad unum vertere*' means focusing around the person rather than society, today still; this humanist heritage of higher education since the Renaissance remains valid as long as societies are made for persons rather than persons for society. And this is not simply philosophy: in the emerging society of knowledge, flexibility, agility and openness are considered key concepts of adaptation and adoption of the new. Flexible, agile and open people should best master knowledge transformations. This is not always clear everywhere and even the European Union tends to be sometimes rather utilitarian when admonishing the universities to meet the Lisbon objectives: be efficient, be effective and make the best of the constraints societies have determined, even if you, institutions, have not indicated what you would need to act best! However, in other areas, like the Bologna process, the same governments are calling the universities to 'put their act together' so that public authorities can negotiate with real partners the conditions of higher education growth and progress!

Becoming 'real partners' has indeed transformed the present organisation of universities in Europe: in general, the State has diminished its micro-management of higher education, thus reinforcing the self-steering ability of institutions. At the same time, while giving them more liberty of initiative and development, national – or regional – authorities asked universities to take greater responsibility of their acts and decisions. Accountability has become a key item of academic management, not only vis-à-vis government but also in relation to private partners in commerce and industry. To face the challenge, universities had to become less cumbersome in decision-making, faster in implementation and more trustworthy in their responsibilities. In other words, they had to present single will and united action when meeting social partners, not an obvious fact considering their traditional *collegial governance* or, more recently, the *co-decision structures* involving all university members, teachers and researchers, students and administrators. Decisions taken that way have nearly as many connotations as there are people to take them; the university, in its relations with outside partners, seems slow and fuzzy, a situation that is strengthened by the diversity of disciplines, students, activities and kinds of institutions. The trend has been in Europe to move toward a corporate organisation of the system of higher education; the Dutch – who had been the first to generalise democratic decision-making in the early 1970s - were also pioneers in new organisational trends: in the mid 1990s, universities in the Netherlands were given total responsibility for the use of state funds – a form of full autonomy – but the rectors, no longer elected by staff and students, have now to be chosen and appointed by a supervisory board –which no academic is part of. That Board – mainly consisting of university stakeholders from the private and the public sectors – is directly responsible to the Ministry for the work done in the university, the leader of which they have appointed. The rector then chooses the deans, who appoint the heads of department, each lower level being responsible to the higher for the quality of its activities. Thus, a university can be considered as one entity that can speak with a single voice, through the rector. The system has been working for nearly ten years now because there is – in the Dutch culture – a long history of consensus building that still permeates organisations in the country; before a decision is taken, pros and cons are discussed with all people concerned – on an advisory basis, however, no longer in terms of open power negotiations. Interestingly enough, there was no student on the street when the new law reduced student representation to a consultative role only. Corporate responsibility has now crept in many other systems, from Austria to Finland, society being represented by public and private partners who have non negligible powers in the definition of the higher education future. This model had already been tested in Britain - and in the US of course. Indeed, social commitment to the university is balanced with strong self-steering in the university. Organised partnership is the name of the game – even if, in some countries, some faculties are fighting a rear-guard battle to keep a legal identity of their own, thus creating a university that is simply a public relations service rendered to powerful deans – each with their own vision of the future.

For the Magna Charta, all this confirms that social commitment is indeed at the centre of university autonomy and academic freedom. Commitment involves the recognition of similar development strategies both *inside* the institution and *outside*, among its partners in society. When the inner and outer will meet - the cross-fertilisation of two liberties built on the tensions between consent and dissent - the university is all the stronger. Therefore it is not surprising that the AACU list of academic mandates dovetails with the functions universities play in society, as analysed at the beginning of this intervention: the acquisition of *knowledge*, indeed, is fed by universities becoming *laboratories for innovative products* and services, a question of well being; that of *intellectual skills* by academic institutions acting as *knowledge organisers*, a matter of meaning; that of *personal and social responsibility* by universities acting as *centres of qualification*, a question of order; and that of *integrative learning* by academic institutions turned into *think tanks* of the future, a matter of discovering the untold,

what was long called the search for truth. That represents the balance between functions and actions the world of tomorrow needs.

Universities may still be the locus and focus of intellectual discovery in the 21st century – doubting knowledge in all its forms, practical, theoretical, social or cultural before taking the risk of actions serving the long term future of individuals as persons, integrated in communities that represent the cells and nodes of the responsible knowledge society all are aspiring to. This is certainly true of Europe; perhaps it echoes the situation here in Venezuela – even if history and geographical circumstances have placed higher education in a somewhat different role in society. My part consisted in holding a European mirror to universities in Latin America, a mirror that can be used for comparisons by the CIES participants: nothing more, nothing less.

Thank you for your attention!