

Mr. Chairman, Professor Anzai

Dear colleagues

Ladies and gentlemen,

Let me say what a great pleasure and an honour it is to participate in this forum and to have the opportunity to share with you some of my reflections on “The role of Universities” at the beginning of this century.

What is needed of Universities in the 21st Century? What is expected of them?

It is really not an easy task to answer those questions, considering the diversity of the audience, representing Universities from all over the world as well as public and private entities, research institutes and major corporations, and including ministers and other governmental dignitaries. Working in different economic and social environments, some of our universities will have to play different roles in order to fulfill the same mission; they will even have to define different missions, or at least prioritize them in different ways.

Quality

The first thing that is asked of a University as of any other institution in the 21st century, at least those represented here, is that they can get a message across in no more than six minutes. Therefore, I will try to complement what has already been said by my colleagues, without dwelling on the obvious: the need to implement quality management systems gauged and evaluated according to internationally recognised standards in all areas of university action. Only if they comply with those standards in the way they organise and govern themselves, in the education and training they provide, in the scientific research and related activities they carry out, will they be able to fulfill their mission, whatever it may be, in a consistent and coherent way. Only then will they be able to maintain their status as cultural, intellectual and ethical institutions of reference and deserve the trust society places in them. Therefore, whatever universities do or turn out to be, quality is constantly required and the quality assessment issue is a sort of invariant of the problem.

Change and evolution

As one of the most important creations of the human spirit, Universities owe their acknowledged longevity to their ability to transform and adjust themselves to the world's evolution. Apart from their core – they have always been a community of teachers and students interested in producing and disseminating knowledge – few similarities may actually be found between mediaeval Universities and contemporary ones.

Sometimes on their own initiative, other times responding to external stimuli of a more or less forceful nature; always, or nearly always, precariously balanced between autonomous reflection and heteronomy; caught, in a word, between proactive and reactive forces, present-day Universities have inscribed change on their genetic code, because those that proved unable to do so have disappeared by a process of natural selection. Being aware that this selective mechanism will never stop is the best remedy against the temptation to lower our guard and rest upon the situations we take for granted, which, as we all know, are an illusion.

Change is thus a permanent ingredient of University life and a criterion for preserving its autonomy. But mere awareness and stipulations alone will not bring about its materialisation. Time and circumstance have to be taken into account; the prognosis needs to be correct; the users have to be known and the agents mobilised; adequate instruments have to be chosen. In a nutshell: the right choices have to be made so that laws, deliberations and orders may be converted into actual reforms. The second feature expected of a 21st century University is the ability to find the significance of permanent change, day in, day out.

Diversity

The ability to change ensures adaptability to the conditions of the economic and social environment, at each time and place, and has led to the diversity of the current forms of organisation. Based on one formula with two varieties, the Universities of Bologna and Sorbonne, which in turn were built upon previous experiences such as those of ancient Greece and Egypt, are believed to have shaped the hundred thousand universities now in

existence across the world, different from one another in the way they are organised and governed, as well as in the definition and materialisation of their missions. This diversity constitutes a wealth that allows for the adoption of different survival strategies, like diverse experiments conducted in actual time, which increase the probability of finding the right answers for each time and circumstance.

What is expected is that the constant search for quality and management efficiency may be carried out without detriment to the safeguarding of a reasonable degree of diversity. Between two institutions of equivalent quality, it is desirable that they may preserve their differences as much as possible.

Ruling out no options

When making decisions, what sometimes seems to be appealing in the short term may prove disastrous in the medium and long term. However, even long-haul journeys need their first steps. In times of uncertainty, the best choice is often not the one that maximises the immediate result, but the one that minimises the risk of leaving out options. Or, as P. Kitcher chooses to say, the one that reduces the phenomenon to as few ultimates as possible.

Commitment to society

In an open society, only institutions acknowledged as useful will survive. Depending on specific circumstances, it is up to each University to define its mission in a way that may prove of value to society and recognised as such. The time when all Universities could perform in the same fashion belongs to the past. Those that try to address the needs of a global society will follow autonomous and varied paths. The ones that remain focused on local reality will find their own specificity in that connection. As a result, the mission of each University tends to be more and more diverse and its definition a moment of high strategic relevance. This fact will make it harder for institutions to be evaluated and compared and crucially calls for the implementation of regulation systems that will prevent or penalise remissness and dishonesty.

Autonomy

Universities will have to deal with their search of a permanent commitment to society without losing their identity, their autonomy and their intellectual independence. Universities that merely limit themselves to service the business and industry community do themselves a disservice. Although we can accept, at least to a certain extent, the concept of market-driven research, we should avoid that of market-driven universities.

Universities are the bedrock of our educational and intellectual systems and will have to remain so in the 21st Century.

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