

# CHAPTER 3

## The Task of Institutions of Higher Education in the New Europe

*Paolo Blasi*

**I**n the next three years, 11 European countries will abandon their national currencies forever to adopt a common monetary unit, the euro. In the following years, the other four countries of the European Union will join the first 11 and become members of the "Euroclub."

Apart from the political and economic significance of the new monetary course, it is impossible to overrate the symbolic impact of the operation. Giving up their own national currencies—the historical symbol of national unity in recent times—citizens of individual states deprive themselves of a familiar instrument of daily life used by everybody in all kinds of transactions. Why have Europeans faced hardships and financial restrictions to achieve this goal? I believe that the establishing of an authentic European Union has been largely considered a priority, particularly in this age of change and instability, a situation that gives all political and economic problems a global dimension. In this perspective, the drive toward unity has prevailed. In my opinion, this happened because national monetary unity cannot any longer be identified as a cultural value essential to the identity of the citizens of a European nation. The loss of one's national currency is not felt as a *vulnus* to one's cultural identity if seen in the perspective of the defense and advancement of more significant common European values.

The situation of the various national systems—and particularly of institutions of higher learning, such as universities—is utterly different. Those institutions have evolved in different ways throughout the centuries and have

made a substantial contribution to the diversity of the cultural traditions of the various states and regions of Europe.

The richness of this diversity must obviously be preserved—a view that is largely shared in Europe. The coexistence of different traditions and cultural values is the basis of that spirit of tolerance that is the life and soul of Europeans in their internal and external relations.

As to universities, three different systems can be, broadly speaking, identified in Europe: the Anglo-Saxon system, the French-Spanish system, and the German-Italian system. In the framework of each system, individual universities coexist with their own peculiarities. Yet some general views and values are common to all European universities.

A survey among the members of the Association of European Universities on *The European Universities in 2010* (1997) shows that the following main values are shared throughout Europe:

- Freedom of research and teaching must be the fundamental principle of university life.
- Research and teaching must remain inseparable at all levels of university education.
- The contribution of the university to the “sustainable development of society” will become the most important activity of such an institution.
- National governments should accept as much responsibility in higher education in the year 2010 as they do at present.

All this can be referred to the very origin of European universities. As a matter of fact, universities were created at the beginning of the second millennium inside Europe as transnational institutions with the purpose of developing a new comprehensive culture, adequate to the needs and problems of the new growing cities and consequently to the new economic activities and the new social interaction.

The university—bound *ad unum vertere*—combined the different aspects of human knowledge connecting culture and professional training in an all-embracing unitary Christian view of the human being. Later, the needs of the new philosophy of learning in the various specific fields of knowledge gradually brought about the differentiation of learning and the development of individual methodologies. Thus, Machiavelli maintained that the study of politics should be separated from the study of ethics. Later still, Galileo stated that the laws that rule the world of nature should be identified by an experimental method rather than by philosophical and theological arguments.

The division of learning into various branches and the application of the experimental method fostered, on the other side, the growth of science and technology to such an extent that humans, like so many new Promethei, are

induced to the delusion of solving all problems through scientific progress. This delusion marked the positivist fad of the end of the last century and the first years after 1900.

Yet scientists themselves were the first to realize that science has its own limits. The theory of relativity in the first decades of this century represented a new approach to the conception of science. In the same way, artists will try to derive from the primitive world of Africa new inspirations that will find a common ground with the new stimuli created by the world of science.

Today, at the end of a century and a millennium, the European *Erlebnis* and the experience of the West in general are characterized by a widespread mistrust of science, and by a negative view shared by a significant sector of the young generation as to its applications. Such an attitude is obviously a consequence of the improper use of nuclear energy and bio-engineering—not to mention the dangerous impact on the natural environment of uncontrolled technological development. Humanity, and young people in particular, is now striving to recover stable values as points of reference. The need of a newly found cultural unity, rooted in the very nature of the human being, is deeply felt as a drive toward motivations of self-esteem and appreciation—a necessary condition for loving your neighbors as yourself.

The recent dramatic success of the film *Titanic*, particularly with the young generation, is, in my opinion, due to the authentic values that it represents. These values include the fragility of human technology in relation to the unpredictable forces of nature and, as a counterpart, the greatness of sentiments, of being in love, something of which humans are fully capable, something that can overcome not only the brutal violence of nature but also social and economic conditioning that can cause alienation in human beings. At the same time, young people today have to face a world subject to dramatic changes, a world where our know-how doubles every five years, where the very web of social structure is modified continuously, where stable jobs are on the wane, and where work conditions and professional abilities are renewed every day.

In past centuries, social change was slow and beyond the lifespan of any social being; an individual could perceive only a part of the process. Today evolving trends are daily modified in such a way that young people will necessarily face most of them during their lives. Young people must now become acquainted with the quicksand of an uncertain world, characterized by life conditions that are unlikely to last for long. Such being the case, their education and training, and, substantially, their cultural background, must be different from ours and adequate to the task. They will have to face new social problems, and above all they must be aware that individual behavior is relevant for everybody else. Globalization and the expanding progress of communication implies that each of us, with our behavior and our thoughts,

can have an influence, direct or indirect, on other people everywhere in the world, almost in real time and without our even being totally aware of the process. All this calls for a deep renewal of education and training at the family, school, and social levels.

Above all, a European citizen involved in this new global context should be educated to a new concept of freedom. This freedom is not the liberty of doing anything one is willing to do, but freedom conceived as the ability of controlling one's behavior in view of the social significance it may eventually have. Last March, Dr. Benjamin Spock died. He was the guru of the *laissez-faire* educational philosophy as the right way of encouraging the expression of one's creativity. If this, in principle, were somehow justified as an attempt to break the reality of an excessive formal rigidity, there is no doubt that the consequences would be disastrous, as they have been wherever his principles have been adopted in American and European society.

The principle that the consent of the new generation is to be obtained at any possible cost, added to the *laissez-faire* philosophy, has been mischievous. Educators, both teachers and parents, have lost any sense of responsibility, inducing among young people the delusion of grandeur and omnipotence, and the incapacity for self-control.

Once forced to face the challenge and the hardships of life, a few of them give in and seek for security in drug addiction, or look for an identity in unconventional attire and attitudes; but they remain incapable of self-esteem and appreciation and of interacting with others. Thus, they will never become members of a well-ordered society and, even less, be equipped with the stamina to face a context full of uncertainties and continuous change.

I am aware that my analysis is oversimplified, more like a brief than a report. Yet I do believe that these reflections should go in parallel with the social and economic counterpart, if we are to define the aims and to plan the organization of universities so as to be in the position of confronting successfully the challenge of the coming century.

Everybody agrees that the most precious resource in the "society of knowledge" is the human being as such, the "producer" of knowledge, and, in the majority of cases, the processor, user, and communicator of knowledge. Humans are also capable of interpreting and integrating knowledge to transform it into patterns of behavior, decisions, and initiatives. As Malcolm Webb (1999), general manager for Human Resources of PetroFina SA of Belgium, said in a speech given at the Palermo Conference of the Association of European Universities,

In order to survive and grow in the knowledge society, we need the help of well-rounded individuals with strong interpersonal skills who are not looking for a regimented or a controlled environment but are capable of living with uncertainty, keen to try to find solutions to complex problems

and committed to lifelong learning....[Industries] of course need people who are strong professionals in their particular domains. However, a technical expert who is insensitive to others, who cannot work in a team, and who will not share his or her knowledge is more of a hindrance than a help in modern industry.

Webb (1999) also identified the following “auxiliary skills” beyond academic achievement that today’s graduates must have to be successful in their chosen professions:

- strong oral and written communication skills
- a basic understanding of mathematics and science
- good information technologies skills
- critical thinking ability
- an appreciation of the need for continuous learning
- the ability to work in teams
- creativity and initiative
- self-discipline, flexibility, and the ability to undertake sustained hard work
- an enjoyment of healthy competition
- cultural sensitivity and international awareness
- a result-oriented outlook and the ability to take decisions

Universities should plan their educational activities in such a way as to supersede the conventional tuition schemes once used to built up curricula and give priority instead to the reinforcement and development of the above-mentioned “auxiliary skills.” Educational and academic curricula at all levels must take into consideration the importance of developing in the students such abilities and skills. Consequently, the organization and the procedures of the learning process in primary and secondary schools must be modified so as to substantially improve the basic background of college education. Therefore, it will be necessary to aim at a global methodological and critical training that may preserve its validity in the course of time, and be characterized by a philosophy that makes it the foundation of stints of specific, many-sided professional training.

How to achieve these aims? There is no doubt that conventional teaching is inadequate and that curricular restraints must be eliminated, and that interaction between student and teacher must take a new and less academic dimension. It should be taken for granted that auxiliary skills must develop at the same time between students and teachers. This implies that the prospective university teacher must be capable not only of doing research but of interacting satisfactorily with his or her students. A more active personal interaction between students and teachers requires adequate structures and a substantial staff increase if we think it necessary (as I do) to involve in higher

education more and more young people. Today the European average is 40 percent of the age group.

All this means we must face the problem of financial resources and the priority of options by European governments and the European Union itself. These resources could be found by limiting agricultural investments as well as expenditures for the various national health systems. In fact, a new agricultural policy aimed at harmonizing the price of agricultural products to the standards of the world market, and at the same time prepared to give adequate recognition to the role of European agriculture for the safeguarding of the environment, could make reasonable resources available to finance a continuing system of higher education.

Those individuals who are endowed with a higher cultural level cost much less to national systems because they make better use of prevention and know-how to take advantage of what the public health facilities can offer. Further resources for education and training could thus be found. I am convinced that only a consistent and constant intervention by the governments could develop a university system of quality preserving the variety of the tuition modules and cultural identity, and at the same time offsetting the gap between the best universities and the less privileged ones. This is necessary if we want to encourage the balance of the cultural level and involve all social classes in higher education as it is happening in Europe right now. I also support the principle that students must share the cost of university education. In Italy today, they pay about 20 percent of the sums allocated by the government. This has a positive effect on students because it makes them aware of the cost of education and the value of activities and services offered by the university.

Another way of developing the students' auxiliary skills is experimentation with 'job activities inside the university, particularly if consistent with the careers they have chosen.

Universities must identify ways and means to foster this policy by involving an increasing number of students; by creating connections with the industrial, commercial, and agricultural world, as well as with society at large; by encouraging the employment of students for various jobs inside the university; and by ignoring the hostility of trade unions. Universities should become ever more open to all levels of society. In today's world, lifelong learning is a necessity. Universities are asked to play an extended and influential role in the education chain by greatly extending the work they undertake in the area of adult and continuing education; this extension is necessary for their own as well as for Europe's sake!

To satisfy the needs of continuing education, we must devise more flexible teaching structures and strategies. We can still have stable tuition facilities, like faculties and departments, but virtual and ad hoc structures should also be temporarily created to ensure that specific projects are realized. In the Euro-

pean system, characterized by a variety of options and decidedly diversified, only a large autonomy in organization, teaching, and finance can give an adequate answer to the above-mentioned problems. Thus, all European universities share the assumption that higher education should enjoy complete autonomy from the government and its rules, as well from the extramural world, including economic interests.

Yet the university cannot forget its own main task of being, above all, the natural cradle of spontaneous research, of cultural creativity, and of the transmission of learning that is not dependent on specific professional training. Students who ask the university to help them develop their intellectual callings still exist, and they should not be disappointed. They deserve particular attention because they may become our future colleagues.

The need to make a quality academic education available for a large number of students requires not only adequate resources but also high standards of research. Hence the choice of fields where a scientist may excel. Likewise, universities will find an identity in their specific task to amalgamate a global variety of knowledge and know-how.

Obviously, an academic institution excelling in all possible fields will never exist. Cooperation with other similar institutions must be encouraged so that networks may be created to share know-how and research projects in such a way as to put at the disposal of students learning facilities and qualified curricula. All this is possible and is happening already in Europe, where competition does exist, but without the extremes of U.S. academic life.

All this requires an internal organization of universities capable of giving an adequate answer to immediate problems while also being efficient and up to standards. Such an organization should guarantee academic freedom and should involve teachers and researchers in its various projects; it should also make proper use of its representative collegiate bodies.

We are facing a difficult but important challenge—how to reconcile the necessity of a sturdy individual leadership and the equally fundamental cooperation of collegiate bodies. The solutions being devised in Europe are various. It may be appropriate to take the initiative for an exchange of information that may favor “the best practice” and make it widely accepted, without interfering with the diversity of local situations and traditions and consequently with possible individual solutions.

## REFERENCES

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