

The Knowledge Triangle Shaping the Future of Europe

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Contribution by Ligia Deca – ESU Chairperson

Distinguished hosts,

Dear guests,

Dear fellow students,

I am indeed honoured to be here on behalf of the 11 million European students that our 47 members – National Unions of Students – represent. I would like to begin by thanking the Swedish Presidency for inviting the European Students' Union and for emphasizing the link between higher education and research as an essential drive for innovation.

After listening to a series of diverse presentations, it would seem to me that the educational aspect of the debate was somehow considered to be self-evident and tended to get out of the content of most interventions, leaving room in the spotlight only for research and innovation, although there is a clear focus of the Swedish Presidency on developing the role of education in a fully functional knowledge triangle. More – we seemed, at some point, to make the case for a visionary and almost messianic leadership that would increase the level of European innovation to unseen heights. But I can't help to ask, as a member of the academic community, where is the focus on the primary innovators – students, professors, researchers? My short contribution of today will try to fill in a part of the blank spots and refer to 5 main themes:

1. Participative democracy the knowledge triangle
2. The link between higher education and research as the basis for innovation
3. Access to the knowledge triangle
4. Student centered learning

5. Entrepreneurial skills vs. entrepreneurial universities in the context of academic values

Participative democracy in the knowledge triangle

We have said many times that the knowledge triangle is not easy to digest as a concept and it's even harder to operationalise. A reform is successful when the ones affected by it are convinced by its necessity and benefits. In this case, academic communities would have to be convinced as a whole to be able to really mainstream innovative approaches in HE and research. Moreover, decisions related to how exactly we change the way in which a university functions have to be taken at least with the same degree of participative democracy as the other decisions in the academia. This means inclusion of students and academic staff including researchers in the strategy building and its implementation, not just being treated as the "people to be thrown in the new institutional settings" that can seem perfect on paper, but won't work on the ground due to academic community resistance. So, yes – students have a unique way of seeing fresh approaches and the best ways of fostering creativity – and hence – they should be empowered to do so, regardless of the cycle they are enrolled in: be it first, second or third cycle.

The link between higher education and research as the basis for innovation

When discussing research, it is common sense that education should be strongly linked to research and this pair should generate innovation. All students should learn to do research and the best way to learn to research is by doing it. A large share of today's students won't become researchers and this is not a huge problem in itself. It is a problem in some countries where only an insignificant share of the students becomes researchers. Research is necessary for economic growth and progression of society as a whole, which makes it essential to ensure that students feel attracted to this field. I am convinced that there is only one way to make sure that students see the fascinating work of scientific research: teaching through research. In a knowledge-based society, research has to become a central part of education and although there are some good examples, this is

not the case in many institutions at this moment. Instead we see research and education been separated in more and more Higher Education Systems. Specialisation and differentiation are leading to separate research centres and teaching-based institutions. Differentiation between institutions can also be in the advantage of students, when it means diversifying the alternatives for students. Instead it is in many cases understood as a separation between teaching and research while it's essential to not break the link between the 2 concepts. This bond is fundamental for the future of the academia. Without students that have learned to research we won't have researchers in the future and without researchers we don't have any progress and material to teach to the students. Although the link between higher education and research has been emphasized by ministers in a number of Bologna Process communiqués, it seems like concrete work is lacking on the matter, as we still don't have a proposed working structure within the Bologna Follow Up Group on this topic.

Access to the knowledge triangle and student centered learning

And so I am back to my intervention from yesterday. How do we ensure societal progress through research and innovation? Certainly not by focusing exclusively on selecting the best of the best from the already restricted pool of student that we have. Tapping into the human potential means enabling young and adult citizens to access higher education, a higher education that is naturally intertwined with research. General support for access, progress and completion of higher education is not getting better, except for very targeted funds for research, that are only accessible to those who manage to convince with their research plan or results. And all this in a context of lack of real connection between HE and research in the first and second cycle in many national systems and institutions in Europe. So, if we are to fulfill the goals that are already outlined with regard to the knowledge triangle, we mustn't lose focus of the essential support needed for students to reach their full potential, regardless of the socio-economic context.

A very specific problem is the enormous difference in status of doctoral students that is depending on their contractual relationship with the institution and national support systems. If we are to foster a European approach on research

and innovation we can't have doctoral students clustered in "social classes" and therefore support should be provided equally, regardless of the employment status, discipline, country, background etc.

Student centered learning

Innovation comes with letting your mind get out of the box. And this can hardly be achieved with HE systems that are based on the mere transmission of already chewed concepts and the manifested expectation to reproduce them to the letter. If we are to capture the innovation light from each individual, we need to empower them to develop a unique and personal academic path. The issue of student-centred education is important in achieving progress in most areas. For example, there can be no progress on employability unless the student that will eventually seek employment is given greater control over his or her educational achievements. I wish we would have spent more time during this event discussing how to define student centred learning, with a special focus on curricula reform and change of the teaching/ fostering learning methods. Students and teachers have already embarked, through a European Commission funded project jointly managed by the European Students' Union and Education International, in shedding some light on the dark side of the moon and raising the good practices existing at institutional levels to the European policy making level.

Entrepreneurial skills vs. entrepreneurial universities in the context of academic values

We have heard a lot in the past days about entrepreneurial universities, strong and visionary leadership and moving to action, as time does not wait for long debaters. But behind the effective rhetorics lies a truth that is hardly told: entrepreneurial universities tend to have a much more marketised approach to higher education, with much less involvement of the academic community in its running and hence less ownership over its development. The European Students' Union strongly agrees with the need for developing skills for tackling global challenges and this certainly includes entrepreneurship – empowering the graduates – after they have been empowered as students through student centered learning. But is it really necessary to suddenly shift towards a leadership

model for universities that in many cases meant managing an educational institution as you would a company? In conclusion, we all know that the European Higher Education Area firmly stands upon a set of values and principles that make it unique and highly attractive in the global context. Among them: higher education as a public good, stakeholders' involvement and student participation as equal partners, institutional autonomy in a climate of accountability; academic freedom and respect for personal development beyond the immediate market needs. In this context, we would argue for a careful consideration of the governance model needed to project the knowledge triangle in institutional realities, but without losing identity and affecting the mission of higher education and its principle basis.

Thank you for your attention!