

Udine, Italy, 29th and 30th June 2017



Welcome Address

ROLF TARRACH

President, EUA - European University Association

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“Rettore Magnifico dell’Università di Udine, io sono molto contento di essere qui a Udine, a casa vostra”.

Rectors, Presidents, Vice-Chancellors, authorities, friends, ladies and gentlemen, it is my pleasure to be here with you today, it is my pleasure to be here in Italy.

Italy is a very special country for me, what I mean is Italy is a special country for all of us because we come from Academia, and this is the country where universities were first created and developed; as you know banks too and many, many other things started in Italy. So from that point of view, I would say that Italy is probably the most European country of all. My field is physics, as you know, so as a physicist, it is of course a special privilege to be here because this is also the country of Galileo and of Torricelli, the country of Majorana, Fermi, Rubbia and so on. And although I may be slowly forgetting my physics, I can’t forget that Italy’s tradition in this subject is remarkable. At a more personal level, this is a country where people have a natural elegance and sublime comity which I also admire a lot.

Yesterday we heard from the President of Friuli Venezia Giulia who mentioned that the University of Trieste and the Region are bidding to host the EuroScience Open Forum 2020, and also yesterday the interviews with the two cities on the shortlist to host this event took place. I could not be present at the interviews because I was here and that is Stefano Paleari’s fault... What I mean is that about one year ago, he told me to make a note in my agenda that I have to be in Udine these two days; I wrote it down and when they told me that I had to be in Salzburg or Brussels for the interviews, I replied “No, no, no, Stefano told me I had to be in Udine” and so here I am in Udine. In any case, I hope that Trieste will be successful in its bid and of course that will also be very positive for you.

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Now, although Stefano has mentioned that several of the members of the board are here as well as the Secretary General, let me tell you a little bit about the European University Association. It is a large association with some eight hundred members of which almost sixty are Italian universities. If I welcome you here on behalf of the European University Association, in a certain sense you are welcoming yourselves, if you are members of the association. This must be one of the countries with the largest number of universities in Europe, which demonstrates the European spirit of Italian universities.

The association has a dual structure: there is a Council representing the universities which come from 47 different countries, a number which therefore goes well beyond that of the European Union, and then there is a further Council whose members are the Rectors' Conferences (you have CRUI as the member of this Council), which come from 33 or 34 countries. This dual structure has to do with the origin of the association which is in fact a merger of two previous associations; one of them was based in Brussels and the other in Geneva, which is why we still have meetings both in Brussels and in Geneva.

The association provides many services to its members: we have a research policy group, a council for doctoral education, we regularly publish a report about autonomy, the Autonomy Scorecard, in fact the last one was published just recently, and so on. We offer many kinds of services to specific universities, our aim is to compare, to learn from each other, and of course we produce a great deal of information. There is a series called TRENDS which is very popular, it describes the trends in the European University system; we meet with the Council three times a year and of course it is extremely interesting for the members of the Council to hear from other countries, to hear about the problems of others and their solutions. I am sure we can do more, but that is what we are doing right now.

Now, to finish, I would just like to say a few words about the subject we are discussing here, education for all. I'm not sure whether one of the questions which always comes up concerning this subject has been discussed or not, but allow me to mention it: it is clear to us that education for all is a way of looking ahead, of making sure that the future for young people is a bright one, that they are well-prepared to deal with complex situations in twenty years' time. We have no doubts about that; the question is, of course, that it has to be a good education, the right education, which is difficult because nobody knows what the world will be like twenty years from now, we simply don't have a clue.

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Thus, for me the question is ‘why are we not good at convincing the politicians who have the power to decide that this is really something they should put more resources, more force and pressure into?’ Why is it that the citizens, the politicians and all those who have the power to decide say ‘yes, education for all is important’, but when it comes to priorities, when we see what the priorities of new governments are, very seldom this is really one of them? Sometimes there are exceptions: I remember that in Portugal at one point they decided to make the reform of their higher education system a top priority and they succeeded. But these are exceptions, what I mean is that usually they give the issue a lot of lip service, which is of course very important, but my question remains: why are we not very good at convincing them?

Maybe because we are not good enough at understanding their points of view, maybe we should listen a little more to what they are saying. Of course they have many other things to deal with, I mean they have many other priorities: they have to build highways, they have to take care of, I don’t know, Alitalia perhaps, or other problems. So for them it might be politically difficult, but nevertheless maybe we should listen to them a bit more and try to understand their way of reasoning a bit better, and then maybe we will know how to convince them.

And with this I would like to finish, I know it’s a rather pessimistic note but I would like to finish with a sentence by Gramsci which you of course know: “Contro il pessimismo della ragione, l’ottimismo della volontà”.

Thank you very much, have a really nice day.