

# THE KEY ROLE OF UNIVERSITIES IN A KNOWLEDGE DRIVEN SOCIETY

Second opening speech by prof. Luc Weber<sup>1</sup>,  
on the occasion of the ceremony of presentation of the White Book  
of the University of Catalonia  
Barcelona, 12 June 2008

Ministers, colleagues, ladies and gentlemen, dear friends

It is a great honor and privilege for me to address such a distinguished assembly on the occasion of the presentation of the White Book of the University of Catalonia. Although I – unfortunately – speak neither Catalan, nor Spanish, I somehow feel at home in Catalonia. One of the reasons is that I have had the privilege of working, on the European scene, with three past and present Rectors of Catalan Universities.

In the short time available, I want to share with you a few thoughts on the key role of universities in a knowledge driven society.

To begin with, I want to stress that universities are not spared the profound transformations that are taking place in the world. In fact, universities contribute significantly to these changes, although too many governments and institutions have not fully realized that higher education and research policies, as well as the institutions' strategies and governance, have to be improved to make sure that Universities can continue to play the leading role expected of them.

The changes that are taking place, particularly since the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, have their origin in two interdependent engines of change:

- A Globalization, which is fueled by the liberalization of trade, the deregulation of most of the centrally planned economies and the emergence of new super economic powers, mainly in Asia,
- B Scientific and technological progress, notably in information and telecommunication technologies, as well as in the life and material sciences.

Today we are living in a global knowledge driven society where:

- distance is no longer a constraint
- information is global, immediate and increasingly participative,
- interdependence has dramatically increased
- and innovation is increasingly driven by a collective effort.

Obviously, these trends impact on higher education institutions. These institutions are not only forced to adapt in order to survive, but they are also expected to contribute

- to economic and social innovations,
- to a better society and
- to train the people needed by the new economy.

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Higher education institutions are also challenged by the changes affecting the system itself. Let us mention a few:

- the increased competition for talent (teachers and students) within Europe and Worldwide,
- the increasing cost of research, as well as of training master's and PhD students,
- the over-regulation and under-funding of Higher education institutions by the State,
- the difficulty for institutions in making changes,
- the Bologna process.

However, for me, the biggest threat for Europe and European universities comes from Asia. Some countries in Asia have understood that, in order to develop more rapidly and to become a super economic power, they must develop a knowledge based economy, in parallel with industrial activity based on cheap labour. They count therefore heavily on universities to train the brains they need and to do the research.

This means that the relative standard of living of Europe will increasingly suffer if Europe is unable

- to increase the public and private share of GDP allocated to higher education and research,
- to improve the efficiency of the system as a whole, as well as the governance and leadership of higher education institutions.

However, there are good reasons to remain reasonably optimistic thanks to a few "wake-up calls" and to strong initiatives at European, national and institutional levels.

- The well known Lisbon 2000 and Barcelona 2002 initiatives to promote the European Research Area, which owe a lot to professor and Minister José Mariano Gago,
- The creation of the European Research Council aimed at financing fundamental research on a competitive basis at the European Union level,
- The pan-European Bologna process, to promote the mobility of students within Europe and to make the European higher education system more easily transparent, and therefore accessible, to non-European students,
- The 2003 communication of the EU Commission "The Role of Universities in the Europe of Knowledge",
- A few National initiatives, in particular the German "Excellence initiative", which offers special financial support to nine so-called "elite" universities, as well as to high quality research clusters and doctorate colleges.
- And finally, at the institutional level,
  - the strengthening of institutions' governance and leadership
  - and the decision by several institutions to merge.

Even if there are very good institutions in Europe and more and more in Asia, it is nonetheless relevant to search for guidance by identifying the success factors of American universities, in particular research intensive ones, as well as many liberal arts and other teaching colleges.

- They attract the most talented students, and avoid, thanks to a selection process at entry, being overwhelmed by too many students who are not fit to study in their institution,
- They recruit their senior professors worldwide through a competitive process and pay great attention to the human development of junior professors,

- They enjoy a governance and leadership system allowing them to behave strategically and to fix priorities and “posteriorities”,
- Their internal organization minimizes the inevitable walls between subdivisions, which is essential for interdisciplinary teaching and research, source of innovation,
- They are student-centered and they privilege learning to teaching more than European universities,
- They are well financed thanks to substantial student fees, which are, at the same time, promoting efficiency, without necessarily creating financial barriers to entry thanks to a very developed loan and grant system. They benefit also from substantial donations from alumni and other donors,
- They attach great importance to the branding of their name, which is a factor of attraction for students, professors and sponsors,
- They collaborate with business and the State on research projects and are more permeable to in and out movements by staff,
- They combine curiosity driven research and project research,
- Many liberal arts and teaching colleges offer a high training quality at undergraduate level,
- Last but not least, American universities, private not for profit and many public ones, are very autonomous, which means that they are free to choose their students, their staff, their teaching and research programs, their organization and their leaders. However, they make a great effort to be accountable to their stakeholders, the State, business, students and donors.

I want also to stress that institutional autonomy, coupled with accountability, is a necessary, but not sufficient condition to exploit the whole potential of an institution. University autonomy has imposed itself as one of the most important success factors for universities for at least two reasons:

- First, the subsidiary principle according to which universities know, in principle better than anyone else, what is best to fulfill their mission,
- Second, frequent State interventions create a vicious circle as it affects the staff willingness to take initiatives, which calls for more intervention.

If we compare world class Asian Universities with American Universities, we observe that the autonomy of the former is rather restricted as they are an important tool for the implementation of the economic growth policy of the government. However, this weakness is largely compensated by very generous public founding.

I shall now conclude with a last remark directly related to your timely initiative developed in the “Llibre Blanc de la Universitat de Catalunya”. Considering both the great potential of the region and of the eight universities composing the Association of Catalonian public universities, the objectives seem to me quite pertinent. I shall just underline two of them,

- First, the Association is right to work on promoting the awareness of the public and of political authorities that higher education and research are the key to the development of the knowledge society. Indeed, knowledge society is for Catalonia, as for Europe, the single possible strategy to continue to prosper,
- Second, the Association is well advised to work on the higher education system. Whatever the quality of each institution taken separately and whatever their capacity for change, setting-up a dynamic network of Catalan universities in order to promote better coordination and cooperation between them is the best solution for fostering a collective output greater than the sum of the individual outputs. The competition at world level is

strong enough to compensate for the decrease of competitive pressures at regional level consecutive to better coordination and cooperation.

In the light of past experience in my region, the French speaking part of Switzerland, I encourage each institution to work seriously on this initiative. This is – I am convinced - the way to go to help Catalonia becoming a knowledge economy as successful as the London or Cambridge areas, Bavaria, Bad Wurttemberg, Zurich or the lake of Geneva region. I wish you all great success in this endeavor.

Thank you for your attention and for the invitation.

LW, 11.06.08, rev. 16.06.2008