

MODERNISING UNIVERSITIES IN EUROPE

Plenary 1 - A vision for the modernisation of universities in Europe

Welcome remarks: António Rendas

Dear Minister of Science, Technology and Higher Education

Dear EU Commissioners for Science and Research and for Education,
Training, Culture and Youth

Dear Secretary of State of Science, Technology and Higher Education

Dear President of the Council of Rectors of the Portuguese Universities

Distinguished guests, leaders from prestigious european organisations of
higher education and science

Distinguished guests, leaders from european institutions of excellence in
higher education, technology and research

Dear participants

The Portuguese Presidency of the European Union allowed for the development of important initiatives in multiple areas aiming to have a longterm effect on the development of our continent.

I sincerely believe that this meeting is part of this movement.

Universities have always been central partners in european evolution, in good and in bad times!

Why is there now a need to modernise universities in Europe?

My "gut feeling", and I am not original, is because Europe is modernising itself in order to compete in a global world and needs highly qualified human resources to do so.

But my second thought comes in the form of a question: how are the universities perceiving this need?

In the XIIth century the university (studium) was the third power, after the sacerdotium and the imperium. During that period, latin allowed for the creation of the first european area of education and reinforced the power of the church, represented by the Pope, over the lords of the land. This led in turn to the reinforcement of the power of local universities under the protection of the crown. For example, the portuguese King Afonso V decided, in 1440, that all the portuguese with foreign degrees had to pay 20 crowns to the University of Coimbra, the only higher education existent, and forced them to take the last ranks when applying for a job as civil servants.

The relations between universities and society have gone a long way since those times but many questions still need to be clarified particularly since the process has been dynamic on both sides, even since medieval times. This is why the acceptance of external forces pressing for change is not consensual in the university as a whole, even in the twenty first century.

One of the main question relates to the fact that there is no single model of european university.

However, some of the titles of the sessions of this meeting refer to concepts that should contibute to unite universities in Europe: funding, autonomy, accountability, research and internasionalisation.

Modernising means, amongst other things, applying these concepts to the governance of european universities and it is my opinion that there is an urgent need for this to happen, despite the european diversity of nations and cultures.

Before closing I want to pay tribute to the enormous effort that has been made, in the last decades, to develop what I call "The European Environment for Research and Higher Education" and since some of the key players of the process are here today I am anxious, as I am sure you all are, to listen to them.

It is indeed a great honour to host this debate under the roof of the Universidade Nova de Lisboa and I thank the Minister for that decision.

Portuguese Universities will change their governance model in the next few months and I believe that this change will make them more modern and for that reason more european.

But modernising universities in Europe will also depend on the support from european policies coming both from the member states and from the commission, trusting universities and their capacity to change.

It is our role to build this trust based on these new grounds, I am sure that the european citizens will be grateful.