



FUTURE EDUCATION

ROME 2017

PROCEEDINGS

*2nd International
Conference
on Future Education*

**Effective Learning in
an Age of Increasing
Speed, Complexity and
Uncertainty**

Co-Organizer:



Collaborators:



Rome, Italy | November 16-18, 2017

The European University in Crisis: A Vision From Spain

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1. Some Preliminary Considerations

1.1. Education and University

Education, from the Latin 'educatio', as defined by The Royal Academy of the Spanish Language, is the action and effect of educating, as embodied by the definition "instruction by means of teaching action". We have devoted our life to education in the spirit of providing guidance and direction to our students, to develop or make perfect their intellectual and moral faculties by means of precepts, exercises and examples. This is an arduous and at times desperate task, especially when students are educated in the University where they arrive with a ready conformed mind, with habits already acquired and with a series of mental prejudices already determined.

Those of us who profess a teaching vocation, assume in this way our commitment to the world, to the society we serve and live in. And this task, impassive and always unfinished, necessarily implies a certain distance from the world. Hence the traditional absorption of the teacher whose intellect often stays in a dimension is not yet reached by the disciple. This also results in a paradox that the task of educating, in spite of always being an exercise, requires for its preparation a certain amount of solitude, quiet work, inspiration, and withdrawal from worldly distraction and of the concupiscence of the senses. The same applies to study and in today's world so enraptured and full of distractions and stimuli, the task of the educator is more difficult, requires more capacity for abstraction, and schools need less superficial teachers, preferably an environment isolated from the disorder that rules everywhere.

University education carries with it an implication of maintaining a certain distance in order to both teach and learn. It is for this reason that true education is in its essence an enigma to utilitarianism. Traditionally, the University was understood as a community of free men seeking truth. A definition that today still seems valid and adjusted to the essence of what a university is. As truth seekers, we university people will be determined to find it, regardless of whether the truth found is useful or pleasant to the majority or whether it is to the liking of the powerful. Properly understood, university autonomy (in its applications to the institution and also in its applications to the members of the university community and especially to lecturers) is precisely the guarantee of that freedom without which any educational endeavour will be mediated, and will remain emptied of its real content and reduced to one of its dimensions, perhaps the simplest or most insubstantial.

Today we see with sadness how the University has lost much of that freedom due to the bureaucrats and governments, but not all faults of our degradation fall on the external operators of the University. The dangerous conception that the University should be useful in transmitting only the knowledge and skills necessary for employability has also spread among us. We do not doubt that the improvement of the professional and job prospects of our graduates is very important. It is what society demands from us and therefore, we will have to adequately attend to that need. But limiting the essence of the University to that end, valuing exclusively the creation and dissemination of that useful knowledge for the future employment of the student, is in our opinion a gross error of unforeseeable consequences but intuitively I can say that the consequences will be highly negative. The University must certainly contribute to the transmission of useful knowledge for employment. However, limiting the role of the University in our society exclusively to that means and curtailing its real purpose as an institution of higher education is going to invite problems.

The university student must surely be an expert in his discipline, but his role is not restricted to only that. University students should also be able to understand that their discipline applies to the whole world and should be able to develop their own ideas, to have a critical mind, to feel perpetual curiosity for everything around them, to live intensely, cultivate the yearning to know and ultimately attain intellectual expertise and constantly walk on the path of reaching it throughout their lives. Much of what is required to be a good professional must be acquired in the workplace itself and only the passage of time, one's own mistakes and those of others, as well as experiences of successes will allow one to reach professional status in its wider meaning. The University should give the graduate that initial kick start that will place him in a good positioning but, in our judgement, should not focus exclusively in preparing the student in the chosen discipline. We do not say that this is the main cause of the crisis the European University faces, but it is certainly a first symptom or effect of its increasing decay, perhaps a second cause because it feeds a sick university.

1.2. Notes on the Debate of the Public and the Private in the Heart of the University

This is the context where the traditional debate about whether the University is a public or a private good takes place and the debate extends its content to interesting issues that we may not be able to address with the necessary depth in a contribution such as the present one. The assimilation of education as public goods is obviously based on the fact that it is the entire society that benefits from it, while those who claimed that it was a private good focused on the fact that the direct beneficiary is the student and this particular benefit is of private nature. The question may seem trivial, but it is not so, given the relevance derived from its understanding as one category or another. In our view, the nature of education is mixed, public and private, since both visions are right in understanding both society as a whole and the individual as beneficiaries of education. Given this situation, we do not want

to avoid the debate on the financing of the University, on determining who and how much to pay to receive public higher education service. This is an issue that is obviously related to the previous one if we understand that the beneficiary is society and, therefore, the very nature of university education is public and so it will be society and not the individual who has to defray the expenses.

It is a question of tremendous importance that the problems of each of the national education systems are resolved in a different way. By way of example and having a greater knowledge of the Spanish reality, we will illustrate the question with Spain. The financing of the University has been, at least in Spain, one of the issues that has never been solved satisfactorily for all, perhaps because of the adverse situation our university system faces, which was once a reference in the medieval beginnings but is today simply irrelevant in the European and global framework.

Consistently and after nationalization, most of the Spanish Universities, through confiscation and honourable exceptions, have converted the prestigious Ecclesiastical University into a mediocre State University which has requested greater funds and resources to carry out the functions entrusted to it. Public Universities are subsidized mainly with public funds that come from the general State budgets through Autonomous Communities. Students pay only a small percentage of the cost of their enrolment (with or without scholarship), a cost that is not even known with scientific certainty. It seems that the knowledge of the University is insufficient to determine what a university student costs the University. This is not difficult to comprehend when we take into account that public Universities in Spain have not even been able to implement analytical accounting systems despite the fact that they are legally bound to do so. It is ironic that the clamour of the University is constant in terms of demanding more money when it is not even able to know exactly whether what it does is sustainable, efficient and convenient not only for the members of the university community but for the society which it theoretically serves.

It is beyond the scope of this work to dwell on this question, which merits a monograph. It should be pointed out that if university education has a mixed condition, that is, it benefits both society as a whole and the individual who receives it personally, and it would seem obvious that its financing should be of mixed nature in all cases, that is to say, paid by the subject that receives it and by the State that benefits from students in a University. The proportion of each party to this “co-payment” which, we insist, should be applicable to all citizens without any discrimination, would have to be logically dependent on two factors alone: the merit of each individual and their previous economic capacity. The greater the merit of the student and the lower the economic capacity of the student, the greater should be the proportion of his education covered by the State; to lower merit and greater economic capacity, less contribution should be made from the public to help students’ university education. And of course, this holds true, regardless of the University (public or private) in which the student in the exercise of their freedom has decided to study. The reality of what something is, once again, is far from what it should be. In the case of Spain, only students who opt to follow their education in public Universities receive co-payment for their university studies, because in fact it is the institution that receives the money and not the particular student. Such an unjust way of financing, discriminatory and disrespectful to the freedom of choice of educational centre, is consistent with the crushing of the traditional principle of subsidiarity proper to the old European Christendom and particularly in Spain, according to the old principle *corruptio optimi pessima*. The intervention of the State and the civil society today becomes preponderant, through universities of a non-public nature, which are limited and conditioned by all possible means. A limitation that in practice is confined to mere tolerance and that too, reluctantly. We shall return to this later, but let it be said now that freedom was always necessary for the search for truth as we pointed at the beginning of this document. And because of this, freedom within the University has always been threatened by the powerful at any level at which this claim needs to be examined. At a general level, the constitutions include the freedom of foundation of universities and private schools, configuring this right as fundamental and as the first priority. In the educational environment the autonomy of the University, which is only the expression of freedom in the academic world, is also guaranteed and protected to avoid interferences that are incompatible with the search for truth. However, once again we see how post-modernism gives us examples of living contradictions and the Spanish case is also paradigmatic in this respect as we shall see later.

1.3. Crisis and the European University

Crisis means, according to the Real Academia Española in the meaning listed first, “profound change with important consequences in a process or situation or in the way in which these are appreciated”. In the third meaning listed, it is a “bad or difficult situation”. We exclude the other meanings because they are relevant to medicine or economy. We therefore overcome the current fashion of affirming that crisis means opportunity, which perhaps corresponds to some oriental philosophies but is not characteristic of our cultural context. In our environment, the term ‘crisis’ has always had a negative connotation, either because it causes uncertainty in the face of a relevant and often abrupt sudden change or because it is understood in the sense of frustration of expectations with the risk of loss.

Crisis has played a central role in the last few years in the European context. Say, the economic crisis for about ten years, the political crisis in the last five years. As far as the University is concerned, the crisis has been the ongoing state for over thirty years; since the 1980s when the American universities exceeded in capacity, notoriety, results and prestige compared to the European university system which was at that time still atomized into different national systems. Since then, Europe has tried to overcome its deep crisis. The rigid Humboldt University yielded to a much more open model after it faced a crisis. The most recent proposal is the so-called European Higher Education Area which in practice continues to suffer from an enormous amount of incoherence due to the aggregation of different national particularities. Nowadays, even a certain coherence has not been achieved in regard to the duration in years of university studies. It has even been necessary to create a homogenized supplement to the diploma obtained by

the graduates so that the essence of what has been studied, the knowledge and skills acquired can in some way be understood in the common space.

The University has never had more means at its disposal than today. Never before have there been less young Europeans and consequently, the University is less impersonal than ever before. Never before has available information resources been more at hand; the technique has been at the service of teaching and research with means. Until recently, the scenario was more typical of science fiction than an academic environment. Inter-European mobility has never been simpler and it had never been easier to attract international talent, to cooperate in multinational teams and to learn from the good practices of those who are more advanced than us in didactics, methodology or learning outcomes. And yet the European university still faces a crisis. How is it possible? What is the reason for it? We will try to answer these questions and explain the paradox that we face.

2. The Context in which the University Develops Today

2.1. Society and Globalization

As much as the paladins of postmodernity insist keenly on repeating the praises of present-day society, any minimally critical observer can understand that destroyed societies coexist currently as totally fragmented units with no other social bond than materialistic attachment and surrounded by financial conditions and wealth. In such societies a plurality of uprooted individuals separated from the firmness of values and traditions, considered as their own, unconsciously has become part of a mass phenomenon and has been absorbed by the sinkhole of the politically correct, the promotion of the plural regardless of it being good or bad for the individual and society and by a supposed tolerance that in the end hides the most adverse of tyrannies. Tyranny is demanded by enslaved subjects who are under the effects of a libertarian illusion that does not think of the common good but only in the particular good of a few.

This mental unity, of clearly totalitarian roots, dominates the West and does not refer to the accessory but to the essential. In the accessory citizens enjoy the dream of having opposing opinions, of observing political confrontation between seemingly different parties and of choosing the course of their lives. However, this globalizing and unifying system through its brands, fashions and tendencies, only distracts minds while the terrifying domination occurs and the individual, as never before in history, joyfully and gradually renounces his human essence, is degraded in his morality and is reified to become a scarecrow of himself. The techniques help this mental uniformity, keep those that are part of the mass phenomenon happy and it is also useful towards their control which affirms their superficiality. This frames a context in which superficiality and materialism are installed in society and therefore also in the University itself, spreading equally to teachers and disciplines, and thereby curtailing any possibility for the University to fulfil its true mission, restricted as it is by political correctness and in search for material returns.

2.2. Democratization of Access to University

In the above-mentioned mass-production like context, meritocracy suffers greatly and as far as university studies are concerned, egalitarianism with an uniformitarianism effect is reflected in the consideration that university studies are a fundamental right and therefore should be universally accessible. Europe understands that no one who wishes to have university studies should be excluded and to this end, it has created measures such as the elimination of access tests or their conversion into pure formality that all students go through and most of them pass. The result is far from a selection process and it rather creates mental illusions in the less prepared candidates. Egalitarianism makes universal what was previously reserved for the intellectual elite and as it is to be expected, it does so on the basis of equalization from the base. There is no doubt that some institutions that truly select their students or some others that in only certain studies can make that selection still remain. However, the general rule and more so in the public system is that in one university or another, the less prepared candidate will be able to achieve his dream of being a university student and be awarded a degree that proves his condition.

This has produced, as it cannot be otherwise, a drop in the average level and an increase in inequality among students (the more and less prepared) that hampers classroom dynamics and complicates learning and teaching dynamics making the task of the lecturer more difficult. In addition and in order to adapt to the students, it is common to reduce the level of requirements and the depth or complexity of the explained contents. As a result and objectively, the level achieved tends to be lower than it used to be. Notice that equalitarianism and mediocrity have also spread among the classrooms on the professorial side and, although in times of economic crises enrolment numbers have come down, in many cases as in the case of Spain and to refer to the example that we know best, the deadly damage to the institution has already been done, with a highly bureaucratic faculty with little scientific relevance who are more concerned with documenting their daily work than to form their own ideas with which to get their students to think.

2.3. The University Models

The university doctrine* has established that there are three models of organization of the Universities; namely, a “bureaucratic-official” model, a “business” model and a “collegial” model. None of them is perceived as pure and normally a mixture is found in the analysis of the different educational systems of the States, although the dominant tendency can be detected fairly easily. Therefore, out of the three we will reduce our analysis to two of them. Two different models, although they are not exactly subsumed in any of the previously mentioned models, contain some of their most important characteristics. Thus, for the purposes of this work, we proceed by distinguishing the “continental” model from the “Anglo-Saxon” model.

* Cfr. B.R. Clark, *The Higer Education System*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1.983

The first one with clear collegial-like roots and medieval spirit, is the corruption the original model filtered through the sieve of statism proper to modernity. It is a model that was rich and varied in its origins and plural in unity. Today, this model is fundamentally controlled by the State in its various modern configurations. A model in which the State establishes increasingly detailed rules of operation, including planning in the most interventionist sense based on egalitarianism. Under this model, the State also finances most of the University budget, has preference for the public University and in the best of cases tolerates those Universities born out of a social initiative. Currently, everything is regulated under this model in which ironically, university autonomy remains to be identified however much it is constantly proclaimed. The model is a contrast to the old Medieval University, anchored in traditional society and therefore in its own jurisdiction was as alive as the society it served. Study plans, categories of teaching staff, promotion systems, university governance, research orientation, student admissions, teaching staff selection, relations with society... Nowadays everything is filtered through the sieve of the State in a broad sense, everything is made uniform and is regulated to guarantee the uniformity of the public educational service, thus killing any trace of assets and uniqueness proper to each individual institution. Only a memory is left of those remains of collegial government in which everything was based on the trust placed in the University that was fully sovereign within the established social order to establish and determine everything that related to its operation. An unfortunate transformation is an example of the degradation of Europe that went from being a living body in Medieval Christendom where the University was a valued reference, to today's system that is rotten. Corruption also extends to the Universities, as it could not be otherwise.

The second model, radically influenced by the Protestant ethic, is what we have come to call Anglo-Saxon. And today it has unquestionably taken the lead in practically every aspect to be measured or compared with the foul continental model. It seems logical that this is so, since as it happens with the modern State, it has a head start in its competition with the modern world with which it shares political, anthropological, philosophical and economic foundations. While the societies of continental Europe absorbed the impact of the blows of the new revolutionary paradigms of the modern State, the Anglo-Saxon world and fundamentally the United States of America and its satellite cultures were born into the new times and are therefore better adapted to the keys of modernity. This university model allows from the beginning the interaction of the new economic classes of the capitalist system with the Universities, which undoubtedly revert to a much higher financing capacity due to their agility and connection with the social demands of the productive system. From the beginning it does not start from an equal conception regarding the access to the University, but it rewards merit and capacity in a decisive way inspired by the yearning of success that characterizes protestant societies as a sign of predestination. It watches over the competition between institutions and guides them in a utilitarian way to solve the needs of leading technology and applied research, being able to afford and to devote part of its huge surpluses to basic science. And unlike the continental model it hardly has any regulations. Universities are totally free in terms of their professors and students selection, scholarship policy or internal governance, thereby making possible a University of objective quality (in fact a reference in the current world) without bureaucrats, posts in ownership or extreme politicization. A system that accounts for both terrible universities and some that are probably the best.

3. The European University in Crisis

Despite being aware that any generalization is in itself inaccurate and that any attempt at systematization is not without errors when faced with a very diverse reality, the argument that we maintain in this document is that the European University is in crisis. Perhaps it is going through its most profound crisis in almost a thousand years of the institution's history (nine hundred and twenty-eight years from the Foundation of the University of Bologna in 1,088, which is the oldest of all).

Here we offer some ideas for those who wish to know the causes of such an undeniable reality. And we point out those that appear to us to be of major relevance. We do not pretend to do, for obvious reasons of space, an exhaustive analysis. Our ideas could be contradicted dialectically, but that is precisely what we want to do by putting them in writing and taking into account that healthy intellectual debate is one of the essential pillars upon which the University should work.

3.1. Europe as a Problem

From the above argument, it is immediately apparent that in our view the European University has plunged into a deep crisis that goes beyond mere economic questions. And this is so because postmodern Europe itself is in a crisis, as newspapers remind us every day. Postmodern Europe, which leaving aside the principles that once were its support as a true civilization and destroying with revolutionary persistence the Christian society that preceded it, first promoted nationalism and then fell into a pan-Europeanism as idolatrous as it is unreal. This is based on grandiloquent declarations but not on a living society that is not able to achieve a true union because nothing really unites Europeans beyond the materialistic interest in the economic well-being achieved. Without firm values to hold on to, with no commonly recognized and accepted roots, Europe is sailing adrift without direction, becoming easily prey to superficial populisms and politicians, subjected to the increasingly fierce attacks of a sea of enemies: in the culture of American power, in Asian gigantism and finally in the social aspect, the uncontrolled migratory flows that far from being contained are encouraged by European simplistic goodness. All these enemies smell the blood of the mortally wounded and already weakened Europe and with their fashions, their money and their more or less infiltrated waves of Islamic radicalism, they deem themselves victorious. All of them are already among us, they are part of our societies and we have adopted them as fashions, investors or nationals despite the fact that they never wanted to integrate themselves into our model any more than to use our model for their own benefit. In the next few decades, we will pay very dearly for the abandonment of our true cultural roots that once made us great,

united us in morals, allowed us to stand out among other cultural, economic or military powers at that time. Rats are always the first to leave the ship when danger ensues and in our case they have decided to leave the European Union.

3.2. Lights and shadows of the European Higher Education Area

And it is in this breeding ground where the European rubbish dump opts for an initiative called European Higher Education Area, which has been aspiring since 1988 to be our lifeline in what refers to the university environment. It seems like yesterday when in that year the Magna Carta University (again a bombastic term) was signed by the vice-chancellors present in Bologna, which focused on highlighting university autonomy and on the basic structure for binomial research/teaching that always worries Universities. Ten years went by without special developments from that first statement, perhaps because the time in the University as well as in the church is often perceived and measured in centuries. But as early as 1998 the various states, as it is always the case in recent European history, take control and the ministers of education of France, Italy, the United Kingdom and Germany subscribe to the Sorbonne declaration and trigger the subsequent grandiloquent declarations: 1990 Bologna, 2001 Prague, 2003 Berlin, 2005 Bergen, 2007 London and 2009 Leuven. All of them are beautiful examples of political statements generally loaded with good wishes and little reality. The world economic crisis slows down this bunch of pretty declarations that did not do much more than to make it to pages of the newspapers. In essence, agreements with practical effect have been so ridiculous that it is embarrassing to summarize them. For example, Europeans agreed that university education divides into two cycles, degree and postgraduate. The latter being further divided into two levels, master's and doctorate. This is a great development. However, each university system decides whether the degree lasts three or four years, the master's degree lasts one or two years and the doctorate requires additional or no specific training. This way, each national university system continues to be different from one another and after so many statements and meetings, Europe still does not have a system of higher education minimally homogeneous. The reason for this is not the free choice of universities in the exercise of the autonomy that they should have, but rather the political decisions of national governments.

In honesty I will say that in all these years there has been some practical progress that has benefited the system as a whole. Only one is significant in our opinion: mobility. Europe has been able to create a successful exchange system that has favoured the internationalization of Universities through exchange stays. The name chosen for the "Erasmus" program is in memory of one of the first leaders of the so-called Free Thought, illegitimate son of the priest and his servant who was educated in *devotio moderna*. Together with his companions Calvin and Martin Luther, who always quoted Erasmus as a source of inspiration, Erasmus became one of the three intellectual pillars of the Protestant rupture, the first step in the revolution that would end with old Christianity. The universality of the University is not a novelty at all, but there is no doubt that the program in question has allowed many members of the university community to expand their mental boundaries knowing from within more about the reality, qualities and defects of Universities other than their own. In our judgement and beyond the successful promotion of mobility, there is little more that stands out regarding the practical excellence of the whole process.

3.3. Competencies versus Knowledge

It is an old debate to determine whether university education should try to transform those who receive it or simply limit itself to transmitting knowledge. In our opinion, the mission of the University is essentially to generate, preserve and transmit knowledge. We flee from the idealistic approach that seeks the transformation of reality to adapt it to the ideals previously determined by the intellect. We have no doubt that when knowledge is transmitted, the individual who receives it is gradually transformed, his behaviour changes, he enriches himself learning things that he did not know before and this usually results in a personal transformation. However, from there to fundamentally seek the educational task of modelling of the student's mind and its transformation for the purposes previously decided by the teacher, there is too great a leap that we prefer not to address. Learning is in our vision a process that ends up transforming the person who learns. However that implies an enrichment per se derived from its progressive nature, the need for it to be reflexive and the requirement that it be critical. We respect so much the human freedom with which God endowed our nature that we do not judge the University to choose the effect that knowledge must have on its students. Our role as academics is to guide in the learning that will most likely end with the transformation of the student. The student however must do his part and positively wish to be transformed, bringing that transformation to completion.

The previous reflection is born of the growing commitment to the strategy chosen that we have been observing in the European University, for the general and specific competencies that are geared exclusively to the future professional life. Logically, we support the training in skills or abilities but we resist supporting the exclusive aim of fitting students professionally in the work market. To reduce the mission of the University in this way seems an excessively simplistic and reductionist approach which is a sign and effect of the decline of the European University as previously mentioned in this article.

3.4. Education in what could seem to be Values but are Not

Here is another contradictory sign that characterizes Western postmodernism: the assumption and propagation of values that in reality are not values. Let me give an example. Surely, the assertion with which this paragraph begins will be unacceptable to more than one educated reader nowadays. Not for its specific content but for the previous assumption that truth does not exist and that there is not a human way and much less divine in a society that has reduced God to the private sphere, to reach it.

The assertion we make will be at best in the eyes of this hypothetical educated reader an opinion. Perhaps a respectable one but no more than any other opinion, including that which states otherwise. And if we were to take specific values it would probably

become a proscribed opinion, for only opinions that do not question the basis of the system, such as modern-day democracy or free choice of sexual orientation, are respected. Relativism has become a new dogma of postmodern faith and, as it cannot be otherwise, totalitarian root models. Either it is accepted or one is left out of the system. According to this position, relativism must be instilled in the minds of the youth since childhood and better still, at University.

We defined the University as the community of free men who seek truth, but where is the mission left within this context? It is simply left in emptiness, in irrelevance, it is non-existent. If the truth does not exist the University as we conceive of it does not make sense because its mission is impossible. It may be refuted that if there is a truth this will be exclusively scientific, testable by the method of science, which admits verification and experimentation. But in such a case, does the University only make sense when it teaches science? The urge to consider anything as science (social sciences, human sciences, communication sciences, legal sciences etc.) shows the longing for academic survival.

In order not to prolong the imaginary dialogue that we are maintaining, we will simply say that in our opinion the European University is in a crisis. This crisis is also due to the fact that it confuses the reference values as the society that the University serves is confused about them. This is the reason why the University is perceived in many cases as a simple extension of the politically correct, a place which, far from seeking the truth, seeks to formulate academic justifications against something or someone. And the university ecosystem must become a free forum in which views should be debated in an inbreeding environment where there are internal struggles for a crumb of power to break the monotony. I am in no doubt that I have been conditioned by my experience of 25 years of service in the Spanish University and the deep knowledge of the University that I have acquired and treasure throughout these years. I therefore admit that perhaps in other European surroundings the reality is not so crude. However, I suspect that in one way or another the problems we face are systemic and civilizational.

3.5. The Sophistication of the Torments around the Myth of Quality

The University system of the European Area of Higher Education has begun to traverse a path, seemingly without return, which has also been irresponsibly followed in other university contexts (we now think about what is happening in many Latin American countries). It is the way of the quest for quality. It may be a surprise that a commendable assignment is considered negative as I do. An assignment which we think is demanded by the society, a work so necessary and one that understands that the existing system was not of quality or at least not of the suitable quality. Although no one is willing to acknowledge it, the average of our Universities work in an environment of remarkable mediocrity. Let us clarify this point in order not to definitively fall into absolute discredit. By all means, the search for quality and the implementation of continuous improvement systems is a desirable asset for the University. In our view, the problem is determined by the system that Europe has decided to use for this purpose and which, as the title of the section indicates, has become a torment for lecturers, universities and the system in general with, at least in the Spanish reality that I know, absolutely insignificant results.

The European university system has made the strategic decision to seek quality through accreditation systems entrusted to political bodies and quality agencies. They are supposed to be independent, effective, expert evaluation agencies that are consistent with the designs of a system that aspires to compete among the best in a globalized world. Unfortunately, at least in the Spanish experience, we have failed unsuccessfully. At least in Spain it does not seem possible that any neutral observer can assert without failing to stick to the truth that our university system has improved, thanks to the intervention of the systems of verification and accreditation that we have been able to implement. The Spanish agency at the national level, as well as the autonomous agencies that have been carrying out their own tasks within their competence, have become bureaucratic systems that often fail to comply with the basic principles of legal certainty, independence and efficiency. These agencies, more often than is desirable, have come de facto to occupy an increasingly empty space of power, to apply political criteria in their judgments that fully invade university autonomy, to perceive their role not so much as tools to improve the system but, at best, as inspectors of the system and, at worst, as tools of the lowest passions to pay past or present personal bills, school fights or imperceptible misunderstandings. Under the apparent protection of technical discretion we find everywhere cases where the deviation of power is committed without ambiguity when not directly in brazen abuse. And the system, incomprehensibly, continues to nourish the beast created up to now without being aware of its excessive growth and the small impact on the improvement of the system itself. This is demonstrated with the objective relevant system data from all over the world showing internal and external competitiveness and the level of real improvement in short.

Most ironically, this disturbing new monster is made up of well-trained and even well-meaning professionals. Once again, the brilliant idea crumbles when put into practice through sophisticated and complex processes bringing the life of the students to a halt as they search for and prepare evidence of what is evident. The commendable work of most of his collaborators is obscured by the bad works of a few who abuse their new position of power with the terrible feeling that this is often resolved in dark corridors rather than be resolved in broad light and with scenographers. And everything is even more complex in cases such as Spain where once again, with this “provincial” complex that sometimes characterizes national initiatives, we wanted to establish controls of this nature ex ante, during and ex post with unusual and identical complexity in the different phases. This is done in order to try to appear to be at the forefront of freshness and concern for quality, when precisely in reality and stubbornly, we are placed as a system at the tail or at best in mediocrity.

Beyond the pertinence of establishing a ranking system, pertinence that we question in a university system like ours, this tool does not even exist formally in Spain. The Spanish system has an approach of coffee for all as it shows for example in the fact that a governmental initiative called “Campus of International Excellence”, which was supposed to support those exemplary experiences

of the system, has declined to recognize this excellence in practically all the initiatives presented. In practice, almost all Universities have the recognition of these Campuses of excellence in a fiction in which almost all of them turn out to be excellent. Spain has not been able to design a reliable university ranking as a system and its presence in international universities is disappointing compared to other countries in our vicinity. The Spanish university system is shielded against competitiveness, which is precisely the main engine of excellence and the financing systems hardly affect it, concerned as they are simply to make the University accessible to all citizens who wish to enroll in it. The dramatic consequence is that neither the Spanish system is a reference in anything in the world, nor the majority of Spanish university students get the fruits they expect from their passage through the University.

4. Proposals for Improvement

After a superficial analysis of the European University crisis, with special emphasis on the Spanish university system, I would like to finish this humble contribution in a constructive way. It is obvious to us that the solutions proposed will alleviate the situation and make the European university system more competitive and attractive, both for students and for academics and researchers and ultimately for the university community and society as a whole. The added difficulty of dismantling more than two hundred years of continental university history is also clear to us. We will try, however, to summarize in only five steps, the proposals for improvement through their synthetic enumeration:

- I. Return as far as possible to the collegial model by undoing what has been done in the bureaucratic/official model, in the pursuit of academic cooperation and respecting the principle of subsidiarity in its classical conception. That is, favouring boundary conditions that allow Universities to develop their potential and rebuilding the public universities through professional management and a deep conceptual revision.
- II. Promotion of academic freedom targeted at the search for truth and common good, thereby enhancing true university autonomy and national and international competitiveness of Universities, accompanying such initiatives with a system of access to the University in which admission depends exclusively on the criterion that each University wants to establish autonomy and discarding the universality of access that only leads to frustration among lecturers and graduates.
- III. Curricular incorporation of professional knowledge and skills through non-politicized academic pensus, aimed at ensuring the mental structuring of critical thinking of the student, their ability to interact in a volatile and complex social environment, and to foster their resistance to frustration with a base of consistent values.
- IV. Review of the teaching staff as a whole, of the entire teaching function, removing inbreeding from the system by establishing clear and determined systems to reward merit and ability, national and international mobility, long-term careers and the periodic and systematic evaluation of teaching and research activity through homogeneous systems that have positive and negative consequences for those evaluated.
- V. Adequate budget allocation for the education system, replacing the current formula of university funding based on the number of students in order to establish a different system that guarantees freedom of choice of centre (public or non-public). The state should finance the student endowed with the capacity and willingness to study and who is accepted by the University. If desired it should also moderate the amount in regard to family income, but resulting in any case in “universal scholarship” for the university student of the public University. This would allow the approximation of the price of tuition to the real cost, with the positive implication of a requirement of greater efficiency in university spending freely decided by each institution.

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