

Honorary degree acceptance speech
Universitat Rovira i Virgili , 7 February 2019
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Rectora Magnífica, distinguished guests, friends,

Allow me to start by telling you how grateful I am to the URV community, and how humbled by this distinction.

Tarragona has many reasons to be proud of itself. Of its friendly shores and mellow climate, for instance, which only someone who has spent thirty years under the cloudy skies of Brussels can fully appreciate.

Of its past, too. As I spent most of my formative years in Rome, I had no choice but to learn about Roman history. So among the childhood memories that come to my mind whenever I think of Tarragona, there are no sad moments or rainy days: only summertime, *caga tió* and Roman emperors.

It seems that Augustus, a man not known for his modesty, said this about Rome: “I found a city of bricks and left a city of marble” [*marmoream relinquo, quam latericiam accepi*]. You just need to stroll from this hill down to the amphitheatre to realise that Augustus could have said the same about Tarragona for the way his presence transformed it into a majestic city.

But the best resource of any province – Roman or Catalan – is not its climate or its past: it is its talent and its future. And talent and future is what the URV stands for.

In less than thirty years this young university has become a symbol of excellence: an innovative institution competing successfully in Europe and globally yet connected to its region and engaged with society in the promotion of knowledge and human capital.

I am therefore deeply honoured to join the URV community today. I don’t know whether I have done enough to receive this distinction, but I promise to do my best to deserve it.

My only regret is that my parents are not with us any more. My father would have been proud of his son; my mother would have believed every word of Dr Grau’s generous *laudatio*.

A new purpose for education

Since you are here, trapped with no choice but to listen, I would like to make a few comments on a topic close to my heart: education and its significance for Europe’s future.

We Europeans have been discussing education at least since Plato wrote the Socratic dialogues almost twenty-five centuries ago. We still have a variety of viewpoints on the reasons for acquiring knowledge and skills and the ways to do so - but I think we will all agree that, for most of human history, the purpose of education has been to make men better people.

I do mean “men”, by the way, since it is only in modern times that women have been considered worthy of an education. The first evidence of teaching at the University of Oxford can be traced back to the year 1096; in 1956, 860 years later, the faculty of the university still insisted on limiting the number of female students to less than 25% of the total. And even today the best proof of the transformational power of education is the fear that the empowerment of women still inspires in the mind of authoritarian governments and organised religions.

But still: modern European civilisation was built on belief in the empowerment of the individual through knowledge, and the driving force behind such personal improvement was education. “Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire”, as Yeats defined it.

And today we have come to realise another very important thing about education: that its benefits go beyond the individual, as new ideas create economic growth and prosperity.

And I believe that, for us Europeans, education has an even more urgent purpose: more than ever before, it is the upholder of intellectual freedom and democracy.

Europe’s pessimism

Helmut Köhl, borrowing from Bismarck I think, once said that the European project is like a sausage: it’s very good, but you’d rather not know how it’s made. I have witnessed the making of the sausage for thirty years, and I have never been as convinced as now of the frailty of European integration - but also of its importance.

The European ideal to which I have devoted most of my professional life is a very simple one: a society based on rational informed choice, in which pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality between women and men prevail.

These values are the foundation of the European Union. With the end of the Cold War, we thought we could take them for granted. Not any more: they are challenged on our doorsteps and increasingly at home, here in Europe, by new forms of populism and by illiberal authoritarian regimes. And by new versions of the same old nationalisms.

There is nothing new in the arguments of nationalism since Fichte proposed, two centuries ago, that education should be the vehicle to promote Germany’s national culture and language, and to raise its pride after humiliation at the hands of France.

We know what kind of totalitarian ideology Fichte’s well-meaning romantic idealism inspired. Two World Wars and 120 million dead should have taught us that, in Samuel Johnson’s words, “patriotism is the last refuge of scoundrels” and that the liberty of the citizen is far more important than the identity of the nation. The European Union was born as a result of these lessons from history – but history also tells us that nothing is learned forever, and that man is the only animal that trips on the same stone twice.

These are uncertain times; it is understandable that many European citizens feel apprehensive about the present, pessimistic about the future, and distrustful of public institutions. We see this anxiety every day: in the media, in surveys and cultural expression.

Europe's pessimism can be explained in part by the lasting impact of the economic crisis, the rise of inequality, and the realisation that the world is drifting in ways we don't understand or control. But this sense of anxiety, our lack of confidence in our own future, sets Europe apart from other regions in the world.

Most countries are more deeply unequal, and most people have weaker social protection than Europe, and yet their civil societies and institutions seem more confident about their personal and collective future than we are.

Education is no exception: we Europeans seem to have lost faith in knowledge and in the transformational power of education. It's not that people do not want to get a degree; it's that having a degree has become an end in itself - a signal to future employers and a source of social respectability – rather than a means to becoming a better person.

It's not that governments don't produce new education laws because sometimes it seems that's all they do. It's that a law is not an end or a compromise between vested interests. There is not enough concern about the victims of education (the students) or its architects (the teachers).

In the meantime, many countries that find themselves where Europe was a few decades ago believe in education and research more than ever. The global trends are telling. In emerging economies, individuals as well as public and private institutions are boosting their investment in education and research, leading to a massive expansion of student enrolment and to higher levels of research. Brazil, Chile, South Africa and Korea devote a far higher proportion of their GDP to education than almost any EU country.

It's true that money is not everything in education. You can spend the same amount on education and the outcomes can be radically different. Many improvements require only political will or regulatory changes (more flexibility and autonomy for universities, for example). And it's very difficult to measure and transfer education outcomes. But as they say: if you think education is expensive, try ignorance.

A better future is possible

To overcome this Euro-pessimism and be confident that there is a better future, we need to bear in mind what Europe has achieved in its recent past.

Western Europe's economic reconstruction of the post-war period was based not on natural resources but on immaterial wealth: people, their talent, and their attitude to personal development.

Or take women's rights. As we celebrate this year the 150th anniversary of John Stuart Mill's "*The Subjection of Women*" and the 70th of Simone de Beauvoir's "*Le deuxième sexe*", it is

worth remembering that gender equality is an essentially European value. At the beginning of the 20th century, 75% of Spanish women were illiterate. A century later, 75% of the students of medicine in Spain are women. Discrimination and inequality are still a daily experience for millions of women, and the MeToo movement has brought the pervasiveness of abuse to the surface.

But the daunting task ahead should not hide the fact that women have made extraordinary progress, and that the European Union is the champion of the global movement for women's sexual and reproductive health and rights.

Likewise, saying that education can transform Europe's society is not wishful thinking. It has already happened. Although it seems to have faded away in our collective memory, over the last fifty years, Europe's education systems have made extraordinary progress.

In fifty years, the proportion of people with at least an upper secondary education in the EU has doubled to above 80%. And the proportion of Europeans with a university degree has risen from under 15%, mostly males, to almost 40% with a slight majority of females.

This radical transformation was possible thanks to changing social values, the emancipation of women, and the simple, compelling idea that creating educated people is the path to a better society. It can be done again.

So, education can and must have a great future, if only because the demand for new knowledge and new skills will increase. And because critical thinking is the prerequisite of a democratic society.

But it will not be education as we know it.

I cannot think of any country in the world that is not trying to reform its education system. Why? Because it is not enough to do more of what we did yesterday: we must do it differently. Because our societies have never been like they are now. And because what we are doing today is not what young people will need tomorrow.

We are witnessing dramatic changes in the global education landscape, in the global distribution of talent, in the business models of education institutions, in the delivery and certification of skills, in the ways people teach and learn, and in the expectations of students, who are increasingly aware of the importance of learning and yet uncertain as to the relevance of what they learn for their future lives.

These changes will continue. The number of 25- to 34-year-old graduates in China will rise by 300% by 2030, and by 30% in Europe and the United States, for example. Most importantly in my view, both teaching and learning will have to be far more collaborative and far more interdisciplinary than it is today.

Students of all types of education need to understand and combine science, the humanities and the arts. Because while science and technology have a big role to play in our societies and economies, so do the social sciences in coping with diversity and inequality, and the arts and humanities in developing creative products and services to meet new unimagined demands.

We have more information than ever, yet knowledge changes so fast that we know very little about how the world will look when the URV celebrates its 50th anniversary. So the last thing students need today from their teacher or tenured professor is more information: they already have too much. What they need is the ability to combine different information into strategic thinking, to understand other cultures and disciplines, to distinguish the important from the ephemeral, to be resilient and adapt to permanent change.

If education needs to change, can technology help? This has been the subject of heated discussions since Thomas Edison predicted in 1913 that, in ten years, schools would no longer need books, just a cinema.

Until recently, there was a lot of talk but little evidence about the impact of technology on education. Many are still sceptical: after all, if Socrates or Augustus came to visit a URV campus today, one of the few things they would recognise immediately is a classroom. Their only surprise would be to see that women are learning and teaching. If the basic principles and tools of education have survived through the ages, why shouldn't they survive the 21st century too?

Yet this time it's different, I think. The tsunami of technology is about to disrupt education as it has already disrupted other sectors. The world's e-learning market has already created completely new services and audiences: off-campus international learners, modular courses rather than complete programmes, broader student age ranges. More importantly, the combination of artificial intelligence and big data are bringing aspects of education to the surface that have so far eluded analytical scrutiny, such as personal learning pathways.

On the other hand, technology brings unprecedented risks, not just for privacy but also for the risk of determinism. Since technologies forget nothing, learners could be bound by their own past, or could be denied from an early age the recognition of their ability to improve; and they could be limited in their own choice and freedom to learn by institutions playing with statistics and predictive algorithms.

The challenge is not to improve education but to change the way we educate, so that we can remain masters of our own future.

A bolder agenda for Europe's universities

Our societies will have to address complex challenges that do not lend themselves to simplistic solutions. As Yuval Noah Harari put it, for the last two thousand years philosophy, religion and science have been telling us that the most important thing in life is to know oneself. Yet very soon an algorithm will know us better than we know ourselves, and biotechnology will give us the capacity to reshape life. Whether we like it or not, we are now being forced to rethink what it means to be human.

The only way we will meet these challenges is through a far stronger role for knowledge, science and the humanities.

Think about this paradox: just as science and technology advance with giant steps, so does scepticism about science. We know that vaccination is the most effective public health instrument in human history. We know that homeopathy is to medicine what astrology is to astronomy: the product of ignorance and fear. And yet trust in vaccines is decreasing, and homeopathic products pushed by a few unscrupulous multinationals are trusted by many as a natural alternative to scientifically sound medicine.

We need more decisions informed by reasoned debate, based on evidence. All opinions are legitimate, but not all opinions are equal. People should be free to think and say that the Earth is flat. But if they do, they must be told in no uncertain terms that they are wrong.

This is why I believe the voice of universities in the public debate must be louder and bolder.

We Europeans have invented many things. Not all of them good: total war and the Holocaust are pure European legacies. But we can claim one genuine, important, positive contribution to humanity: the University, a truly European invention that made us what we are and which deserves a far more prominent role.

Since the creation of Humboldt University in 1810, the greatest ambition of any university is excellence, as judged by academic peers. This remains as important as ever. But in these uncertain times of change, we must aim for Europe's universities to have a greater impact on society. Why offer just a degree, when what citizens need is a lifetime subscription that grants them access to the knowledge produced by higher education institutions?

I realise this may sound unrealistic, even unfair, in these times of budget constraints and the bureaucratisation of academic life, especially for the governance model in Southern Europe.

I hear that most days, when the gates of the URV open at dawn, the Rector is already waiting on the doorstep. And that more often than not she is the one who turns off the light in the evening. And, apparently, a few years ago she was not allowed to attend her faculty meeting because she was on maternity leave. One can't ask for more dedication from individuals, or more bureaucracy from institutions.

As most people in this room know better than me, universities today face many challenges: they are complex, vertically organised by departments and disciplines, and yet they operate in an increasingly flat and networked ecosystem. They are losing the monopoly on the transmission and certification of knowledge.

At the same time, universities are expected to do ever more with less: meet higher expectations for accountability and performance; fulfil more bureaucratic requirements; compete against other claims for limited public funding; and find an elusive balance between research-intensive activities and quality of teaching.

And all education institutions are increasingly under pressure from students, who demand change and improvement in content and delivery mode. As more and more people acquire a university degree, questions arise about cost and added value, and about alternatives to the university as we know it. If today, in an improbable gesture of solidarity, the citizens of Tarragona decided to cancel the student debt of the United States of America, each of us

would have to disburse 15 million dollars; this will not happen – and there are many sustainable alternatives around.

We know what universities require to be able to play their role in full: more autonomy to define their strategies, fewer administrative constraints, and more funding to achieve impact. And in exchange, they would need to provide more transparency and accountability.

Easier said than done; and not something universities can decide on their own. But this can be, I think, the ambition of a young institution such as the URV, which can be confident about its future and proud of its achievements without being encumbered by the weight of tradition. This is also what European societies need today. It is an agenda worth fighting for.

As Amin Maalouf said here, in his own *honoris causa* address in 2006, the success or the failure of the European project will determine whether human adventure will find the path of progress. And we can all, with our words and actions, as fellow Europeans, make a difference.

Today I am joining the privileged club of URV doctors *honoris causa*. Some of them bring affectionate personal memories: Josep Anton Baixeras was a dear friend of my parents. Others are eminent international personalities: Chomsky, Maalouf, Sen, Tàpies.

They are all distinguished. They are artisans, stonemasons patiently trying to construct a world we can be proud to inhabit. It is honourable work, and I am deeply honoured that you have chosen to recognise mine.

Almost all of them, though, are also male. So I am keenly aware that today, just by receiving this distinction, I have already made a contribution to the URV community. Unfortunately, it is a negative one: I am increasing the under-representation of women. I will take this as another incentive to deserve the distinction that you, the members of the URV community, have so generously granted me.

My consolation is that I am aware of the great work being done by the Equality Observatory of the URV led by Dr Inma Pastor. And I am also aware that the Rector herself is personally committed to ensuring that the URV bestows this great honour on outstanding women, who will not be just honorary degree holders but also defenders of the cause of equality and role models for the young women of today and tomorrow.

It is too late for the URV to acknowledge the heroism of Maria Helena Maseras, the first *tarragonina* and Spanish woman to study Medicine 150 years ago but who was never allowed to practise. If she could see a Medicine classroom today where three out of four students are women, she would probably feel vindicated.

But there are many other unsung heroes, and the road to equality is long.

Thank you for your patience.
