

THE ROLE OF UNIVERSITIES IN TODAY'S LEARNING SOCIETY: THE KNOWLEDGE TRIANGLE AND BEYOND

Fundamental theme:

The role of universities in the knowledge triangle, taking a global perspective. The knowledge triangle is a means of increasing the impact of universities in society – highlighting the interplay of research, education and benefit to society, and the movements between these three components. The concept can be stretched even further, not least with regard to the 'global' dimension. A 'global knowledge triangle' is more than eliciting business out of academic research and enticing students to become entrepreneurs; it is about global responsibility and global commitment. The experiences of the financial crisis and its ongoing consequences (just as the experiences of climate change and of unreliable energy and food supplies) tell us that new points of stability are required in society. Accordingly, the focus of the conference would be on the wider societal role and responsibility of higher education institutions, especially the major research universities, in formulating and approaching global inequalities – partly on their own, partly in cooperation with each other and with other players and stakeholders – by providing globally oriented programmes of study and research adopting global perspectives.

Some possible themes:

Theme 1: University research in a global knowledge economy

The global responsibilities of universities and their insertion into a 'knowledge triangle' do not reduce the need and significance of independence and integrity – rather they should complement and reinforce one another in a cycle where academic credibility and societal relevance co-evolve. This will be the subject of this speech, primarily addressing the adjustments made within individual universities in terms of their funding strategies, collaborative networks, and general activity profile.

This will be supported by comments from 'practitioners' on the preconditions for such alignments at the micro-level (connecting this discussion with that of the next to next theme, how universities as organizations can collaborate with societal actors without compromising their integrity)

Theme 2: Universities acting socially and globally responsible

The role of academic research in identifying and managing 'grand challenges' (grand challenges, if taken seriously, must be the outcome of broad-based societal mobilization, encompassing academic, social, political and economic interests in complex and iterative dialogues. How can universities take part in the process of identifying challenges and solutions to such challenges? And how have such challenges developed historically? Here, one can draw on decades of experience of the intersection between research, society, politics and the market in the development of new technologies and their insertion into society through a complex interplay between relatively 'sticky' social traditions and often utopian technological opportunities and how they may be integrated in addressing pressing societal issues.

A second stream will focus on the experience of individual U21 universities in engaging with societal issues and finding novel ways of instigating change in their wider community, in areas like technological development, health care and social welfare.

Theme 3: The global university – raising resources, developing curricula, developing networks

Internationalisation policies among universities in the world have during recent years increasingly been focused on education. Apart from Africa and the Middle East, where higher education institutions seek to develop and strengthen their research capacity, in other regions the focus of internationalization is on education – not only recruitment but also collaboration between partner institutions to develop exchange and global curricula. (see IAU 3rd Global Survey Report 2011, where it is concluded that “students and their preparation for life in a globalized world are the main focus of internationalization within HEIs policies and activities”). We can now talk about “global students” that increasingly encounter global curricula and global class rooms (on campus and online). How does this development and the possibilities to prepare students to tackle global challenges relate to a context where funding is mainly dependent on national governments and/or market resources?

A related theme concerns the globalization of university funding, as they now aggressively pursue new funding possibilities – how can that be reconciled with their growing global responsibility?