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European University Association (EUA) Annual conference: University leaders map paths for future success

Following a decade of change and multiple reforms in European higher education, research and governance and, more recently, sharp cuts in public funding universities across Europe are responding by developing and “sharpening” their own distinctive university profiles.

This was one of the clear messages from the EUA Annual conference that ended this weekend at the University of Palermo (20-23 October). The event gathered around 300 higher education leaders and stakeholders to analyse how institutions are reacting to the profound changes that have been taking place in higher education across Europe, and which have been driven also by the continuing ‘massification’ of higher education and demographic change.

During the three-day event, university leaders focused on the challenges they need to overcome in terms of consolidating their mission/profile through tailored research strategies, clear staff profiles and increased student diversity, and highlighted examples of good practice in each of these areas. Specific solutions include looking to diversify funding sources (to complement public funding cuts), developing and sustaining effective research partnerships with a wide range of partners and providing incentives and development opportunities for staff. Universities are also looking to develop ‘multicultural learning environments’ and developing ways to respond to the needs of an increasingly diverse student population.

As universities seek to develop distinct individual profiles both in their national systems and internationally, they face a number of challenges and will have to take decisions such as whether to focus on specific educational/research niches; how to promote interdisciplinarity (for example by making interdisciplinary programmes more prestigious and promoting internal mobility with “professors on the move”); serving their own region while maintaining an international orientation; and avoiding ‘bureaucratisation’ while professionalising management.

In terms of enhancing individual institutional research strategies, conference participants underlined the importance of balancing university workloads for teaching and research; diversifying income streams; and developing more long-term partnerships. Another key element for the future addressed during the conference was the need for universities to overcome the existing barriers in many systems for attracting and retaining talented staff and to create more flexible career structures for their talented young researchers, academic and administrative staff.

University leaders also recognised their role in catering for a wider variety of students; and the need to be aware of who they teach, where they come from and what their needs are. Equally, they underlined their proactive duty to promote a multicultural community in the university and to pursue global engagement.

In order to continue to respond to the profound changes taking place in higher education, the university leaders gathered in Palermo concluded by emphasising the crucial importance of strong institutional leadership to ensure support for internal diversification, to implement changes with shrinking resources and also to be able to evaluate the impact of these changes while they are still ongoing. Strategic capacity is growing, but the need for leadership development at all levels is becoming an increasingly crucial issue for the years to come.

Ends:

More information about the EUA conference at the University of Palermo is available on the conference website: www.eua.be/palermo

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