

Welcome address to the EUA Annual Conference

by Jean Chambaz, president of Sorbonne University.

Dear colleagues, dear friends,

It is an honor and a great pleasure to welcome you all here today:

First, on behalf of Sorbonne University, one of the oldest European universities and one of the youngest because, a year ago we refounded La Sorbonne as a comprehensive research university by merging two leading universities: Paris-Sorbonne in arts and humanities, and Pierre and Marie Curie sciences, engineering and medicine.

Second, on behalf of the 4EU+ Alliance that Sorbonne created a year ago with Charles, Heidelberg, Warsaw, Copenhagen and Milano universities to build a space of free circulation for students, professors, researchers, staff, to share ideas and access to common infrastructures, to work together as a group to better address the main challenges faced by Europe than we could do alone.

It is also my pleasure to host this conference, as a former member of the EUA board, actively participating in the EUA activities for more than 16 years when Eric Froment convinced my former university to engage at the European level. I started to work on the doctoral program project with Lesley Wilson, the soul and the engine of the EUA for 20 years, who is here at home as a Doctor Honoris Causa of Sorbonne University. I invite you to join me to warmly thank her for her achievements to the service of European universities.

Finally, I won't forget to mention that I am also proud to welcome you as the current chair of the League of European Research Universities, the LERU, that brings together 23 of the most prestigious European universities.

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This is no contradiction but the affirmation of the unicity and the richness of the European academic community, advocating, through its diversity, for excellence and inclusiveness to better serve Europe development.

This needs a strong and unified voice and it's what EUA is for.

We need this strong and unified voice to advocate at the national and the European levels as to what universities are for and, therefore, advocate for the support and instruments needed to benefit fully from universities for the society and the economy.

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First, there is no opposition between excellence and inclusiveness. We need both.

All academic institutions yearn to achieve excellence and this can be reached by many means.

We should, our policy makers should, stop being obsessed with rankings, which, by definition are simplistic and caricatures. How can the diversity of our missions be efficiently evaluated by one single figure based on biased indicators?

One part of the solution is in the implementation of a global vision of open science, not reduced to open access nor to plan S, but including alternative platforms of open publication, open and fair evaluation by peers, open and fair citation index, open and fair indexation and mining of scientific data, and a profound change in the criteria for recruiting, rewarding and promoting academic staff.

We are demanding of the other stakeholders but we have our own part to play.

That said, we cannot accept any compromise on excellence in research or in education because we have centuries of experience to demonstrate it is not efficient. The excellence should be measured in the achievement of the institutional strategy according to its environment. Inclusiveness need to be promoted as much and evaluated in the same way but not by compromising on excellence. The richness of Europe is its diversity, and its reinforcement won't come from uniformization or levelling down.

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Another asset of universities is that they develop their contribution in the long-term. Creativity in research and innovation takes time and freedom. It's the same for education: how can you evaluate transformation or innovation at the bachelor's level until 5 or 6 years later, the time to educate and to follow one or two cohorts in their development?

This creates tensions in a world which moves faster and faster and where policy-makers are facing strong short-term pressure. But, you can't be off-handed about equipping new generations of experts and leaders with the necessary skills to be able to create our future and face the sustainable challenges of Europe and the world. The only way to allow universities to meet the needs of our society and economy is to give us the incompressible time of our missions.

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This preamble seemed necessary to sketch the frame of the theme of our conference "driving innovation in European universities".

The excellent study recently published by EUA under the direction of Sybille Reichert on the role of universities in innovation ecosystems clearly demonstrate how Europe could better make benefit from universities to achieve the development of our economy and society, since - considering the dramatic transformations we face - we better should consider ourselves as a continent in development.

I won't comment what we achieve at Sorbonne university, we are lucky enough to be included as a case study in the report.

If universities are unique in organizing innovation ecosystems, it's because they walk on four legs they could efficiently coordinate: research, the education of executives and experts, innovation and service to society.

As such, universities play a role of comprehensive integrators of Europe's economic development and social cohesion: extending knowledge and addressing the challenges and social demands of nowadays by fostering free research; educating new generations with critical-thinking, creativity, autonomy and entrepreneurship through research-based education; interacting with the economic sector to meet its needs in research as in life-long learning.

Universities are therefore best placed to aggregate innovation ecosystems and actively involve their researchers and their students

We often feel that this fantastic opportunity is not enough mobilized by national and European policies which are still elaborated more as independent actions than as a global transformation.

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I know that Jean Eric Paquet and Sophia Erickson Waterschoot will answer me in a minute that decisions have been taken to overcome this functioning in silos and that universities are highly considered as important stakeholders by the Commission, what I don't doubt.

But if I may - speaking in Paris in spring – if we appreciate words of love, we prefer acts.

Two examples which still could be reshaped in the preparation of Erasmus+ and Horizon Europe we know you work hard on their finalization

Following a proposition of President Macron, DGEAC took the initiative to open as early as this year in the frame of Erasmus + program, a call for projects for European University Networks. It is already a fantastic success with more than 300 universities involved in more than 50 proposals.

But we regret that, while universities walk on four legs, as should do the European University Networks to fulfill their mission, the call is limited to the education leg, excluding research and mobility. And we are waiting information on how the two DGs – will cooperate to let us efficiently run on our four legs for the sake of Europe

The second example is at the heart of our conference and concerns the Pilar III of Horizon Europe. We could understand the will of the commission and the council to foster the creation of European licorns, which appears to be the goal of the launch of the EIC. But, as I mention each time I meet with Jean Eric, we still lack an instrument to support the excellence in the integrative activity of universities in innovation ecosystems.

These remarks are not complaints but the expression of eagerness and enthusiasm to better serve the development of Europe, since we strongly believe that Europe is our common horizon and future. There is no Plan B and the year 2019 is crucial.

I wish our discussions during the conference will contribute to strengthen the determination of the university sector to fully play its part in these very challenging times for Europe and the world.

Thank you.