

Rome, UNICA Conference, 22nd September 2010

Distinguished Rectors and professors,

dear students,

it is very difficult to address such an audience with many expectations and more knowledge and personal experiences on Europe than we imagine.

In speaking to you, I have to bare in mind some facts which are taken for granted from your perspective but which are, for others, symbols of revolutionary changes. Let me spot few of them:

The first is freedom of movement. For **many** of you crossing national borders has been easier and cheaper, with low costs company and youth hostels. Hopefully future visa regulation will allow this to **all** of you. Consequently, you can more often meet people coming from different societies and cultures, you shall take advantage of the opportunities that other European countries offer you, and you will lay the foundations of the Europe of the future.

The second change is wider access to all kind of information through the internet and the spread use of technological tools. You are familiar with mobile phones, mp3 players and, of course, computers. You take advantage of the share of knowledge in “wikis” and can have an overview of many university campuses through satellite pictures. How can you be supported in making the best use of them, not only to have some good time off but also to improve your knowledge, skills and competences?

The third – but I recognize that is a bit more tricky – is the use of a single currency, for the ones in the € area. This factor makes you part of one market where exchange of goods and services involves so many organizations and firms that competition is hard and the range of possible choices is astonishing.

On the negative side, your future is not so rosy. I’m sure it will not surprise you if I mention the difficulties to enter the labour market, or if I refer to the fact that many of you or your colleagues might not be so

enthusiastic to leave their hometown to find better opportunities. I assume that you feel the gap between your everyday life and a society which looks “old” and “elderly oriented”.

Far from being the magical wand against all the wrongs, higher education has a role to play in your future lives and careers. To be able to play it, universities and other higher education institutions must keep on innovating and adapting to the trends I just mention, and to many other maybe less relevant for you now.

Within the European debate on what educational system we envisage, the core missions of higher education have been enriched and systematized. In one of the most recent Ministerial Conference, Leuven/LLN 2009, Ministers affirm that (quote) “The aim is to ensure that higher education institutions have the necessary resources to continue to fulfill their full range of purposes such as preparing students for life as active citizens in a democratic society; preparing students for their future careers and enabling their personal development; creating and maintaining a broad, advanced knowledge base and stimulating research and innovation”.

The first big step, back in 1999, has been the decision taken by Ministers for higher education that certain challenges can be faced only through intergovernmental cooperation. In the Bologna Declaration , 31 Ministers affirmed that (quote) “A Europe of Knowledge is now widely recognized as an irreplaceable factor for social and human growth and as an indispensable component to consolidate and enrich the European citizenship, capable of giving its citizens the necessary competencies to face the challenges of the new millennium, together with an awareness of shared values and belonging to a common social and cultural space”.

This Europe of Knowledge is a system of easily readable and comparable degrees – thanks to the three cycle structure, the ECTS, the Diploma Supplement, the frameworks of qualifications – where curricula are updated and students are at the centre of the learning process – thanks to the definition of reference learning outcomes, measurement of students workload, students participation in quality assurance.

Its main features are mobility of students and staff, full recognition of learning related activities - including the ones taken in mobility periods -, full recognition of academic qualifications and prior learning, attention given to employability and graduates career.

A central role is played by quality culture and quality assurance. The first one is the pre - condition for any qualitative assessment that universities and higher education institutions wish to undertake within their own structure. It encompasses open and active commitment, willingness to engage in such a process by the different decision making layers of the institution, clarity and consistency of procedures and, last but not least, effective follow up mechanisms. Quality Assurance, instead, defines the system with which the aims of a certain activity are chosen and the related procedures are agreed, in order to guarantee its fitness **for** purpose and fitness **of** purpose, within a reasonable duration of time. It implies a constructive process towards improvements.

On another front, the European Union – despite its limited competencies on educational systems – tried hard to keep high in the agenda educational issues and financial support to the knowledge triangle (education – research – innovation and knowledge transfer). Some achievement have been reached with the Lisbon Strategy and there are lots of expectation on the recently approved Europe 2020 Strategy.

Back from past to present. 2010 represents a turning point of the European debate: the commitment of the Bologna Process to create the European Higher Education Area has been quite successfully met. Last march, in Budapest and Vienna, 47 Ministers for higher education celebrated this important achievement.

Nevertheless, while celebrating, Ministers were well aware of the fact that not all the policies and tools agreed have been followed up and implemented at acceptable levels. It would be unwise for me to try to convince you, who live the everyday University life, that ECTS are used correctly, that there are no barriers to mobility and recognition and that the learning process is students centered.

The policy cooperation at the European level has been extremely intense and open to all stakeholders, higher education institutions, students, quality assurance agencies, European institutions, labour market and teacher unions. What shall be the guideline towards 2020 is (quoting again the Ministers in Budapest and Vienna) ” the full and proper implementation of the agreed objectives and the agenda for the next decade set by the Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve Communiqué. In close cooperation with higher education institutions, staff, students and other stakeholders [...] We acknowledge the key role of the academic community - institutional leaders, teachers, researchers, administrative staff and students - in making the European Higher Education Area a reality“.

The first tests of this new bottom – up approach will be the match of the “2020 benchmark” (20% of graduates with mobility experiences by 2020) and the match of the hidden benchmark on the social representation of student body within higher education, which should reflect the diversity of Europe’s populations.

Last but not least, and I sincerely hope that you will take this input in your work for this conference, all the true supporters of the European Higher Education Area, of its core values and innovative visions must improve their “pr and communication skills”. Too much mis – communication has been done around it, either by blaming the European Higher Education Area of failures it was not responsible for or by “throwing” it in the national context without adequate support, information, follow up mechanisms.

To conclude, I would like to share with you the conviction that students must contribute more to the realization of the European Higher Education Area. We have to take care of it and you have to make your voice and proposal heard.