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How Can the Leadership of the Universities Promote Intercultural Dialogue?

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Ladies and gentlemen,

Introduction

The division of labour during this session is that I will share with you some general ideas on the theme, which focuses on the role of university leadership or management in promoting intercultural dialogue in wider society. After this there will be presentations of more concrete case studies. One of my main arguments – to tell you this already at the outset - is that the best general instrument which university leadership has in her or his hands is to work via the students, soon to enter the labour market in various professions.

Some starting-points

I will start with some words on the value basis of universities. What are our universities? What place do they occupy in the knowledge society of this new millennium? The usual description of their activities is, as you all are well acquainted with, to provide young people, having left some 12 years of schooling behind, with that kind of knowledge and skills which modern society demands from the best educated labour force. The other task is to create new knowledge. Sometimes this knowledge is purely theoretical, sometimes it is nearer to be put to practical use. So the two major tasks are: Education and research. It is common to add a third mission for the universities, and that is service to society. This is the traditional way to describe the activities of our universities. You can find these major tasks in laws, regulations and other documents. But the universities also have a mission to foster certain attitudes and behaviours among its students, although it is much less stated in official documents. The educational process as such is supposed to give results more or less as a side-effect. Also, I suppose it has something to do with the age of new-entrants into universities. In some countries, in fact a majority of them, the students are about 20 when being admitted, in other countries somewhat older. As to what values, norms and attitudes the younger generations are supposed to acquire there is a clear distinction between on one hand the school-level (compulsory and upper secondary schooling) on one hand, and the post-secondary on the other. The students are grown-up people, in their own right, whereas school pupils still are the target for direct influences from parents and teachers.

What values, then, are associated with the activities of universities? Officially we find a number of key-words as democracy, international understanding, human rights. It is fascinating to see how these officially stated goals or values have a tendency to change over time. One example is sustainable society, which has come up on the agenda fairly recently. If we look back new radical goals were added in the wake of 1968, at least in

my own country. However, there is definitely something more at the heart of universities, besides the aspirations that are reflected in the kind of key-words I just mentioned. What is it?

Easy to ask, difficult to answer in a few words! And probably the answer will differ, from person to person. My answer to this prize-winning question is this. With their roots in the intellectual and religious life of medieval society, universities evolved during the Renaissance, were very much influenced by the ideas associated with the Enlightenment, broadened their scope during the 19th century to become, in our own days, one of the most important actors in modernizing our societies. The key-words during this long journey are rationalism, facts, respect for facts, the idea that it is always right to challenge accepted knowledge, and the idea that it is irrelevant who puts forward new ideas and facts; a debate is won by the one having the best arguments and facts, not by the richest, oldest or most influential protagonist. With respect for facts is also linked humbleness - the realisation that you have to give up your own ideas if facts talk against you. This, ladies and gentlemen, is my interpretation of the core values of universities – rationalism, respect for facts, acceptance of all people irrespective of social standing, ethnic background etc, and humbleness!

Ways to promote intercultural dialogue

Now, let us approach the question set for us in this session: What can university leadership do to promote intercultural dialogue? I think there are mainly two fields in which university leadership can operate. Let us call one of them hard-ware, the other soft-ware.

The first one, to put it in a few words, is to keep your university in good shape with respect to intercultural dialogue. My major message in this presentation is that what university leadership can do to promote intercultural dialogue in wider society – at a general level – is to see to it that all students on graduation take with them a set of values that make all of them reliable supporters of the attitudes in society that, together with other measures, will prevent inter-culturally motivated tensions. Some of the students, or more precisely the former students, might even become champions of the dialogue. And the argument is that you cannot adopt such attitudes during your life as a student unless the day-to-day practice on campus is in line with the basic ideas about intercultural dialogue. As an academic leader you can't say one thing and act in another; any student will find out such discrepancies. This theme – what can be done at campus in terms of increasing the intercultural dialogue – was dealt with during the previous Council of Europe seminar, last year in Strasbourg. Generally these two seminars must be looked upon as twin exercises, they are really interrelated. From the perspective of university management it is both a question of stimulating research and teaching in areas of intercultural dialogue and a question of managing your own university in line with intercultural practice. At my university, have we succeeded in attracting students from under-privileged groups, such as immigrants? How are our policies in the field of human resources in terms of hiring staff from other countries? Have the student unions at our university succeeded in integrating students from various parts of the world into their activities? Have we set up special projects directly targeted to promote intercultural dialogue? What study programs have a bearing on intercultural dialogue - directly or indirectly? I can see in the documentation from the previous seminar that one

question, which was discussed, concerns if internationalisation is enough to promote intercultural dialogue, or if there must be something more to it. The problem was formulated like this: Is internationalisation only a necessary precondition, but not a sufficient one for intercultural dialogue?

It is obvious that what university management can do in fields such as these is very important for the students at large, soon to leave the university and start their professional careers. The more concrete the measures on campus have been, the higher will be the impact. In parallel there is the “soft-ware” part of a student’s experience of her or his time at university, to which I referred earlier. The students enter the labour market. They will probably be active there for three or four decades. Many of them – of course not all of them - will occupy decision-making positions in various branches of society, in business, in administration, in cultural life, in politics etc. Perhaps I am naïve – many Swedes have a reputation for being so – but I strongly believe that the values, attitudes and beliefs that you have met during your life as a student will have an impact on your attitudes later on in life. And these influences work at two levels. If the graduate has been trained in transferable skills such as language proficiency, has taken a course related to intercultural dialogue, has had teachers of various cultural and ethnic backgrounds – these are obvious influencing factors. Hopefully the graduates take this with them in their future careers, and can have more or less direct use of it. But even more so is the general atmosphere and experience of academic life and studies. I now come back to where I started. I said that, at best, universities are institutions in society that stand for rationalism, respect of facts, human rights in every sense of the word, readiness to incorporate the unknown. When higher education works according to its own high aspirations the students are invited into this common world of belief in knowledge as a source of building human relations and harmonious societies. The opposite is ignorance and lack of knowledge, which too easily is the basis of prejudices, opportunism etc. It is here that I might be accused of being naïve – namely my belief that knowledge matters, also when it comes to preventing ethnic related tensions in our societies.

So this is the argument: In general terms university management can best promote intercultural dialogue in wider society by seeing to it that the graduates during their time on campus have met the kind of attitudes and behaviour which will prevent tensions of the kind we are talking about here and, this is the important thing, which will have long-term effects. The older you get, the more you realise that it is these general and indirect lessons you learnt at university that yield the greatest pay-offs in the long run. Even if we all hope for rapidly decreasing inter-culturally related tensions, the dialogue we are trying to promote here is really something of a life-long undertaking.

Rectors as actors

As I said I have talked in general terms here. Let me also be somewhat more concrete. What can university leadership do to promote intercultural dialogue *in persona*, as individuals? It differs. Europe is a fantastic continent, for its variety. Universities also vary, and with them their Rectors. I have had the privilege to work half my professional life with a great number of Rectors, in my own country and in Europe at large. They vary from a Nobel Prize winner to Rectors of quite other orientations. And they all have different personalities. In some cases a university leader can be quite an official person and have a good position in media. Such rectors might have access to national fora

where public opinion is moulded. There are Rectors working more within their organisations. I think one can generalise and say that most Rectors abstain from appearing too often in the general debate, unless there is a special reason for it. And when they appear, they do so in matters closely related to university matters. This means that you will probably not see a newspaper article by Rector X about the importance of intercultural dialogue in general. But it might be, if something good or bad has happened at her or his university which is related to this issue. The degree to which the general public listens to university leaders is also dependent on the general position of universities among the citizens. In my own country there is an annual list of institutions in society which people at large have confidence in. I'm proud to tell you that universities, together with the health care system, are usually among those with top rankings. Naturally, the impact of what university leaders say in public is closely related to the fact if there is some sort of a "moral" platform to speak from.

The Bologna Process

This conference has as one of its titles "Promoting Intercultural Dialogue in the European Higher Education Area". As you know, soon the preparatory period for establishing the EHEA will expire, after ten years of more or less common efforts to create something like a European system for higher education. By 2010 the EHEA will be in place, and we are now looking for another ten year period beyond this year. I'm one of those travelling from one university to another, from one country to another, to look into things in order to get an idea of how far we have come in relation to the various goals originally set up in 1999 and then elaborated every second year by the Ministers of Education, the university leaders and the student unions. One of the major goals has been to promote mobility among students and among staff. If European universities would be fully successful in this respect it would definitely have positive effects on intercultural dialogue. The more students and staff go abroad and meet and experience other ways to tackle common problems and to get into contact with other cultural settings, the more will they understand the importance of intercultural dialogue. In general one can say that great steps forward have been taken as to student mobility, even if still there are many practical problems to be solved. We are much less successful in stimulating academic staff to move around. Another aspect of the Bologna Process is the structure of programs and courses, based on a credit system for accumulating points. It is easier in such a curriculum structure to introduce a course let's say in intercultural dialogue in relation to the orientation of the major degree. And the division into the Bachelor and Master degrees - I take this just as an example - would allow for a Bachelor of a general orientation followed at the Master level by a specialisation in intercultural dialogue. And the complete success would be if this Master program could be provided as a joint degree, that is a program for which two universities in different countries are responsible. This would be something like a crown jewel!

Thank you for your attention!