



Association of International Education Administrators
Leaders in International Higher Education

The Role of the Academy in Facilitating Global Understanding

Rolf Tarrach, President
University of Luxembourg

These are exciting times. Humankind faces major challenges which demand - beyond scientific knowledge and technologies - an unprecedented worldwide cooperation based on mutual trust. We are at a loss on how to accomplish this. The tragedy of the commons, the dominance of immediate results and benefits, our difficulty in understanding long term issues and their uncertainties, the weak foundations of strong solidarity, to name but a few, (all of them possibly determined by the evolutionary history of our species), make dealing with these challenges a Herculean task. Few, if any, of those who make the important decisions do so with full understanding of all the facts and options. The pale blue dot - our Earth - has become a global home for many of us, but arguably our brains are not prepared for dealing with this level of complexity and diversity. Whether collectively, as technology allows us to communicate anywhere with anyone, we will be able to cope with the great challenges facing us, remains to be seen. However, we have no choice but to try and to believe that we can.

Universities play an important role in preparing the future generations for these times. This is especially true now that information is ubiquitous, but knowledge is still a rare commodity. What is new is that we have to prepare our students for living and working anywhere and not just in our country, our continent, our region. We have to prepare them to do many kinds of jobs, not just one. In Southern Europe the crisis is currently pushing hundreds of thousands of young graduates to look abroad, anywhere, for a job, for a chance to live an independent and fulfilling life. Being a migrant will most likely be a common status for many students who are now enrolling in universities. But even for those who will stay in their own country, understanding the outside world, and being able to learn from other cultures will be essential for their professional activity as well as for their role as responsible citizens of our world.

Most of us have not properly gone through the Copernican revolution. Most of us believe that our country, our culture, our music, our language, our religion - or our lack of it -, our literature and ourselves are better, deeper, more subtle, more powerful, truer, richer and brighter than others'. Of course, on grounds of elementary reasoning, this has to be wrong. Surveys have shown that more than 90% of Swedish male drivers consider themselves to belong to the better performing half of Swedish male drivers; that more than 80% of French male lovers consider themselves to belong to the better performing half of French male lovers; that most religious believers deem that their religion is the only true one, and so on. These are easy examples of how we can be wrong, because the mathematics tell us that we have to be wrong.

Beyond what is obviously wrong, and yet believed by many or most, there are all the more subtle questions: to mention but one, most Americans do not doubt that individual rights are more fundamental than collective rights. Is the foundation of this attitude right? There are other

cultures that see it the other way round. Would it not be better to listen to the others, to try to understand them and - maybe - to even learn from them? I am not a relativist and I have opinions of what is better here than there, but only if I truly know and understand the others am I able to judge in a knowledgeable way.

University education offered today should provide our graduates with enough knowledge to be post-Copernican. They have to be able to understand the others or at least to be able to realize that they do not understand the way others think, but that this is no basis for thinking that we are right and the others are wrong. An international education is the most effective step leading to a better understanding of others, and an efficient vaccination against xenophobia and jingoism. Furthermore, it allows one to learn from others! Unfortunately a truly international education is neither easy to provide nor a guarantee that the goal of empowering the students in understanding the others will be achieved, but it is the best we can offer, and in our times, increasingly necessary.

It is doubtful that we will understand others while only speaking English; do not forget the saying “traduttore, traditore” or Goethe’s “Wer keine fremden Sprachen versteht, versteht auch die eigene nicht”¹, which hints at a deeper limitation of monolingualism. To keep these remarks near my own intensive linguistic and living experiences, I doubt that Germans, Frenchmen, Spaniards, Swiss or Luxembourgers, their relation to authority, to the government, to their languages, to their rights and duties, their acceptance of misconduct or affaires, their concept of privacy and obviously their culture can properly be grasped without knowing their languages. And at an even more personal level, I doubt Catalan separatism can be understood - let alone approved - without speaking Catalan. Now, one certainly cannot aim at knowing the 6000 or so languages still spoken on our planet, but just knowing another important language well, immediately gives us a completely different world view and philosophy of life, as one moves from a mono-cultural point of view to one which tells you that some things are better in your country or culture but other things are better in the other country or culture. This then allows an extrapolation to other cultures and nations that is less accessible to monolingual people. One point does not allow for extrapolations, but two do. There is no depth in one-eyed vision. Bilingualism also increases substantially the chances of being proven wrong, and thus broadens our capacity to correct and learn.

The US will very likely go on playing a leading role in world affairs for the foreseeable future; to do so successfully and if possible peacefully, American leaders will have to have a much better understanding of other regions than what has been the case until now. This is an essential task to be performed by American universities and colleges. It will only be possible if presidents consider this pending Copernican revolution as “Chiefsache”, their own responsibility. Of course a president with her or his own international experience will do so more easily and perhaps more convincingly, but often the regret of not having had the possibility of enjoying an international experience is a strong motivator for offering the students precisely what one could not have oneself.

It is important to realize that even for a college with mostly local students and aiming at a local job market, international approaches are important inasmuch as understanding the problems today and even more so in finding their solutions that require more and more diverse points of views. This broader, more diverse approach comes more easily with an international - rather than with a more traditional - education.

¹ “Who does not understand foreign languages neither understands his own.”

However, not any international experience will do the job I am proposing here. For an American student to spend a year in the UK, in Australia, or even in some of the many excellent universities in many non-English speaking countries that offer graduate courses in English, will not contribute so much to a comprehensive understanding of a different culture than to follow courses in say Spanish, Mandarin or Arabic. And the world desperately needs American leaders with this kind of experience which they cannot acquire in the English-speaking world! One should also not forget that when English is spoken by everybody the added value will come from the other languages one speaks.

Power will be distributed differently in the future. It will be the power of understanding each other that will make it possible for democracy and civilization to have the upper hand. For that to be achieved we need a more international, less national, education. America's Higher Education system has the strength to transform itself into a genuinely international one. Strategic goals should be set at having in the not too distant future a large majority of graduates who are able to express themselves in another language and who possess a solid understanding of another culture. For universities in non-English speaking countries the situation is more complex, as English is essential in any case, so that the reasoning followed *ut supra* would demand a third language. That is indeed what is considered the ideal situation for continental European students, but we are generally not there yet, except in some multilingual hot spots, like Luxembourg.

It is precisely in those countries, states or regions where several official languages coexist where one could think that learning another foreign language beyond English seems almost impossible. This is not so. The greatest challenge is to master a second language and, once that is achieved, the others are more easily learned. A famous example is the one of the Emperor Charles V who spoke Flemish with the beggars, French with men, Italian with ladies, German with his horse and Spanish to God.

Ideally, languages, like mathematics, should be learnt at a young age, well before one enters college. But this would precisely be an important windfall benefit of an international higher education: it would lead to welcomed changes in school curricula. The sciences are essential to understand nature and to learn from her, but the languages are essential to understand others and to learn from them.