The Europe of Universities

Perspectives and Recommendations.

A special contribution issued by the French University Presidents' Conference (CPU) in the wake of its annual conference.

2018

This contribution has been presented to the presidents of European Rectors' conferences during a meeting organized by the CPU at Sorbonne Nouvelle University on the first day of the Ministerial Conference.

Gilles Roussel, President of the CPU
Président de l'Université Marne-la-Vallée

In 2018, higher education and research are more European than ever. While the twentieth anniversary of Europe's Ministerial Conference on Higher Education, also known as the Bologna Process Conference, is being celebrated in Paris this year, significant moves are also under way as regards the European higher education and research area with the publication, in June, of the European Commission's orientations for its future framework programme.

It is in this context and with a wish to focus on "the Europe of universities" that the CPU organised its annual symposium at the Université de Bourgogne on March 15-16. Indeed, 2018 gives us a unique opportunity to reflect collectively about the Europe our institutions need, be it about excellence or innovation, as well as the Europe they aspire to.

Monitored by Carle Bonafous-Murat, who is President of Sorbonne Nouvelle University as well as chair of the committee for European affairs (Comité Europe) the CPU recently created, this symposium was structured around thematic workshops and round tables enabling university managers, local representatives, companies, associations and international organisations to confront their viewpoints, stances and ambitions concerning Europe.

The 2018 CPU symposium therefore endeavoured to ponder over the future form of the "European universities" and academic networks called for by the President of the French Republic in his Sorbonne speech in September 2017. It also made considerable room to deal with what is at stake for the universities participating in European programmes, the redefinition of local policies, or how to interact with regional and national decision-makers, research organisations and the ministry for Higher Education, Research and Innovation.

European policies and programmes obviously impact universities. Conversely, the responsibility to boost changes rests with universities and the CPU, which represents them in their diversity. Many have already made the most of this responsibility. Thanks to their autonomy, each of them can assess the reality of its location, its organisation, its history, its culture and, what matters most, offer these assets to students in the European higher education and research area.

Bologna secured major changes such as the harmonisation of courses and degrees, the increase in students' mobility, a new global attractiveness for Europe and so many other achievements. We must keep this momentum going and confirm that there exists a European community of practises in learning, research, innovation and knowledge dissemination. We must also champion a more integrated approach to European programmes and reinforce international partnerships and exchanges between international research groups. In brief, we must build new ecosystems engaging the academic community in its entirety and allowing institutions to appropriate what can now be called "the spirit of Bologna".

But beyond programmes and measures, what French higher education and research institutions promote and share in the first place are a certain set of values. These include humanism, openness, citizenship, secularity, equality between women and men, the refusal of all discriminations, developing critical minds and the valorisation of research.

On several occasions throughout history, academia has been jeopardised by attempts at political appropriation, the rise of nationalisms and a mistrust in science. But it always managed to defend the universality of knowledge, playing an essential part in fighting obscurantism and the temptation of authoritarianism, and promoting peace. Today, as the enemies of democracy gain ground in Europe and the sense of a European identity is weakened amongst certain populations, culture is a shield. It adds to the communal, it turns our differences into assets—provided it is shared as widely as possible. And let us not forget that, at the doors of Europe, there are researchers and intellectuals who are the victims of threats, imprisonments or things even worse.

This is the reason why universities and all higher education and research institutions must and can, as they have proved in the past, be a driving force in the European project. And since we do not intend to give up building academic communities with Great Britain after Brexit, we conceive of Europe in the broad sense of the term, including the Mediterranean countries, Africa and more broadly all the French-speaking areas with which we have strong historical links.

We need to join forces and expert skills to develop, endorse and impose this Europe of excellence and innovation. We must find a way to institutionalise our cooperations without imposing rigid
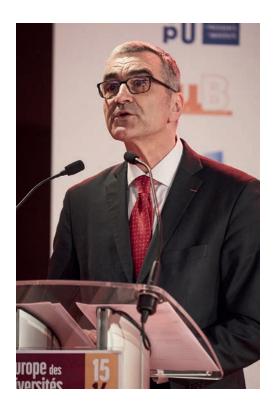
frames or restraining liberties and always foregrounding common values. We have made progress in the harmonisation of degrees and courses and in sharing expertise. We must move even further, it is our responsibility. It should be considered as a real commitment.

We must get ahead together in the European higher education and research area, imagining new collaborations, pooling what can be made mutual, inspiring, knowing and emulating one another. That is why we hope to strengthen our links with the other assemblies of university presidents in Europe.

The CPU plays a major part in negotiating the project on "European universities" and academic networks. It will keep doing so, with all higher education and research executives. In order to ground its strategic influence upon EU institutions, it reinforced its board in Brussels where it regularly schedules meetings for presidents. Therefore, thanks to its partnerships with the Banque Populaire, the Caisse des Dépôts, the MAIF and the Mgen, the CPU will carry on with its mission to represent, influence and make the excellence of institutions better known, be it in France or Europe.

Gilles Roussel, President of the CPU
Président of the Université Marne-la-Vallée

Université de Bourgogne

"Universities share the founding values of Europe : respect for human diversity and dignity, freedom, equality, democracy, respect for human rights and the rule of law.
Thus, higher education and research can give a new impetus to the building of Europe. French universities are ready to do so. This is the very meaning of our annual symposium."

Alain Bonnin, President of the Université de Bourgogne

An interview with Carle Bonafous-Murat: in universities, "Europe sparks interest but also raises questions"

As President of Sorbonne Nouvelle University and chair of the CPU's Committee for European Affairs, Carle Bonafous-Murat monitored the CPU's symposium "The Europe of Universities". As the question of Europe is particularly central this year, with Europe's ministerial Conference on Higher Education organised by France in May and the publication of the European Commission's orientations for its future framework programme in June, the symposium was highly successful, with more than 250 participants.

According to Carle Bonafous-Murat, the very fruitful exchanges covered a broad spectrum of topics in relation with the Europe of universities. The 17 proposals that stemmed from the symposium "set clear objectives". However, they also lead to the same conclusion: "there is a necessity to develop the potential of French universities on the European scene".

What do you conclude from this symposium dedicated to "the Europe of universities" ?

Carle Bonafous-Murat: The symposium attracted more than 250 participants, including around sixty university presidents as well as many stakeholders from the political and socio-economic fields and representatives from students' associations. These figures show that Europe sparks interest but also raises questions on certain occasions, for it is not easy to design a joint European strategy that would reach a consensus between all the active members of the same institution, especially lecturers and researchers. In that respect, the vade-mecum on how to respond to European calls for proposals, produced by the bureau of the CPU in Brussels, is a very useful tool.

Besides, a great number of issues have been explored thanks to the diversity of the workshops and round tables, ranging from the CPU's lobbying policy in Brussels to the new forms taken by students' mobility, especially with the development of digital resources or student entrepreneurship. We wanted one of the three topics to be specifically focused on students and very lively debates have been held in the workshops in relation to the role and place of students in Europe.

The European area for higher education has been a reality for years but it needs to be strengthened and renewed. In these days of identitarian closure and mistrust in Europe, this renewal is more necessary than ever, and it is the reason why students must wholly share in it.

To what extent will the symposium's proposals impact Europe's key decisions ?

The 17 proposals resulting from the symposium define clear objectives and are meant to challenge the French government and EU institutions about the measures necessary to reach these goals. Some of them echo proposals made by other European associations or conferences of university presidents: the HRK and the EUA, amongst others, are also asking for a doubling of the funds granted to universities in the next framework programme. Others are more specifically linked to the situation in France, such as the inclusion of a training course on Europe in the May 2016 decree on doctoral degrees, which aims at introducing the future generations of researchers and lecturers to European values and issues.

Beyond that, all the proposals show the same necessity: developing the potential of French universities on the European scene. If we want the rate of responses to European calls for proposals to reflect what France can do for research and learning, we do need additional funding to make sure some very good projects won't be left out, but we should also map out joint strategies to set projects up: universities and research organisations must cooperate more closely in such matters. To do so, we will keep calling upon decision-makers in Brussels as well as France for support. The CPU's bureau regularly meet ministers in Paris while the bureau in Brussels carries out a lobbying policy to make our proposals known and heard. In this regard, the participation of the CPU in the Bologna ministerial conference held in May will be decisive.

Has the symposium helped to define the future "European universities" mapped out by the president of the Republic in his Sorbonne speech last September ?

Everybody had the topic of the "European universities" in mind and the round table dedicated to it, to which the Minister contributed, helped answer some questions.

First of all, it is clear that there are not one but several models for European universities (cross-border, transnational, in network or with a stronger integrated governance) and the university presidents who spoke on this subject clearly showed the variety of projects.

Secondly, their creation must use existing or emerging networks as a basis, the European Commission still having to specify the legal frame for their constitution. The procedure is both bottom-up and top-down.

However, some questions remain unsettled: for instance, what part will be played by the member states? Will they contribute financially to the implementation of these universities? It seems there is still some disagreement on this point for the moment, especially between EU-15 and EU-13 countries. Besides, how could students receive the same degree from these universities? It is well known that regulations differ from one member state to another and arrangements will have to be made, without them being complex administrative manoeuvres.

Carle Bonafous-Murat,
President of the Université Sorbonne Nouvelle

The Committee for European Affairs: structuring what the CPU can do on a European level

Created in December 2016 by the Bureau of the CPU, this committee meets the increasing need to structure the actions of the CPU on a European level, in relation with the CPU's representatives in Brussels.

The committee keeps interacting with the various commissions in the CPU, especially with the Corie, in charge of international and European relations. As European matters and this year's key gatherings presented major challenges, it seemed necessary to create a transversal committee that would be exclusively dedicated to this topic and could react quickly, addressing current European affairs at the crossroads between research, training and innovation.

The Committee for Europe has two main objectives: it receives information from the decision-makers in charge of European and national policies regarding Europe. Its role is to work and debate on the CPU's proposals and recommendations regarding European issues. It is, incidentally, a chamber of echo for European policies.

Frédérique Vidal,
Minister of Higher Education, Research and Innovation

The CPU's Recommendations

1. The CPU fully supports the creation of "European universities" — excellence networks diversely designed and aiming to favour an integrated approach to learning, research, innovation and entrepreneurship — throughout the European territory.

2. The CPU defends an inclusive and variable conception of excellence in research and learning. It hopes that the initiatives freely undertaken by European higher education institutions will eventually strengthen the cohesion between all the member states and help to develop territorial ecosystems, associating regions and higher education institutions through a joint strategy.

3. The CPU stresses the importance of sustaining the collaborations with British universities beyond the institutional framework that will be defined by the European Union at the end of the negotiations on Brexit, a framework that should not put an end to partnerships enhancing the development of research, innovation and training in Europe or globally. It also invites to maintain a generous and reciprocal policy in the handling of students' mobility.

4. The CPU reasserts that universities play a major part in the promotion of European values such as tolerance, open-mindedness, academic freedom and solidarity: it calls for an academic mobilisation throughout Europe to promote these values more strongly, and actively develop a sense of European culture and citizenship among young people.

5. The CPU is favourable to spreading open access, nationally or in the Union. In keeping with this commitment, it intends to support initiatives fostering the development of open science.

6. The CPU would like the proportion of students having benefited from a study period or internship in another European country at some point in their training to reach 50%. In this view, it asks for a significant increase of the means allocated to European mobility, recommends the inclusion of mobility in curricula and encourages the development of virtual mobility, hoping to impact as many students and learners as possible as part of their lifelong learning.

7. The CPU asks for an investment plan favouring the development of innovative pedagogies and infrastructures necessary to back up virtual mobility, as well as the digitisation of the courses offered in the European higher education area.

8. In order to support student entrepreneurship and allow its spreading as a status, the CPU asks for a programme like Pepite to be implemented on a European scale, in parallel with the support given to the national apparatus.

9. The CPU offers to promote, through the new Erasmus+ procedures, the internationalisation of apprenticeship and sandwich courses in higher education. In order to make moves easier for apprentices, the CPU asks for the possibility to suspend employment contracts during the period of mobility, with Erasmus+ guaranteeing a financial relay.

10. The CPU confirms its commitment to the objective, set within the framework of the Europe 2020 strategy, to see 3% of the GDP invested in public or private research and innovation in all member states, including France. In order to guarantee the scientific independence of Europe, address tomorrow's major social issues appropriately and better fund increasingly more projects, it asks, as other European academic associations have done, for a doubling of the budget allocated to research and innovation in the next framework programme.

11. In agreement with the other conferences of European rectors and as a result of its constant efforts to find the means required to invest and be always more academically competitive, the CPU asks once more to stop applying the Maastricht criteria to investments in higher education and research.

12. The CPU calls for an integrated approach involving the European Commission Directorates-General (especially DG RTD, EAC and REGIO) and a greater harmonisation of their funding rules.

13. In order to carry out an efficient lobbying policy in Brussels, the representatives of the CPU will work towards more dialogue and joint actions gathering all the European actors in Higher Education, Research and Innovation, relying specifically on the research partnerships and higher education and research institutions present there.

14. The CPU invites European higher education and research institutions to plan a strategy to influence other areas of the globe, especially by engaging overseas universities in teamwork with neighbouring countries.

15. The CPU advises that the engineering and support services for European projects be connected or even made mutual by the partners of a same cluster. More generally, it recommends that local contracts include a section on a common European strategy specifying the part played by each partner, more particularly universities and research organisations.

16. The CPU requires that all institutions in charge of UMR (joint research units), including universities, be clearly mentioned when EU institutions and the French Ministry for Higher Education, Research and Innovation exchange information about European programmes.

17. The CPU recommends that part of doctoral training programmes be dedicated to Europe (European CV, project funding, career, knowing EU institutions and citizenship, open access, etc.).

Enriched version available on the CPU website

This special contribution has been issued by the CPU on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the Bologna process,in which it has been actively involved since 1998.