

**Conference "University, Culture and the City"**  
**16 May 2016**

**Allocution Karine Lalieux à la conférence "University, culture and the city"**

As the Deputy Mayor for Culture of the City of Brussels – the Belgian but also the European Capital –, I'm especially happy to be here to discuss on a European level this all important subject of "University, Culture and the City".

So, I first would like to express my sincere thanks to the Universidade NOVA de Lisboa, the Université libre de Bruxelles and the network UNICA for inviting me to this conference. The very interesting debates of the last two days have clearly shown how relevant its theme is, today more than ever.

I'm also especially thrilled to be here in Lisbon, a fabulous city with which Brussels has had and still has a lot of exchanges on the artistic and cultural levels. To only speak of our present time, did you know that the directors of two very important cultural organizations in Lisbon, the performing arts festival Alkantara (which starts next week) and the Teatro Maria Matos, are Belgian ? This has nurtured a fruitful dialogue between our cities, what is for example visible in the large number of Portuguese artists contributing to Brussels' cultural life – as does the sizeable Portuguese community of among 25.000 people which calls Brussels home.

In Brussels we make culture a priority. Brussels is one of the most multicultural capitals in Europe and a thriving artistic centre on par with much larger world cities. The city is home to almost 250 cultural festivals and celebrations, and has become an European hub for contemporary visual arts and artists, so much so that *The New York Times* recently described it as the new Berlin. But it is also a city with huge challenges, as recent events have dramatically shown.

As the Deputy Mayor for Culture of the City of Brussels, I deeply believe in the power of culture to foster inclusive growth and to stimulate a much needed dialogue between citizens and communities. Since entering service, I have successfully fought to maintain and even increase the budget for culture, a very unusual feat in our time of crisis, and I take daily actions to try bring culture to



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every citizen and to have every citizen's culture be represented by the city's cultural policy. This is why, to give only one example, as recently as last week I inaugurated in a peripheral area of the city a new cultural centre whose program will be made by and with the inhabitants themselves. Indeed, rather than a set of practices that separate the ones who engage with them and the ones who ignore them, culture has to be the common denominator of all citizens.

University has a huge role to play in the achievement of this goal. University is the ideal place to let people engage with culture and discover a diversity of cultures. The age between 18 and 25 is indeed the decisive period during which individuals take their autonomy as citizens, during which they overturn installed cultural patterns and acquire new ones that will deeply take root in their adult identity. This is the time when one learns that exterior ideas can shake one's set of values.

University must put students in contact with worlds – also cultural and aesthetic worlds – unknown to them. It is a crucial time to let people live first experiences of cultures that were far from them. Students should be given the reference points and intellectual tools which will allow them to create by themselves and for themselves a cultural identity which is simultaneously collective and personal. And to ensure that this culture is rich, open and balanced, it is essential that students be confronted with different knowledge cultures than their own.

The economic forces would let us believe that specialized schools are the answer to our educative needs. But disciplinary knowledge is worthless without the general culture that allows us to think freely and become active citizens. University is a defence against a functionalist and productivist vision of man. Its role is not only to educate specialists, but also to give each student the cultural depth that will allow his or her integration and active participation in society.

Let us also not forget that universities educate future teachers, the very one individuals that can play a decisive role in encouraging adolescents to engage in cultural activities. Making sure that these future teachers develop an awareness *to*

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– and hopefully a taste *for* – artistic practices during their studies would allow them to better play their important role of cultural catalysts.

We tend to take for granted that university students are active participants in cultural activities, but it is not always true, far from it. Actually, many young people do not practice any artistic activity, as actor nor spectator, and university is a unique chance to make them discover this world they don't know.

Most universities today have cultural missions and cultural departments that support artistic discovery, amateur artistic practices and the initiatives of the students' associations. Their work is often remarkable – for example at the ULB – but it not enough. Culture is still too often seen as ancillary while it should be at the very centre of the university project. Culture has to cross every student's path and to be life-changing for every student. We are not there yet.

University is, by definition, the place where all cultures meet. And at a time in which higher education and research become more and more globalized, it has a major role to play in giving a voice to different local cultures and letting them meet and dialogue. About 20.000 international students are for example enrolled in the higher education system in Brussels, a city of which half the population is of foreign nationality. Universities are a microcosm of our highly multicultural societies and, as such, they should show, both their own communities and the cities in which they are established, how the encounter of differences can be a constant enrichment and a fertile source of creativity and innovation.

Today more than ever, we have to be very attentive not to reduce any culture to its religious dimension. Cultures should be celebrated for their language, their music, their cuisine, their scientific achievements and so forth, and that can perfectly be done without falling into the trap of communitarism. As the place in which knowledge is built and transmitted, university can help achieve that goal. As much as ecological, economic and social aspects, it has become very clear that culture is a pillar of sustainability and must be put at the heart of our agenda.



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Lastly, reinforcing the links between university and culture has become an economic need. The economic future of world cities like Brussels and Lisbon is in large part tied to the development of the new creative industries of our information society. This was made very clear in the debates of the last summit of the World Cities Culture Forum, an important network of which Brussels is a member since 2015. And the growth of these new creative industries is very much linked to the capacity to let artistic, scientific and technological creation meet.

In Belgium in particular this is a challenge, as our country, unlike other countries, has historically not integrated artistic education into the universities. In Belgium, artistic disciplines are taught in specialist art schools. This has not supported the cross-fertilization of the scientific cultures, artistic cultures and social sciences that, as we today know, is central to innovation. The new education cupolas that bring together universities and art schools create possibilities by allowing students to open to knowledge cultures different than the one of their own discipline. Further efforts should be made to stimulate this encounter. We have to make sure that every student in a scientific discipline is put in contact with artistic research before leaving university – and vice-versa.

Why not, for example, have artists in residence at universities, staying in students' accommodations and making projects with and for the university community? Links should also be made between the university and the cultural organizations. If we want to give our cities a sustainable future, we all have to work together.

Culture allows us to think our future differently, to build models through other lenses than the ones offered to us by the past. To practice culture, as actor or as spectator, is to ask oneself challenging questions, to renew one's view of the world, to put oneself at risk. Our contemporary world very much needs that.

Thank you.

