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THE IMPORTANT ROLE OF UNIVERSITIES IN STRENGTHENING THE EUROPEAN UNION

'We European citizens are worried and scared'. These opening words of the *300 intellectuals' appeal*[1] might well capture what seems to be the dominant mood in Europe these days. News from home and abroad seems to suggest that if we are not yet worried and scared, then maybe we should be. In the context of the recent increase in 'EU-exit' discourses (Brexit but also, recently Polexit), nationalistic tendencies and growing dissatisfaction with and lack of faith in politics, there are many reasons to say: 'We European citizens are worried and scared.' But, let's not forget that, first and foremost, prior to being scared and anxious, we are European citizens, European scholars and academics, joined by pursuit of knowledge and commitment to rigorous inquiry. Worrying is not enough. Better tomorrow, for which so many hope, won't come without hard work, now and today. It won't come without concrete steps taken by the European university community towards strengthening the European Union in ways that respond to the undeniable and complex challenges we face.

Before giving into anxiety or rage, let's consider the context in which we find ourselves. According to Eurostat, 'in the EU-28 there were 19.6 million tertiary education students in 2013 (….) (of which 7.5 % were following short-cycle tertiary courses, 60.7 % were studying for Bachelor's degrees, 28.1 % for Master's degrees and 3.7 % for Doctoral degrees.')[2] 19.6 million tertiary education students. If we think about it in terms of a nation-state, that would be the 7th or 8th member state in terms of population size. This is how many people we can reach through our day by day work in research and teaching. In Poland alone, in 2012, there were almost 1.7 million students .[3] That's almost 8 times more than in 1990-1991. These are the students who pass through our doors but of course our impact stretches well beyond that.

In addition to this rising number of students, there's also been a steady increase in the number of students and staff participating in the Erasmus exchanges as well as foreign students

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[1] http://www.marchforeurope2017.eu/academic-community-launches-appeal-in-support-to-the-march-for-europe
[2] http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Tertiary_education_statistics
[3] http://www.nauka.gov.pl/g2/oryginal/2013_07/0695136d37bd577c8ab03acc5c59a1f6.pdf

taking up short-term and full-length study in Poland.[4] Thanks to our membership in the EU my university but also other Polish universities made a huge leap, being able to access to new research collaborations and funding for groundbreaking innovative projects and having the freedom and ability to fully participate in the European academic community. This sense of mobility and flexibility is now taken for granted by our students and many of our staff—a change that I am amazed to see remembering, very well, how different it was to study 25-30 years ago when unrestricted mobility was virtually inexistent. In this context of evident advances we have done over the last decades due to our membership in the EU, it is all the more important that, jointly, Polish and other European universities respond vigorously to rise of fear-based discourses in politics.

The challenges we face today are, of course, very different than those 30 years ago, and, as I see it, they stem largely from the rise of so-called 'post-truth/alternative facts' as well as the sense of increased fragmentation and the tearing of the social fabric into competing, enclosed camps, driven by exclusive agendas. This is visible at all levels: from the increased difficulty of hosting academic debates in an atmosphere of mutual respect within the university setting to the rise of nationalism and xenophobia anti-European sentiments on the national and international levels. These challenges, to which the universities must urgently respond, have a global, European character but also a highly specific local context and manifestation. Only by drawing and pursuing a firm and concrete plan of action, will we be able to effectively strengthen and reaffirm the fundamental importance of the founding and shared principles of the EU.

This process of reaffirming our commitment to the values of a democratic European community should start, at the university level, with an impassioned and persevering fight against all the more evident rise of 'post-truth', 'alternative facts', and similar forms of rhetorical and politcal manipulation. To this end, as Professor Barney Glover from the University of Western Sydney said in his speech to the National Press Club of Australia, we have to '[stand] up for evidence, dealing with disruption and above all asking questions about the complex problems we face today and in the future – and to never rest with the answers.'[5] In terms of research and teaching we need to instill a new type of rationalism and critical thinking in our students: a rigorous commitment to evidence-based inquiry and analysis, characterized by a critical openness and respect for contrasting views. In contrast to Michael Gove's infamous statement, made days

[4] http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/education_culture/repository/education/library/statistics/2014/poland_en.pdf
[5] http://www.universityworldnews.com/article.php?story=20170306234144724

before Brexit, that 'this country [the UK] has had enough of experts,'[6] we need to demonstrate and cherish the value of real expertise, namely expertise that is not an 'ivory-tower' position, 'away from the people', but one that is at the service of the local and international community. The key here is this two-way action: inside and outside of our universities. On the one hand, we have to work towards strengthening, across all disciplines, critical thinking and research skills, re-emphasizing the importance of evidence-based, scholarly and rigorous analysis based on inquiry not on impressions and opinions. On the other, we need to think how to best share and translate these key research skills in the context of everyday preoccupations and public debates, e.g. those on migration, international conflicts and ecology.

To this end, we need to devise long-term and sustainable public engagement programs that reach out to audiences from non-academic backgrounds and are built as partnerships between universities, civil society organizations and government agencies, for example those fighting social exclusion. In direct contrast to some states' actions, not least my own, we need to foster social cohesion within economically, culturally and politically diversified societies by, for example, encouraging and integrating migrant communities in our universities and helping those students displaced by conflict. Ukraine and Syria are two most obvious examples. We need to find ways of integrating our student body in these efforts. Can we maybe think of translating our commitment to solidarity by devising credit-bearing modules that would involve working with civil society organizations or maybe term-long joint service-projects with partnering institutions; or maybe facilitate the forming of student-to-student mentoring networks? All these small steps and measures are all the more important in the context of decreasing state funding, especially for civil rights organizations and groups, whether under the guise of austerity measures or outright change of political agenda. In addition to partnerships with non-academic and civil society stakeholders, another important area to consider is increased collaboration with secondary schools, especially those who have a high proportion of pupils from hard to reach backgrounds who do not go onto continue into higher and post-secondary education. Both these ideas, these are not the only ones of course, are all driven by our commitment to share our knowledge beyond the safety of our faculties and create opportunities for rigorous reflection and debate. Profound change and impact will not happen overnight. Universities' longitudinal engagement in socially meaningful projects, one that is guided by the commitment to shared European values, is key here. University, a community of

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[6] http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/06/10/michael-goves-guide-to-britains-greatest-enemy-the-experts/

scholars, must be an ever more inclusive environment if we are to demonstrate the relevance and importance of knowledge and truth.

Furthermore, the university, if it is to effectively counter the process of local and international fragmentation based on politics of fear and division, needs to confidently assume its position as a responsible and important voice in the public sphere; first within the most immediate community and national level and, second, stemming from that, on the international level. To ensure that our voice, and support for the European project, is heard beyond the academy and the national context and can get through the cacophony of divisive politics talk with a message of unity, solidarity and subsidiarity we need to strengthen the existing transnational exchange networks for students and staff and seek to form new research partnerships. These interdisciplinary and international networks would be the best starting point for tackling common problems and challenges, e.g. youth unemployment, ecological degradation or migrations, helping to navigate moments of crisis, the sharp turning points for contemporary Europe. Again, these bold and ambitious international collaborations should have a clear, outward looking orientation, seeking best ways of involving and reaching out to whole university communities, members of the public, European citizens, as well as policymakers and governments.

In addition to seeking international grants, it is important that we keep on developing and enlarging international networks of universities, such as UNICA and EUA, making sure that they do not become some elite-type exclusive clubs for the chosen few but rather that they provide space for the sharing of knowledge and best practice. The aim here is to build capacity across the whole EU-28, testifying to the possibility and benefits of working in culturally diverse settings. These inter-university bodies and networks are also well placed to actively contribute to the rethinking and renewing of European institutions and the wider European community. The European Parliament report from the 20th of December 2016, provided us with quite a grim diagnosis, admitting '[the] inability of the EU institutions to cope with the deep and multiple crises currently faced by the Union, the so-called 'polycrisis.'[7] Member states, some for lack of capacity and some for lack of political will, cannot deal with these challenges alone. In this context, non-governmental stakeholders, such as EUA and UNICA can, and need to, lend intellectual support for these efforts of reshaping EU institutions by maintaining commitment to the European project and its fundamental values and opposing

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[7] http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?type=REPORT&reference=A8-2016-0390&language=EN

those actions that want to create conflict and divisive confrontation within the European community.

In sum, universities, as the word '*universitas*' already implies, are communities of diverse members and as such are a microcosms of the wider European collective, best placed to initiate multi-level and multi-scale change. By fostering evidence-based critical thinking with our students and safeguarding the principles of respectful and informed debate we are countering the regime of post-truth and fear-based polemics. In so doing, we reaffirm are commitment to democratic dialogue. Yet, our impact and role in strengthening the EU does not stop there. From micro-level we can scale up to macro-level impact on the shape of EU and its institutions by forming interuniversity collaborations and exchanges, fostering public engagement, giving expression to a strong and unified intellectual appeal for unity, collaboration, solidarity, and democracy. There are no easy solutions or quick-fixes available here. Neither can we just carry on the way we did. In research, real innovation requires everyday perseverance and thinking outside the box. Similarly, the new challenges we face as a community of scholars and European community call for a courageous and bold action oriented towards the common good of all, not some. Meetings like this are just the starting point.