

University Cooperation, Europe and the UK
(Remarks delivered at the UNICA Rectors Conference, Rome, March 25, 2017)

Let me start by thanking Luciano Saso and the UNICA organising committee very warmly indeed for inviting me to speak at this wonderful event on behalf of my University, King's College London, and perhaps also, in a small way, on behalf of my country, the United Kingdom. Against the background of the UK's recent decision to leave the EU and now to trigger Article 50, it is hard not to feel - if I may use an idiom inspired by my fellow countryman William Shakespeare - a little like the 'ghost at the feast' at such an event as this, given that we are here to mark the sixtieth anniversary of the Treaty of Rome, one of the foundational documents of the project that became the EU. There is much of course to look back at in those sixty years, and much to celebrate; but it seems right also in current circumstances to look forward. In the relationship between the UK and the EU as it pertains to the University sector, certainly there will be some challenges; and inevitably there will be changes; but that does not mean that we will have any less to commemorate, and even celebrate, in the next sixty years than we have had in the past sixty. I am at heart an optimist; and as a scholar, in my academic life, of the ancient Greek and Roman worlds - and thus particularly delighted to be making these remarks in Rome - I tend to take a long view. The Treaty of Rome was inaugurated - without, of course, the UK as an original signatory - a *mere* sixty years ago. And the EU itself, with or without the UK, will continue to evolve and change, no doubt at times in quite unexpected ways, as all human institutions do. The UK may be withdrawing from the EU, but it is and will remain - in terms of geography, history, culture and tradition - at the heart of Europe. Its Universities will be no exception to that; indeed I hope they will remain a paradigm of that relationship. Organisations like UNICA, whose membership, as we see today, includes Universities from nations outside, as well as inside, the present EU, will surely have a vital role to play in ensuring that flourishing University collaboration continues between all of its members and across the whole of Europe.

But my purpose today is not to speculate on the precise form that such relationships will take. Brexit, as we must remind ourselves, has not, even with the triggering of Article 50, actually happened yet. And I would be claiming powers of prophesy that not even the Delphic Oracle possessed if I were to make any sort of guess as to how the University landscape in Europe will be affected by it. What I would like to do, instead, is try to identify some common challenges and opportunities that we as Universities in what one might call the European tradition will face regardless of what specific formal arrangements emerge from the post-Brexit settlement. It seems to me that for Universities in Europe, whether in the British Isles or on the continent, there are considerably more powerful challenges - if not altogether unrelated ones - than what to do with, or about, Brexit. But these challenges also, I think, provide great opportunities for cooperation between European Universities, and for a reassertion of their core values as Universities, and their ability to really make a difference in the world.

When the UK's former Minister of Education, and leading Brexiteer, Michael Gove, famously, or rather notoriously, declared that people in the UK 'have had enough of experts' he could easily be taken to have had Universities in mind. Equally, it seems as if the growth of the so-called 'post-truth' society - and here I think not just of Brexit but of the political

rise and election to office of the current President of the United States – can be seen to provide a grave challenge to the mission of the European University. But these developments, I think, also raise a paradox that we would do well to ponder: it seems to me that the supposed revolt against expertise, and against the very idea of truth itself, is perhaps more than anything a reflection of people's continued craving for certainties in a very uncertain world. It is, surely, people's disappointment in the failure to find, or be provided with, truth, disappointment in the attempts of experts to explain and help resolve the world's problems, that is most likely to produce the response that in some quarters seems to be prominent: away with truth, and down with the experts.

The temptation for those of us involved in our professional lives in the production and dissemination of knowledge is perhaps to be scornful of such responses - which would be ironic, in view of our own mission, as researches, to seek to understand and explain the world's phenomena. It is tempting indeed for us to reassert the importance of truth, of facts, and of knowledge. As academics and as educators, we could hardly do otherwise. And yet to do so risks, in a certain way, reinforcing the problem rather than addressing it. It risks, perhaps, conveying a view that what actually counts as true and as knowledge, can itself be anything other than a matter of constant testing and debate. Truth and knowledge are so valuable precisely because, in relation to matters of any complexity, the attempt to establish them is hugely difficult and almost always fallible. What we know, or think we know, is at any point subject to revision or subversion by new evidence, new ideas, new ways of thinking. To say this is not to give further ammunition to those who would celebrate a supposedly 'post-truth' world. It is, rather, to seek to correct one of the errors on which such movements are built: the error of supposing that we have ever lived in a world in which certainty or fixity was easily attainable, or even a good thing. It is this myth of certainty, I believe, more than any other, from which the cynicism of 'post-truth' arises.

We need, then, as Universities in a proud European tradition, to perform the difficult task, in such uncertain times, of upholding the values of uncertainty: for these are, simply put, the values of open-ended, critical and independent enquiry that must remain the cornerstone of the University mission. And we need to reiterate, in an age of increasing polarisation of views - again, a paradoxical but intelligible counterpart to the slogans of 'post-truth' - that, where there is an answer at all, it often has the tendency to lie in the middle, drawing from a variety of views that others might take false comfort in representing as diametrically opposed and mutually exclusive. My hero here is a figure about whose philosophy I have had the privilege of writing, that proud patriotic Roman Marcus Tullius Cicero, whose philosophy of scepticism - in the sense of avoidance of dogmatic certainties - held that we must proceed by examining arguments on all sides of a question, and determining not which position was certainly true and which false, but which, if any, was more reasonable. In a supposedly post-truth age, perhaps we in our universities need to be a little bit 'pre-truth': to have the courage to say that nobody, outside very rare genius, has irrefutable answers to the big questions. We are all searching, and searching is hard work; but without the search, the prospect of even approximating the truth becomes not closer but ever more distant.

There is one more way in which, at the present time, it seems to me that our Universities need to display courage. One of the main areas of focus at my own University is the idea of Service to Society; and there can be no doubt that the resources and - dare I say it -

expertise that our Universities possess should be at the service of meeting the problems and challenges of the societies in which they are embedded. But I think it is also important to say that while the service mission is indeed vital to the future flourishing of Universities in Europe, the focus on service to society should not be confused with our simply becoming servants of society. One of the most frustrating things for me about the Brexit movement in the UK is the way that the Brexiteers succeeded in having themselves portrayed as the 'insurgents', the true radicals striking against the status quo. Now is not the time or place to say why I think that that self-portrayal was a deeply misleading one; what I would like to say is that we as representatives of Universities in Europe need, ourselves, to maintain a little bit of the insurgent spirit. The place of a University is sometimes, maybe frequently, to challenge or be critical of the status quo; it is important therefore that we continue to remind ourselves that one of the most vital contributions that Universities can make is to serve as an independent voice; our project is surely to continue, above all at times such as these, to ask fundamental questions and to explore those questions without fear or favour. And the most effective way to serve one's society can sometimes be to interrogate it mercilessly; serving society does not and should not mean conformity with whatever set of values one's society happens to uphold. Let us, then, not shirk from asking difficult questions, about our societies and about ourselves. If we can in this way be true to the task of practicing independent thought, and inspiring it in others, then it seems to me that the future of the European University in the next sixty years and beyond is indeed a hopeful one.

Raphael Woolf
Professor of Philosophy
Vice-Dean (External Relations)
Faculty of Arts & Humanities
King's College London