

“The Sorbonne/Bologna Project: Higher Education for the 21st century”

Keynote Speech by
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15 years ago we celebrated in Paris the 800th anniversary of one of the most highly respected universities of Europe, namely the anniversary of the Sorbonne. At that time four European ministers of education signed the “Joint Declaration on Harmonization of the Architecture of the European Higher Education System”. What a complicated name!

The declaration became known as the “Sorbonne Joint Declaration”. What had preceded this event? We, the education and science ministers of France, Great Britain, Italy and Germany had jointly put forward a fundamental reform of the European landscape of institutes of higher education containing the following elements:

- Joint learning and teaching
- Europe-wide mobility of students and lecturers
- A Two-tier study system and
- Comparable degrees that would be accepted all over Europe.

The Sorbonne Declaration was the starting point of the Bologna process. Some call it the “Big Bang”, the most significant reform of institutions of higher education in modern times. 47 countries have so far joined the Bologna Process – from within the EU and also beyond.

The Sorbonne Declaration came as a surprise (with sustainable effects, though): It had not been expected by most politicians and experts, and it was unprecedented in its clarity and the speed of its preparation.

It was our goal to create a diverse European landscape of higher education. Good science is international. Our institutions of higher education should not only be

national and European. They should also be schools of the world. The Sorbonne Declaration pushed open the doors to the world.

Simultaneously we were drawing on a rich tradition. As early as in the 13th and the 14th century a European “republic of scholars” came into being. The universities established around that time – such as the Sorbonne, the universities of Bologna, Cambridge, Lisbon, Prague, Cracow, Heidelberg and Cologne – were unprecedented in history. The scholars and students were part of a European community. They travelled from university to university all over Europe and created an intellectual network without borders.

Then, as now, a unified landscape of higher education required three elements:

- It had to be diversified und could not be dogmatic. Thus is the character of Europe: unity in diversity.
- Higher education had to be connected to values. Therefore the Sorbonne/Bologna process is also a spiritual process. We are not only dealing with organization and money, but primarily with the foundations of our western culture.

Some of the unifying questions we have to deal with today are: Where are we coming from? Who are we? Where are we going? What is right? What is wrong? What should we do?

Today almost nobody has the courage any more to give clear answers to those questions. But those are questions situated at the core of what many call the conflict of cultures today. People no longer say: “This is right”, “This is wrong”, “One does not do that”. This is what people say today: “In my opinion this is right.”

Clear demarcation lines between true and false, knowledge and lack thereof, human and nature, good and bad, just and unjust, hardly exist anymore. They are replaced by relativism and whateverism. With the assumption that everything is indifferent in principle, the so-called postmodern period has cut down the very foundations of European culture.

This has political consequences. Those who think like postmodern people are distancing themselves from politics committed to normative expectations. This is the reason for the lack of a political vision for the future. Thus we hear talk of the “end of utopia”, and of the “implosion of the future”. When a political approach lacks a substantial concept of humanity, one cannot create a future. A genuine dialogue of cultures is not possible either: One who does not have a viewpoint of his own cannot put himself into another person’s viewpoint.

But there are some valid values that deserve and require common recognition. There is a right life that needs to be protected from the false. If we cannot win back our culture, the danger of nationalism, fundamentalism, and fanaticism

increases. Those are *ersatz* solutions, irresistibly attracted by a spiritual vacuum.

The spiritual unity of Europe is unthinkable without the European universities and institutions of higher education, where the cultural memory of Europe is situated. This is where our selves and our understanding of the world have been shaped since the Middle Ages, and those institutions must take upon themselves this task in the future, too. That is the reason why the Sorbonne Declaration states the following: "We should not forget that Europe is not only that of the Euro, of the banks and the economy". This was written 10 years ahead of the bankruptcy of Lehman Brothers and the global financial crisis.

In too many places university policy was and is seen under the aspect of economic value and international competitiveness. Those are important issues, but it is high time to put into the foreground the importance of our universities for our culture. Universities are not businesses. They do not have to make a profit. They are committed to the truth and nothing else: truth in explaining and understanding nature, truth in self knowledge. Here lies the western heritage which we need to cultivate.

- The third aspect: Universities must be part of the knowledge-based society of the 21st century. This knowledge-based society already exists. Human knowledge doubles every 5 to 7 years, and every year over 20.000 scientific papers are published worldwide. Currently there are as many scientists in the world as in the last 2.000 years together. Knowledge is the most important resource of our times. Knowledge is a resource that multiplies when shared with others. That is the reason why knowledge is the new social agenda of the 21st century. War and violence, hunger and poverty cannot be resolved today by acquiring more land or money, but only through knowledge.

Those were the goals described in the Sorbonne Declaration: "We must strengthen and build upon the intellectual, cultural, social and technical dimensions of our continent. These have to a large extent been shaped by its universities, which continue to play a pivotal role for their development."

When one reads today, 15 years later, the literature regarding this courageous, for many surprising, declaration, one can still sense the tremendous astonishment accompanying this reform project and its success. Many ask: What brought about this joint initiative? Many speculate there was a hidden agenda. I can't help feeling that many scientists and journalists do not really grasp what politics is all about. Well, let me disclose some of those open "secrets".

The Sorbonne Declaration was made possible because the ministers of science of France, Italy and Germany realized in the mid-90s that they shared a common interest. They wanted to reform the partially fossilized education system of their countries. They wanted to overcome a state of stagnation that had lasted for years. They wanted a change in order to provide young people a better education and better job opportunities. And they also wanted a unified Europe.

This marked the beginning of a friendship between the actors involved that continues until today beyond party and national lines, and was also the source of numerous joint political initiatives. But the Sorbonne Declaration was not only a European initiative. For each of us it became part of our national policy of higher education. In France, Italy and Germany huge efforts were made at the time in order to renew the education system.

In 1997 I had publicly presented a comprehensive reform concept resulting from intense discussions we had held. In 26 pages I presented, in addition to an in-depth analysis of the situation then, concrete measures regarding the German system of higher education. With an amendment to the "German Framework Act for Higher Education" of August 20th, 1998, BA and MA degrees were introduced for the first time in Germany. A third of the provisions regarding administration and organization were cut. An output-driven funding, the evaluation of research and teaching, shorter standard periods of study, and the introduction of interim examinations became part of German university life. It was a real "kill or cure remedy".

In spite of the fact that the reform was, and still is, criticised mainly by the lecturers, it was, and still is, a remarkable success story. By the winter semester 2011/12, 85% of all study paths had been switched over to the two-tier system. In the Colleges of Applied Sciences the reform has been successfully completed. The internationalisation of the German system of higher education is also progressing. In 2011, as many as a quarter of a million foreign students were enrolled in German universities. The number of German students studying at foreign universities increased to 115,000 (2009).

As Prime Minister of North Rhine-Westphalia, the most populous German state with 18 million inhabitants, I was able to complete the university reform initiated by me at the Federal level, in my own region. Under my leadership the North Rhine-Westphalian "Law of the Freedom of Institutions of Higher Education" was adopted on the 31st of October, 2006. Through this law, the 53 institutions of higher education in North Rhine-Westphalia were granted the following:

- They were given freedom, i.e., supervision by the state government was abolished for the first time in history.
- Today the institutions of higher education manage themselves.
- The sovereignty in personnel matters – including the appointment of professors – lies within the authority of each university.
- Each institution of higher education receives a global budget.

Simultaneously, eight new Colleges of Applied Sciences were founded or enlarged, and an investment plan of 8 billion Euros until the year 2020 was passed.

Let me tell you a story to conclude my talk: 16 years ago, one year before the Sorbonne Declaration, I coined a phrase at the annual conference of rectors and presidents: "Humboldt's university is dead." I explained this statement by saying

that Humboldt's idea of research conducted in "solitude and freedom" had gotten lost within the mass universities of the 20th century. Humboldt's university had become a myth. To quote Habermas: "The idea of the university degenerated into an ideology of a class enjoying high social prestige."

But science must not breed an exclusive group of overbred, theorizing scholars. The knowledge-based society will not change the *conditio humana*. Only human beings can be the producers, agents and consumers of knowledge. Today knowledge is already a factor of production, just as land, capital and labour. But knowledge must also be the foundation of culture and education. When we succeed in doing just that, the human will once again be in the foreground.

Although Humboldt's university is dead – what remains vibrant is Humboldt's concept of education, i.e., the idea of free self-education of the individual, the unfolding of all gifts and talents. Whoever subjects education to economic dictates alone, creates half-literateness or even illiterateness. Total economisation leads astray. The knowledge-based society thereby turns into pure fact-finding – it loses its sense of how bold new ideas drive forward new insights benefitting all of humankind.

We need people who feel responsible for the society they live in; people who contribute to the common good and who are not only concerned with their own benefits; educated people in the true sense. Everyone has the right to education, the right to escape poverty and ignorance.

The culture of Europe is based on three hills: the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, the Acropolis in Athens, and the Capitoline Hill in Rome. The culture of the Judeo-Christian world and the Enlightenment are still the foundations of our western civilization.

I would be delighted if Israel together with Europe and the entire western world would help create a joint new education system for the 21st century, in which every person, based on unalienable Human Rights and regardless of skin colour, religion and origin will have an opportunity to acquire education and professional training.