

## **Speech by President Michael D Higgins EUA Annual Conference**

**7th April 2016, NUI Galway**

Vice President of the European Universities Association Prof.  
Martine Rahier,

President of NUI Galway,

Distinguished guests,

Fellow scholars and Friends,

Is mian liom buíochas a ghabháil le lucht eagraithe na comhdhála don cuireadh caoin dom a bheith i bhur measc ar maidin. Is mór an pléisiúir dom é fáilte a fhearadh romhaibh go Gaillimh agus an deis seo a bheith agam labhairt libh faoi thodhchaí án n-ollscoileanna agus faoina staid sa sochaí.

May I thank the organisers of your conference for your invitation to be with you this morning. It is a great pleasure to welcome you to Galway and to have the opportunity to address you on this theme of the future of our universities and their position in a rapidly changing society.

I am delighted to have the opportunity to welcome the European Universities Association here to Ireland for the first time. As a critical forum for the discussion of EU policies on higher education, research and innovation the role of the European University Association is an essential component of our shared intellectual infrastructure. Your conference, and the further discussions it will initiate and inspire, are concerned with issues of great importance to the Irish people and you are most welcome to Galway and to Ireland.

As a nation, Ireland has a particular connection to the traditions of European scholarship and the historical intellectual roots from which the very idea of Europe grew. For example, in the long history of our Irish nation, we dedicate a special place to those Irish monks who preserved a heritage of learning in Europe during what were known as "the Dark Ages". We are especially proud of scholars such as Columbanus who placed a

high value on the study of texts, reflection and meditation and who went on to establish many flourishing centres of learning in a Europe at a time when the written word was in dramatic decline.

Columbanus and his colleagues, with their emphasis on knowledge and scholarly learning, shone through in a darkened Europe where the fall of the Roman Empire had led to economic and political fracturing, and not just a loss of learning but a hostility to its practice. Today he is recognised as one of the earliest European visionaries; a man whose cultural influence on Europe during a dark period in its history has been enormous and who, in the words of the French statesman Robert Schuman, "is the patron saint of all those who now seek to build a United Europe".

In the spirit of Columbanus, then, I welcome you to Ireland as the current custodians of that heritage of European scholarship and intellectual life. I wish you well in your responsibilities for ensuring that universities and the life of scholars and students within them will be visionary and that what is visionary is not only made possible, but is privileged.

Today, the challenges for those entrusted with our institutions of learning are quite different from the time of Columbanus, and I commend the European Universities Association for facilitating a wide exploration on the challenges facing Europe's universities as they develop strategies to adapt to a time of great change.

The dedication of this year's annual conference to the 'digital campus', then, has a strategic significance—supporting the exchange of knowledge and the pooling of such expertise and will enable us to collectively forge a future in which knowledge-exchange will increasingly be routine rather than occasional.

The breadth of the programme for this conference provides an opportunity for discussion about the uses and the impact of technology on each of the three core roles of higher education institutions – teaching and learning; research; and engagement.

Those roles of course cannot be defined adequately within any intra-institutional setting. The purpose and content of such

roles carry the domain assumptions and the aspirations of their societies in all their structural diversity.

In exploring the many facets of these issues, this conference will allow the opportunity to learn from specialists, as well as from practitioners. It will also provide opportunities to hear how colleagues from across Europe have set about utilising technology to enhance provision in these three areas as well as your having the opportunity to learn about the work of the National University of Ireland, Galway itself.

There can be no doubt that recent decades have witnessed a significant revolution in higher education and unprecedented change in both its reach and diversity. It has been a dynamic process, at least as radical as those in the 19th century when the concept of the research university developed, fundamentally changing the nature of the university.

It is my sincerest hope that we can embrace the possibilities of the new without losing the independent reflective intellectual atmosphere of the traditional universities - but if we are to achieve that balance, we must first recognise what is essential and timeless in the resource we possess in our universities, as social institutions and as intellectual infrastructure rather than merely as centres for production of what are referred to as "the human resources" of a social and economic system, a system that may be undergoing a change whose fundamental character we are missing.

At the heart of our universities, at their very essence, are certain functions that must be recognised and protected if our embrace of new technology is to enhance rather than undermine the rich heritage we have inherited. There surely is intellectual satisfaction, even excitement, in the symmetries made possible by seeing science, and its technological applications, through the prism of normative moral and socially engaged thought. That should encourage us to see the value of philosophy and the integration of scholarship.

In saying this, I fully recognise that the digital age has undoubtedly already brought with it many advantages for scholars, including, for example, valuable opportunities to

protect and preserve important aspects of our heritage and history.

Most recently, the impact of new technology on historical research was illustrated for me at the presentation of the 1916 Oral History Collection to the National Library. We are currently marking the 100th anniversary of the Easter Rising of 1916, the revolutionary event which would lead to Irish independence. This Oral History Collection, to which I have referred, contains individual stories of both the sung and unsung heroes of that important chapter of our history. This digital collection was a striking reminder to me of how the availability of digitisation has in many ways democratised the study of history, allowing for a wider participation in its production, and a wider gathering of memories, one that brings new perspectives to events of the past.

For universities and archives, digitisation has opened up exciting possibilities, enabling new ways of generating, curating, and engaging with information. It allows for innovative modes of research and broadens the reach and effectiveness of scholarly communications.

More broadly, technology has great liberating potential in a world which is experiencing greatly increased mobility and displacement. One of the most exciting dimensions of the potential positive use of technology by scholars and students for higher education is that it liberates learning and the advancement of knowledge from the constraints of national borders, supporting international partnerships and facilitates a cooperation which is imperative if we are to address the many global challenges facing us.

At the same time, in the context of this information revolution, I am conscious too of the continuing importance for society of the university setting; of the need to critique the domain assumptions about the teacher/student relationships; and of the need to analyse the nature of digital usage as a private or socially shared experience.

Such questions take on a heightened importance in a contemporary world where universities are challenged to adjust to more complex and pluralist society, prompting further questions about

the nature of the university itself: 'What can universities be appropriately requested to deliver for society?' 'What should not be expected from them?' 'What is their role?'

Much of the literature on the future of higher education in the digital age has been almost apocalyptic. Predicting the transformation of the sector by 'the forces of technology and globalisation', the U.K.'s Institute for Public Policy Research warned in its 2013 report, *An Avalanche is Coming: Higher Education and the Revolution Ahead*, :

'the solid classical buildings of great universities may look permanent but the storms of change now threaten them'.

Outlining 'the threat posed to traditional 20th century universities if key institutions don't change radically', they identified the:

'entirely new models of university which are seeking to exploit [...] globalisation and the digital revolution' as

'the new competition, the real threat'.

Similarly Ernst and Young's 2012 report, *University of the Future: A Thousand Year Old Industry on the Cusp of Profound Change*, suggested that, just as:

'digital technologies have transformed media, retail, entertainment and many other industries—higher education is next'.

This language requires critique. How similar it is to the hubris of the moment of arrival of television battles for the coverage of short, or abandoned World Bank Reports on education being the next big private enterprise opportunity in Africa.

It is important, however, to reflect on the sources, the assumptions, and the purpose of the discourses from which those dramatic views have emerged. It is difficult, for example, to discuss the influence of social policy theorists, philosophy departments, social economists, or indeed those engaged in fundamental theoretical work in such analysis.

Similarly, political climate influences academic possibilities. There are interesting examples in the discipline of applied

economics which could tell us something of the importance of getting a political response to research. Werner Reichmann and Markus Schweiger have written of how the fortunes of two great intellectuals Paul Lazarsfeld and Friedrich A. Hayek differed. Hayek's business cycle research found a political support. Lazarsfeld's sociology did not find such favour.

There is a grave danger that debates about the role of the university are taking place in a narrow political and ideological space. Today, higher education worldwide has certainly moved from the periphery to the centre of government agendas. With which aspects of our universities, have government policy makers concerned themselves, and with what consequences and what benefit and for whom should concern all citizens?

I suggest that at the present moment in Europe and far beyond it, insofar as policy makers focus attention on education policy, they tend to view universities in a rather utilitarian way, as foundations of new knowledge and innovative thinking, within the confines of existing trade, commercial and economic paradigms, paradigms that are fading but not without damage to social cohesion.

They pursue, perhaps with their own best of intentions, their own project, rather than any change as a means of advancing social justice and mobility. They seek contributors to social and cultural dynamism irrespective of the distribution of the benefits. This is an approach wherein short-term concerns prevail over long-term developmental objectives.

My purpose this morning, then, is to suggest a recall of some first principles of the necessary role of the university in society; principles which might set the parameters within which we can most productively engage with new technologies and reap the dividends of innovation; principles by which new technologies might strengthen rather than undermine the intellectual foundations of Europe that have been carved out over so many centuries; and principles that might remain as vision, however now threatened, as a possible future for our citizens.

In doing so, we must first recognise that we live at a time when the language and rhetoric of the speculative market has become embedded in the educational culture and has brought some university practices down a precarious road.

That reductive view has brought us, I believe, to a time of great questioning about the purpose of the university - much of which has been corrosive - and perhaps even to a moment of intellectual crisis.

It is in its extreme form a view that is based on an erroneous perception that the necessary focus of higher education must be on that which is utilitarian and immediately applicable. Such a view sees the primary objective of the university, and those who study within it, as being in preparation for a specific role within the labour market, often at the cost of the development of life-enhancing skills such as creativity, analytical thinking, and clarity in written and spoken expression.

We have now reached, I believe, a juncture which sees intellectuals challenged to recover the moral purpose of original thought and emancipatory scholarship; a time when we must seek to recapture the human and unifying capacity of scholarship.

Max Weber, the great 19th century social theorist, responded to the events of his time in the second half of the nineteenth century as a public task of an intellectual, accepting the requirement not only of radical thought but of the duty to communicate as part of a public discourse.

Weber's was a time of radical change and transition, the response to which would be dominated by technocratic thinking. Weber proposed a commitment to rationality as the key building block of the future. His was not a mission to reject the rationalist heritage of a previous century but to look beyond that horizon to something that was beyond logic, intuition, and religious sentiment. He critiqued the excesses of both positivism and idealism, but envisioned the consequences of a potential abuse of that which would be claimed to be rational.

Weber spoke of the threat of a spring that would not beckon with its promise of new life, but would deliver instead a 'polar

night of icy darkness'. He prophesied an iron cage of bureaucracy, a dehumanised landscape within which conformity would be demanded to that which no longer recognised its original moral or reasonable purpose. While Weber's view might be seen as dystopian, we can certainly recognise some of the features he predicted in our contemporary situation, in which rationality has led less to what is productive or inclusive but at so many times to what is a speculative gambling that has consequences in so much global misery.

Our European crisis is at least as profound as that faced by previous generations of political and social theorists at the end of the 19th century, but our response seems to be so slow, even as so many European citizens sense, inadequate. That is among those who care.

The crafting of a response to this crisis is, I believe, a widespread challenge and one which the Irish and European universities must embrace, insisting on remaining open to originality in theory and research, and committed to humanistic values in teaching.

It is through the encouragement of creative and free thinking that our universities acquired their status in the past, and correctly claim it today, as unique institutions that accept the responsibility of enabling and empowering citizens to participate fully and effectively at all levels of society. This creative function must be cherished, nurtured and encouraged.

Too many, perhaps unknowingly, have accepted an 'under labourer' view of the university, indeed of intellectual work more broadly, as we seek to belong in a form of society/economy relationship where we have lost the capacity to critically evaluate. As we witness the many great crises currently facing Europe, we wait for the evidence of engaged critical interdisciplinary work.

'Be the arrow, not the target' was the title that the critical theorist, the late Raymond Williams gave to his last address on communications. We cannot allow ourselves to be the dependent variable of a fractured dialogue on the future of the European Union, of the role of a declining international solidarity. We

cannot allow ourselves to sleepwalk through the crisis that an unaccountable, but reformable, form of globalisation presents.

In this context, the role of the university in enabling citizens to develop the intellectual tools to address the great challenges of our time, which include questions of development and global poverty, of climate change and sustainability, and of conflict and displacement, is one which is vital. Indeed, that we have heard the call to be responsible in relation to climate change or to sustainable development, that it has been endorsed by world leaders, is due to responsible scholars, thoughtful scientists who have made the intellectual case for political action at the global level - who have combined scholarship with citizenship and activism.

In this wider social understanding of the university, its relationship with its students cannot in my view, without great loss, be reduced, then, to that of provider of any narrow professional training, guided towards a specific and limited objective and essentially disengaged from the academic experience which is fundamental to independent thought and scholarly engagement. There must be a much broader rapport, one which introduces students to an intellectual life and allows them to develop a critical turn of mind as well as informing an ethical concern with their community and their planet.

At the pedagogical level, the increasing availability of on-line courses has done much to make a further education accessible to a wider range of citizens, which presents exciting opportunities for increasing participation - especially among remote or marginalised communities. It is critical, however, that students do not become disengaged from the teacher/student experience. Learning from those who are passionate about their subject, face to face collaboration and regular engagement in organic debate and discussion, journeying into the false avenues as well as the fruitful ones, is central to a rich and fulfilling educational experience.

We see great challenges in contemporary research practice too. In the published research in the social sciences, we have witnessed in recent decades the marginalisation of political philosophy and social theory to rather narrow issues of administration and, under pressure of publication and peer

competition, to that which can be easily measured. More and more pressure has come on universities and scholars to prove their relevance within a hegemonic version of the connection between society and economy that is destructive to social cohesion - one that has demanded a consensus on the desirability, not merely of economic growth, but of a singular, limited versions of economics. Scholarship requires the breadth and breath of culture for paradigm shift to happen.

As a research subject, the role of the State as innovator or generator of social cohesion has to be recovered. Analysis of the role of the State has faded in recent decades of political research and has given way to applied studies, in an administrative sense, of the State's actions. These studies may be important in themselves, but they are insufficient to a normative discourse on values, such as solidarity, interdependency, shared vulnerability and community. Such a necessary normative discourse has given way in the popular social science literature to a discourse of lifestyle and individual consumption.

We have been living through a period of extreme individualism, a period where, in its early extreme version, the concept of society itself has been questioned. The public space has been presented as a competitive space of consumers rather than citizens. That is the mark of our times, the hegemonic version of the model by which, it is suggested, we live our lives together.

Neither can there be any doubt that one of the contributing factors of our recent economic crisis was a failure of capacity and intention on the part of our citizens, as well as our institutions, to question, to scrutinise and to interrogate the concepts of individualism to which they were invited to aspire, and the insatiable consumption to which they were invited and which, over recent decades, were accented and prompted as alternatives to the models of public good and welfare. Our existence is assumed to be, is defined as, competing individual actors, at times neurotic in our insatiable anxieties for consumption, as Zygmunt Bauman might put it.

Within the social sciences we can identify also, in their response to current circumstances in Europe, a model of

separatism that leaves us with an approach that is not sufficient at either an analytical, policy or normative level, and in which essential connections between different spheres of our social and political discourse have become fractured or even lost.

The reconnection of theory and practice, and the reconnection of the discourses within philosophy, science and technology, and the social sciences of ethics, and economics is now an urgent priority; as is the reconfiguration of analysis and policy.

The will to create bridges and to listen to each other with respect remains as critical in the academic sphere as it is in all areas of life. When scholars are prepared, in their pursuit of knowledge and solutions, to engage in inclusive and interdisciplinary scholarship, to take a broader perspective, and to learn from the viewpoint of others we can, as a society, only benefit from such an approach.

Indeed, even at the economic level, we must also be mindful that the workplace of the future will have to be a space of creativity that will need graduates who are creative thinkers, able to bring disparate ideas into a coherent whole, bringing that broader understanding to complex matters and engaging in the production of integrated solutions, engaging with intuitive intelligence as so much scientific advance and discovery teaches us.

Walter Isaacson has said that

"science gives us the empirical data and the theories to tie them together, but humans turn them into narratives with moral, emotional and historical meaning".

Any abandoning or relegation of the humanities in our academic institutions will, in the future, be seen by future generations as a betrayal of the purpose of education. If we wish to develop independent thinkers and questioning, engaged citizens, our universities must, while providing excellence in professional training, avoid an emphasis that is solely or exclusively on that which is measurable and is demanded by short term outcomes. They must allow for the patience and the peace that is required for memorable university teaching and research.

What I am describing is not a simple question of any competition between the humanities and sciences. Rather, in a complex world, we are called to understand the necessary relationship between the liberal arts - the foundations on which much academic learning must be built - and the fields of science and technology in an integrated approach to learning. Indeed, throughout history the best of our scientists have merged scientific endeavour with the arts, creating a common space in which the best possibilities could be realised.

Fostering the capacity to dissent is another core function of the university. Third level scholarship has always had, and must retain, a crucial role in creating a society in which the critical exploration of alternatives to any prevailing hegemony is encouraged.

Universities must surely be facilitated and supported, made free and funded, so that they may preserve their role as special places for the generation of alternatives in science, culture and philosophy. They must be allowed to flourish as spaces which develop that intellectual courage which allows the rejection of exclusive or excluding ideologies, and encourages the seeking of truth from fact and the production of alternative solutions and action. Universities must be places where minds are emancipated and citizens enabled to live fully conscious lives in which suggested inevitabilities are constantly questioned. If this is to be achieved the importance of primary and original research is central.

I have quoted before, here in this University, from The Second Glion Declaration, Universities and the Innovative Spirit, 2009 which suggests that it is in our universities that:

"the leaders of each new generation are nurtured; it is there that boundaries to our existing knowledge are explored and crossed; it is there that unfettered thinking can thrive and unconstrained intellectual partnerships can be created. It is there, within each new class, within each new generation that the future is forged."

These are words worth repeating, and words which remind us that it is the duty of the university to engage in shaping, and not simply reacting to, the fourth industrial revolution. Neither

technology, nor its potential to disrupt, are remote extrinsic forces over which we as humans have no control. All of us, as members of a global society, must play our role in guiding the pathway of new technology into our society in a way that is ethical and moral.

It is essential also, that public citizen support for the necessary public investment in universities is secured - and that the benefits from this investment are retained within the universities themselves and demonstrated to a supporting public.

The university must not be reduced to a component of the market place as it cannot exist, in its fullest sense, in an exclusively market world. The intellectual dimension of higher education is not one that can easily be measured, and universities must not be called on to perform solely in ways which lend themselves to metric measures of performance.

Digitisation has great possibilities for the effecting of positive transformation within our society. However, as with all tools of power, the ethical test is its use.

In our current circumstances in Europe and the world, it is here, in our universities, that we can begin to enact such transformative thinking as is necessary to create the foundations of a society that is more inclusive, participatory and equal. That transformative thinking will require a real change in consciousness. It is through critical and engaged pedagogy that we can be assured that we are engaging the educators of a generation that will have the capacity to understand and question the assumptions of any status quo, and to understand when that status quo must be challenged and how; a generation who will have the confidence and the wisdom to engage in alternative visions of what a society can be, and bring it into being.

I suggest that the universities and those who work within them are crucial in that struggle for the recovery of the public world, for the emergence of truly emancipatory paradigms of policy and research. It is not merely a case of connecting the currency, the economy and the people, it is about recovering the right to pose such important questions as Immanuel Kant did in

his time - what might we know, what should we do, what may we hope?

As the university repositions itself in a globally connected and more culturally diverse society, it must seek to deliver its capacity to deliver that creative consciousness and participatory citizenship; recognising both the positive and liberating potential of technology and the critical role of emancipatory universal learning in enabling us to connect to the possibilities of an unknown future.

May I wish you well for your Conference and for the continuing vital work of your Association.

Beir Beannacht

Thank you.