

Universities, cities, academia: solution for a tale of conflicts of autonomy, dependency and interaction

Ladies and gentlemen, good morning,

As you might have read in the programme, I am a student representative working on the European level for the European Students' Union. Therefore, I would like to line out the importance of students for the relations between cities and universities.

As we have heard yesterday, the atmosphere of Innsbruck is strongly influenced by the large number of persons working or studying at universities. Students are one of the defining groups of the influence of universities on the cities not only through their sheer number, but also through the aspect of the diversity which they are bringing to the cities they are living in – youthfulness, various backgrounds, internationalisation and various political, cultural and social interests and activities. On the other hand, students are as well one of the defining groups of universities themselves – let me repeat, not only through their sheer number, but through their different needs, their contribution to academic progress, their influence in the future of teaching and research.

What can be done to make the role of students an even more active one, leading to mutual benefits for the individuals and the institutions and cities, which they are based in?

The definition of the role of higher education institutes in the society is defined by a public responsibility towards the institution, but as well by responsibility of the institution to the public. Higher education institutions have further responsibilities than producing workers according to the demand of today's labour market on the base of study programmes for students, or consumers, as they might be called nowadays. In contrary, I believe the mission of academia and higher education institutions is the production of new scientific knowledge, and the education of citizens, capable of reasonable thinking and exceptional problem solving, and progress of science itself. Higher education institutions serve the public interest by understanding the world we live in and to provide the vision for the future along with knowledge needed to achieve it.

A crucial instrument in enabling an active role of students at their institutions and in their cities is cooperation between teachers, staff and students. How can this better be done then through teaching innovation, or to be more concrete, student-centred learning. Student-centred learning does by no means mean simply fulfilling a wishlist of students to finish their studies as easy as possible, but is a broad concept enabling students with different needs and talents to do the best they are able to in cooperation with teachers and their environment. This is heavily linked to many things we have heard at this very conference yesterday: Having choices, being truly involved in the design of the curriculum and in the process of learning is a central motivation bringing back the mentioned glow in the eyes of the students – may it be in Chicago, in Vienna, in Innsbruck or in Basel where I studied myself. True cooperation between academic staff and students produces innovative study programmes that give students the opportunities for interaction with society – as seen in the interesting presentations of projects with student involvement yesterday afternoon. Students, being allowed to learn according to the quickly evolving reality surrounding them are more likely to be involved not only in their individual education, but as well ready to give back their gained knowledge and skills to others.

I wouldn't be a student unionist, if I would not mention the role of student unions, student initiatives and student groups as a connecting line between institutions and their cities. Student unions might often be challenging and critical to the leadership of the institutions, but they are as well the ones bringing together students, which are keeping track of fresh trends and understanding the contemporary and future challenges in the world - students which are recognizing potentials for improvement and bring solutions to the table. Student unions and student initiatives do not only have outreach to big groups of students through representation and provided services, but as well have experience in political participation, organisation and campaigning. Through the work of student organising, students gain skills and knowledge for active citizenship and through them, higher education institutions are being more visible in their surrounding local communities.

To sum up the impulse statement just made: On the basis of a public responsibility for independent institutions taking their role in society serious, through cooperation with teachers and staff, students are able to take the roles of ambassadors of higher education institutions in their cities. Students, which are gaining more than just subject knowledge,

but also analytic problem solving skills and organisational capabilities are becoming key messengers of higher education institutions towards their cities, contributing actively to the shaping of their future.

Thank you very much for your attention.