



ČESKÁ KONFERENCE REKTORŮ
CZECH RECTORS CONFERENCE

**SPEECH BY THE CZECH RECTORS CONFERENCE PRESIDENT,
RECTOR MARTIN BAREŠ, ON THE OCCASION OF THE MEETING
OF CZECH RECTORS CONFERENCE MEMBERS
WITH THE EUA PRESIDENT
Prague, 24 September 2021**

Dear President Murphy,
Dear members of the Czech Rectors Conference,
Dear colleagues,
Distinguished guests,

I would like to welcome you on the occasion of the visit of the President of the European University Association, Professor Murphy, it is a great honour for me to welcome you on behalf of the Czech Rectors Conference and all my colleagues.

Let me open this meeting by sharing with you some pressing issues and topics.

Key principles of development of universities and current priorities

It is evident that, during the last year and a half, all universities in Europe had to reduce their operation due to the pandemic; and they have since faced numerous problems related to the COVID crisis, which is why it is now vital for us not to lose focus on the long-term development of our universities and their mutual cooperation.

Considering the new European strategy – and possible European leadership –, there are a few general principles to mention which I think are important.

First of all, they include the debate on budgets and financial support for science and research within the framework of the coronavirus crisis; as well as

the prioritisation of research topics; and, also, the support of basic and interdisciplinary research; and, of course, internationalisation. We must also focus on quality and support of talents. And, last but not least, on the expansion and development of cooperation on the national, European and international levels.

I believe that university as an institution is much more than just the sum of its parts. This is what makes it unique, significant and strong as a social institution. And I think that universities that do manage to be more than the sum of their parts are those that are among the elite ones in today's world.

And we should think in a similar way about the cooperation at the European level, as the development of cooperation can give boost to the synergic effect that would otherwise be missed. Indeed, it is the lack of cooperation within the EU, and with external partners in the last few decades, that has harmed our independence in strategic fields such as artificial intelligence, biotechnologies, medicine, cyber security, as well as social challenges related to demographic decline.

Social role and social responsibility of universities

Another key dimension of our thinking should be the focus on the social role and social responsibility of universities. The pandemic has clearly showed us all how vulnerable the society can be due to the many hoaxes, fake news or alarming pseudo-scientific debates.

I believe that it is, among other things, a consequence of some general social, socioeconomic or psychosocial phenomena and trends that cause the fragmentation of the public sphere, as well as the tabloidization of media and the trivialization of political debate, including the growing populism and demagoguery. This of course leads to the general loss of the ability to differentiate between the important and the trivial; between information and misinformation; between facts and hoaxes; between the rational and impressions; between truth and lie.

It is a very dangerous process because it jeopardises democracy in its core and disables rational public discourse and the search for social consensus through the exchange of sound arguments.

As a result, we must ask ourselves: who else but universities must think how to reverse this trend? Who else should be the voice of reason and authority in society?

I believe it is the responsibility of universities to be, among other things, the critical instance in society and the guardian of certain values, ideas and principles which we may call “common European values”. They include basic democratic principles, academic freedoms and human dignity.

This task is even more pressing now that some institutions or key political figures choose not to fulfil this role, or they fail in doing so due to incompetence, or because they are affected by the trends I just mentioned. We should be looking for answers to these problems, even though, as I am fully aware, it is not and it will not be easy.

President Murphy, ladies and gentlemen,

Let me conclude my remarks by expressing my belief that, aside from dealing with all the strategic issues, monitoring quality indicators and positions in international rankings, we must not forget yet another key dimension of our universities. Data and quantifications might be an important indicator, but they cannot become a goal in itself.

We must also keep, in our thinking and in formulating our university policies, a close contact with the philosophical roots of a university as an institution. Which means to be able to keep in touch with the Humboldtian tradition or the key personalities and their legacy, such as John Henry Newman and his “The Idea of a University”.

Because a university is, first and foremost, an *idea*. An idea – and ideal – that remind us that the mission of a university – as *universitas* – is to educate, to expand the boundaries of knowledge and to engage in research; but also to be a critical instance in society. In other words, it is an institution that facilitates human and social cognition and knowledge – and self-exploration – and helps us look for answers to the key questions of life and the world.

It is indeed *universitas* – as one of the great achievements of the European civilisation – that allows us to ask daring questions and to enjoy the freedom of searching for meaningful answers. And in this way enables us to take part in the process of discovering the truth, the greater good and beauty.

This is the true mission of universities. And it should remain so in the 21st century.

Thank you for your attention.