



Higher Education: Cornerstone of the New Era

Federico Mayor

Chairman, Foundation for a Culture of Peace;
Fellow, World Academy of Art & Science

“Many things are to be done and everything is possible,... But who, if not all?”

Miquel Martí i Pol

Abstract

For the first time in history, because of digital technology, human beings are able to express themselves freely and participate in society: they have turned from passive spectators to actors. They are not silent, obedient and fearful anymore. They know what happens on planet Earth on the whole, becoming world citizens in the process. And, above all, women, the cornerstone of the new era, are able to progressively take part in decision-making. Every human being, with the distinctive faculty of creativity, will contribute to invent the future, in which humanity will be guided by “democratic principles”, as enshrined in the UNESCO’s Constitution, the only context in which human rights can be fully exercised. Education for all throughout life is a necessity to become “free and responsible” at a higher level.

The difference between education and training must always be endured in mind. The neoliberal economy is permanently pushing to have and not to be, when what matters is to be and to have the “human tension” needed to act and to dare. In order to develop exclusive human capacities (think, imagine, discover, anticipate, innovate...), the crucial aspects we should consider are the philosophical, humanist and artistic dimensions of higher education, having always in mind a dignified life (food, water, health) and sustainable development for all.

Universities will not only efficiently contribute to be, to know, to do, to live together and to undertake, but they will be at the forefront of the general mobilization needed in order to pave the way for the transition from a culture of force to a culture of word, the “new beginning” envisaged in the “Earth Charter”.

Each human being is unique and has the ability to create. This is a great hope for humanity. Until recently, they were only glimmers in the trajectory of mankind dominated by absolute masculine power, in which people were invisible, anonymous, silent, fearful, submissive... But now, for the first time in history, mankind has a global conscience, is able to contemplate Planet Earth in all of its dimensions as a whole, and has realized that the future has yet to be written. And it is possible to invent it, as President John Fitzgerald Kennedy underscored in his extraordinary speech in Washington on June 23, 1963: “They say that disarmament and peace are unachievable goals. I will show that they are feasible, because *there is no challenge that cannot be resolved through the creative capacity of the human species*”.

Citizen participation has always been very weak and the voice of the people, generally barely audible, was neither listened to nor heard. In contrast, today there are many who are capable of making the transition from subjects to citizens and becoming visible, identifiable, bold and unbound. *The fundamental mission of universities is to pave the way for this new era, the era of the people.*

Higher education means to be fully—and at a higher level—“free and responsible”, as it was so masterfully defined in Article 1 of the UNESCO Constitution. Free and responsible people are those who act upon their own reflections and not upon the dictates of others; who are aware of their rights and obligations, and who fully apply “democratic principles” at the personal, local, regional and global levels, which is the only context in which human rights may be freely exercised.

During the 1990s as Director General of UNESCO, I had the opportunity to organize global conferences on higher education, which provided me with first-hand knowledge of the characteristics and what is essential and must be maintained as our principal reference, the values that are common to all universities of the world. This process culminated in the World Conference on Higher Education held in Paris in 1998, the conclusions of which are still entirely applicable as models for the highest academic institutions at the dawn of this new century and millennium.

A few years ago, the Regional Conference for Latin America was held in Havana. It was evident from the conference proceedings that the Latin American continent both seeks and finds political, economic, academic and cultural alternatives, perhaps due to having so greatly suffered dominance and humiliation during the 1960s. Since 2000, with the new technologies now at the service of great principles, the regional conferences in Latin America and the Caribbean have continued to define fundamental criteria for determining how to best achieve the universities’ mission, strengthen their autonomy and co-governance, access and relations with society...

It was underscored at the conference that *“it is essential that we all be autonomous, while being interrelated and interactive,”* so that universities may play their role as intellectual, academic, scientific and cultural leaders, enabling them to achieve universal recognition and to implement human rights within a genuinely democratic framework.

In effect, universities must tirelessly promote justice, gender equality, sustainability and democracy. Adequate treatment and financing of life-long higher education, always considered as an investment and accessible to all citizens from the age of emancipation, is—as it was so lucidly defined in the Declaration of the Regional Conference on Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean—*“an irreplaceable element for social progress, the generation of wealth, the strengthening of cultural identities, social cohesion, the struggle against poverty and hunger, the prevention of climate change and the energy crisis, as well as for fostering a culture of peace”*.

Concerning universities as a vital instrument, point C.6 of the Declaration of the 2008 Regional Conference on Higher Education is quite significant: *“Moving toward the goal of generalized, life-long higher education requires demanding and providing new content for principles of active teaching, according to which learners are individually and collectively*

the principal protagonists. Active, permanent, and high-level teaching is only possible if it is closely and innovatively linked to the exercise of citizenship, active performance within the workplace, and access to the diversity of cultures”.

We must read and reread the Declaration because it contains essential recommendations, particularly in Chapters D (Social and Human Values of Higher Education) and E (Scientific, Humanistic and Artistic Education and Comprehensive Sustainable Development).

In the early 1990s, I commissioned the European Community President Jacques Delors to produce a Report on Education for the Twenty-first Century which was drafted by a committee of prominent professors at all levels, as well as educators, sociologists, philosophers, etc. The Report defined the four principal pillars of the educational process: learning to know, learning to do, learning to be and learning to live together. Among the four, I would like to underscore the principle of “learning to be”. A century ago, Francisco Giner de los Ríos affirmed that “education is the capacity to sensibly manage one’s own life”. Yes, learning to use the distinctive and infinite powers of the human species: thought, imagination, foresight, creativity! To the Delors Committee’s pillars I added “learn to undertake”. I remember that after a long stay in the Biochemistry Department at Oxford University whose county coat of arms reads “Sapere aude”! (dare to know!), I returned to Spain and thought that *while daring to know, one must also know how to dare*, since risk without knowledge is dangerous, and knowledge without risk is useless. Learn to dare, to learn to undertake, to innovate! I remember some mountaineers who once said, “We did it because we didn’t know it was impossible”.

We must *always bear in mind the difference between education and training*. Training may vary at times substantially, reflecting progress made in the acquisition of new knowledge. In contrast, education isn’t based on aptitudes, but rather on attitudes, that is, following unchanging principles that derive from abilities that are exclusive to the human condition.

Neither has any other common or permanent characteristics, other than quality and accuracy, where there is no room for partisanship, bias or political agendas.

A few words now about the production and dissemination of knowledge. When some focus on commercial aspects, centering mainly or even solely on technology, I feel I need to remind them what I read in 1965 in the Biochemistry Department of the Argentine Nobel Laureate Bernardo Houssay: “*There is no applied science if there is no science to apply*”. Professor Hans Krebs said, “Science exists to prevent or lessen human suffering”. Science that results from discovery, from looking at life from a different perspective. Krebs used to repeat, “*Research is seeing what others also see and thinking what no one has ever thought*”, underscoring the role of imagination in developing research hypotheses.

“*For a socially responsible university*” was the excellent theme of the 9th International Conference on Higher Education “University 2014”, which was renewing its commitment to the university and to our times, while continuing the on-going discussions and debates in the area of higher education.

Among the major questions to be addressed on the social responsibility of universities, I would like to underscore the following:

1. Policies and perspectives of higher education for a socially responsible university.
2. *Educational and teaching challenges in training highly qualified professionals who are committed to society. Universities with socially responsible management of environment, energy and sustainable development.*
3. *Use of information technologies to support the social mission of universities.*
4. Improvement in the training of educational and health professionals in universities as an expression of social responsibility.
5. *Food Security: the responsibility of universities toward society and its food sufficiency.*

“With few exceptions, universities haven’t fulfilled their role as catalysts for social change.”

At this point I believe it would be interesting to examine what were considered the great challenges for higher education 25 years ago and the solutions that were proposed at that time. Here are some of the points that I addressed and the recommendations that I made at the Europe-Latin America University Conference held in 1987 in Buenos Aires:

- *“The genuine wealth of a country has its expression in its capacity for creativity, innovation, and in its capacity to respond to challenges both personally and collectively”.*
- *“The unwavering reason for the university’s existence is to bring culture to all citizens”.*
- *“New dimensions and change require an attitude of permanent learning”.*
- *“Universities can and must play a fundamental role in providing an accurate analysis of the present and in predicting the future”.*
- *“The quality of its teaching staff is the indisputable essence of a university”.*
- *“If you really believe that institutions of higher education are the motors of society on whose actions future progress depends, then new national priorities must be established so that education and science receive the financial and social support that they so urgently need”.*
- *“With few exceptions, universities haven’t fulfilled their role as catalysts for social change”.*
- *“The only requirement for choosing professors should be their qualifications. And as for students, access to higher education shouldn’t be based on their families’ economic standing, but rather on their duly accredited efforts and abilities”.*
- *“We cannot expect universities to be rebuilt or renewed in a context that is anachronistic and indifferent to any change”.*

- “Transformation of our universities can only be achieved with the necessary daring and lucid political, social and economic changes. It is stimulating and supporting that universities can play a fundamental role in the transformation process”.
- “Universities must become permanent centers for higher learning, and institutions capable of mobilizing all of their intellectual potential”.
- “If universities lead the never-ending rebellion against ignorance, and if they still have the strength required to implement the previously mentioned transformations, then universities will provide the life blood of all educational activities”.

‘Socially responsible universities’: Universities that can seek support from a society which is now aware, because it is progressively awakening from the apathy in which it has lived for centuries. In December 1948, the United Nations General Assembly passed and proclaimed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights... asking all member states “to publicize the text of the Declaration and to cause it to be disseminated, displayed, read and expounded principally in schools and other educational institutions, without distinction based on the political status of countries or territories”. The Preamble reads: “Whereas recognition of the inherent dignity and of the *equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family* is the foundation of justice and peace in the world... the advent of a world in which human beings shall enjoy freedom of speech and belief and freedom from fear and want has been proclaimed as the highest aspiration of the common people”...

It is fundamental to underscore the idea of “freedom from fear and want”. And the fact is that, confined both territorially and intellectually, the world’s inhabitants have always lived and died in extremely limited spaces. And they have lived in fear, without points of reference, without the capacity for comparison or to seek answers to essential questions. For that reason, the third paragraph of the Preamble of Universal Declaration affirms that, “if man is *not to be compelled to have recourse, as a last resort, to rebellion*,... human rights should be protected by the rule of law”. *Overcoming inertia, to facilitate evolution and avoid revolution, universities must fully implement the theme of this International Conference: they must be socially responsible*, devoting themselves to “the Peoples”, as the Preamble of the United Nations Charter so wisely insists. It doesn’t mention states or government, but rather the “Peoples”. People who have decided to “save succeeding generations from the scourge of war”. This means that they assume that supreme commitment—so often evoked by President Nelson Mandela—should be the primary characteristic of future generations. *It is the duty of each generation to take the next one into account*. And, for once and for all, *to enable peace to prevail over war, and words to prevail over force*. From the beginning of time, the powers have always followed that perverse adage: “If you want peace, prepare for war”. And thus, at the end of World War I the Republican Party prevented the United States from joining the League of Nations that President Wilson had created to implement his ‘Covenant for Permanent Peace’.

President Roosevelt’s magnificent plan at the end of World War II placed “the Peoples” at the forefront of history. And the Constitution of UNESCO, as the United Nations’ intellectual institution, proclaimed that the educated people must be “free and responsible”, that they must be guided by the “democratic principles” of justice, equality and “intellectual and

moral” solidarity. But all these, as well as the “free flow of ideas by word and image...,” were all too soon ignored and forgotten by the great powers that invariably had security as their supreme concern.

Let us now review the content of Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, “distributed, exhibited, read and discussed” in all educational institutions: “higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of *merit*”. The reference at this point is to adult citizens. Obligatory or compulsory provisions are excluded. The basis is merit, with respect to all members of the academic community, both professors and students. Merit, dedication, effort and imagination are required in order to be fully “free and responsible”.

The second paragraph of Article 26 reads, “Education shall be directed to the *full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms*. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace”. The Universal Declaration and the aforementioned text are especially pertinent at this time when we observe that biased definitions are so often being offered by institutions specializing in other areas, such as economics, and which should not be interfering in education to promote their own interests.

In the late 1940s and early 1950s the key words were “sharing” and “international cooperation.” Sharing what we have with others and distributing wealth adequately were the essence of those “*democratic principles*” that had to be observed in order to put an end to an era of absolute power. “Unity is strength” and it was necessary for all countries to unite (“United Nations”) to achieve the overall and proportional development that would enable peaceful coexistence at the national and international levels. I recall incessant deliberations about the nature of “development”: it should be integral, that is, not limited to economic aspects but rather including, above all, those of a social and cultural nature; it should be *endogenous*; it should be “*sustainable*,” according to the definition suggested by the committee chaired by Gro Harlem Brundtland; and in the late 1980s and at the behest of UNICEF’s Assistant Director Richard Jolly, development should above all be *human* (“Development with a Human Face”).

While these debates concerning the nature of development ensued, the great superpowers were fully devoted to the arms race, raising the stakes to stratospheric levels: I recall with horror the “Star Wars” in which the United States and the Soviet Union were then engaged. “Star Wars!”... While the majority of the rest of the world were engaged in “star-vation”, as I saw it written in large letters in a street in New York. International cooperation became exploitation; subsidies and loans were granted in draconian conditions; the Nation-State was progressively weakened in favor of large multinational corporations. And it was precisely educational institutions, research centers and universities that maintained the flame of human progress and ethical values alive.

To provide the current inhabitants of the earth with the strength they require, now that they may finally cease to be invisible, anonymous, and to have the stimuli to enable them to work tirelessly for equal human dignity and world governance encompassing all human beings and not only a privileged few, it is essential to always bear in mind the episodes that I personally or from the perspective of the university have experienced or witnessed:

the Ku Klux Klan and racial segregation in the United States; the lack of freedom and excesses of power in the Soviet Union; *apartheid* in South Africa; the abominable practices of “Operation Condor” in Latin America; the economic and technological colonialism imposed without hesitation in so many countries of Africa; the craving for domination of the Republican Party, led by Ronald Reagan and seconded by UK Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, who replaced the United Nations with groups of plutocrats and democratic principles for the rules of the marketplace. Although it would appear unthinkable, based solely on their wealth and military power,

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6-8 countries intended to govern the other 193 countries existing at that time. Unthinkable, but true. And, nevertheless, the unexpected happened. *The unexpected is our hope.* The unexpected is the best that can be expected of human beings endowed with creativity. Suddenly, a dark-skinned prisoner called Nelson Mandela, after 27 years in prison, emerged from incarceration without seeking revenge. Contrarily, he emerged with open arms and, complicity with another great figure, President Frederik de Klerk, ushered in the downfall of racial *apartheid* in a few months. He became the first black president, marking the course of a “new beginning” in South Africa and on the African continent as a whole.

Likewise, thanks to Mikhail Sergeyevich Gorbachev’s radical change in the manner of exercising power which was unexpected. With the fall of the Berlin Wall, the vast Soviet empire fell and its members formed the Commonwealth of Independent States which thus commenced their long march toward building regimes based on public liberties and pluralism.

A system based on equality but had forsaken liberty has finally fallen. But the alternative, based on liberty but forsaking equality, failed to learn its lesson. It was just the opposite; it intensified and imposed rules and standards of conduct on the West, in a very peculiar manner.

Nevertheless, in the late 1980s everything pointed to peace: with the end of the Cold War and racism in South Africa, thanks to initiatives supported by UN Secretary General Javier Perez de Cuellar, in a few years peace finally came to Mozambique with the wise intervention of President Joaquim Chissano and the Community of Saint Egidio; the civil conflict in El Salvador was resolved at Chapultepec; and the peace process was renewed in Guatemala. Yes, in the late 1980s everyone demanded peace, a demand that was ignored by those who thought that the moment had come to achieve their dreams of dominance.

The West, and particularly Europe, is experiencing the collapse of a system based on an economy of speculation, delocalization of production—which, above all, has converted China into a huge communist capitalist—and war, whose tragic balance may be summarized in 3 billion dollars invested daily in military spending and weapons. At the same time, more than 50,000 people die of hunger and neglect daily, the majority of whom are children under five years of age.

However, beyond the confusion gripping Europe, the effects of emerging citizen power are being felt: Latin America, Africa, a few Arab and Asian countries—including India, both qualitatively and quantitatively—are taking a new course and applying original models.

Previously, only twenty years ago, it was unimaginable that institutions using socially responsible policies could decisively influence the attitudes and lives of the majority of people. *But now, with a global conscience, the growing participation of women in decision-making processes and the new digital technologies, it is now possible to initiate the great transitions capable of transforming this era of changes into a change of era.*

These are the urgent transformations that must be implemented worldwide:

- the transition from an economy with the characteristics described above to *an economy based on knowledge, for global sustainable and human development,*
- *the transition from a culture of imposition, violence and war to a culture of consensus, dialogue, conciliation, alliance and peace,*
- in short, *a historical transition from force to word.*

Today only 20% of humanity lives in the wealthy neighborhoods of our global village. The other 80%, in progressive degrees of scarcity, survives in conditions that cannot support human dignity. Thus it is *absolutely necessary that we establish priorities that take into account all of the Earth's inhabitants and their ecological environment.*

These priorities, which universities can greatly influence with their intentions and demands, may be summarized as:

- Food
- Water
- Health
- Environment
- Education

In reality, it is a matter of ensuring not only existence, not only life, but rather a *dignified life* for all human beings. A recent Oxfam publication revealed that 85 people have the same wealth as 3,500 million human beings, approximately half of all mankind. *This can't be the case. This daily genocide of hunger and neglect can't continue. These intolerable inequalities in the distribution of all types of resources just can't exist.*

Now that the voice of the people can be heard, we must ensure that everyone understands that *implementing human rights benefits all of us equally.* Everyone must understand that accumulating immense fortunes adds nothing to an already comfortable life. I would like to repeat a simple observation that I read one day in a small chapel in the south of France: "Les linceuls n'ont pas de poches" ("funeral shrouds have no pockets"). Whether we are born to wealth or poverty, death is a great equalizer. Thus, it is essential that the *scientific, academic, intellectual, and artistic communities become the true protagonists of this change* and achieve now what in 1945 was impossible: cooperation, working together, adequately sharing in a context of democratic principles that subject other dimensions of coexistence to social justice and the conditions inherent in a life of dignity for all.

In view of the foregoing points, these are the great objectives that universities should pursue, using all of their influence and capacity for mobilization, both in the classroom and in cyberspace:

1. *A re-founding of the United Nations System* making “We, the peoples” a reality in the General Assembly—which is already the case in the International Labor Organization, the “relic” of the League of Nations—in which 50% of the delegates would be representatives from the member countries and 50% from civil society, with a *Security Council in which veto rights would be replaced by weighted votes and with the addition of the Environmental Council and a Socioeconomic Council*.

This has all been well planned: it is now a matter of ensuring that they (especially the Republican Party in the United States) realize that the time for silence and passive citizens in the world is over. It is essential to return to the concept of a “United Nations” so that all of us, together, may achieve the great transformations previously mentioned, especially the power of words to demand equal dignity for all human beings.

2. *Nuclear disarmament*: it is madness for the world to continue under the sword of Damocles of nuclear weapons. No excuses can be made for reasons of security, because that would contradict all norms. Thus, use of these weapons must immediately cease. If the great majority of the world’s universities were to demand that we usher in the post-nuclear era in war scenarios, this would be a giant step toward achieving that other world which we all desire.
3. *Strengthening genuine democracy* as the only context in which it is possible to implement human rights. Universities should familiarize themselves and offer their observations on the *project for a Universal Declaration on Democracy*.^{*} This Declaration, in addition to ethical, social and cultural aspects, also includes economic and international ones.
4. There are already *associations of institutions of higher education at the global and regional levels*. But especially now that new digital technologies enable us to “come even closer” even while remaining at a distance, it would be wonderful if we could collaborate so that institutions of higher education could not only be places for life-long learning (especially important given our present rates of longevity), but could likewise take actions to support or reject options that would ultimately and rapidly *usher in the previously mentioned transformations, including fulfilling our obligations to future generations, both from a social perspective as well as with respect to protecting the environment*.

The World University Consortium,[†] a project of the World Academy of Art and Science, includes as members the International Association of University Presidents, the Inter-University Centre at Dubrovnik, Library of Alexandria among others.

In my opinion, one of the current activities related to the World Academy of Art & Science that is particularly relevant is the “*new paradigm*”, which seeks to formulate alternatives to the present neoliberal system and in which Green Cross Foundation, the Club of Rome and Foundation for a Culture of Peace, among others, are participating.

Here are a few lines from the Earth Charter, one of the most lucid documents from the last decade: “We stand at a critical moment in the Earth’s history, *a time when humanity*

^{*} Drafted with contributions from Karel Vasak, Juan Antonio Carrillo Salcedo, Mario Soares and other persons who have distinguished themselves for their knowledge of this essential matter. See Universal Declaration on Democracy: http://www.fund-culturadepaz.org/democracia_esp.php

[†] See <http://www.wunicon.org/>

must choose its future. As the world becomes increasingly interdependent and fragile, the future at once holds great peril and great promise. To move forward we must recognize that in the midst of a magnificent diversity of cultures and life forms we are one human family and one Earth community with a common destiny. We must join together to bring forth a sustainable global society founded on respect for nature, universal human rights, economic justice, and a culture of peace... We must realize that when basic needs have been met, human development is primarily about being more, not having more. We have the knowledge and technology to provide for all and to reduce our impact on the environment. The emergence of a global civil society is creating new opportunities to build a democratic and humane world’.

“We must join together to bring forth a sustainable global society founded on respect for nature, universal human rights, economic justice, and a culture of peace....”

– The Earth Charter

Today, for the reasons previously set forth, there is no doubt that universities, united to reach these great objectives, can have an extraordinary impact on the great changes that could really *make the 21st century the century of the peoples, the century that can offer a life of dignity for all.*

- Another matter that I would like to address is one that is being promoted by the Rector of the University of Oslo, “Universities against the Death Penalty”.[‡] Professor Lill Scherдин, of Oslo University, is the head of this initiative. In just a few years the number of countries that have abolished or have implemented a moratorium on the death penalty has risen from around thirty to over 150. In that regard, all Latin American countries have abolished the death penalty, either by law, or *de facto* (as is the case in Guatemala and Cuba in which not only have executions been abolished, but death row has likewise been eliminated). The movement to abolish the death penalty in Africa has likewise made extraordinary progress in the last few years. However, bad examples still exist, headed by the United States where, despite reductions in six states over the last few years, capital punishment is still prevalent in 34 states. And let’s not even mention China, Iran or Saudi Arabia. It is essential that we address this major objective with the support of all intellectuals, academics, scientists and artists.

A new era now lies on the horizon. A new era, thanks to universities and the scientific and creative communities, will bring a transition that will turn subjects to citizens, passive spectators to actors, witnesses to actual agents of change.

With the active and enthusiastic participation of socially responsible universities, civil society will soon be mobilized. And universities will undoubtedly be at the forefront of this great process.

Author Contact Information

Email: fmayor@fund-culturadepaz.org

[‡] Universities against the Death Penalty: <http://www.uio.no/english/about/collaboration/universities-against-death-penalty/>