



UNIVERSIDAD DE
COSTA RICA

Rectoría

Global Meeting of Associations (GMA): “Transforming Higher Education for the Future”

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Rector Universidad de Costa Rica

President UDUAL

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- *Mrs. Pam Fredman, President, International Association of Universities (IAU), Sweden*
 - *Mr. Roberto Escalante, Secretary General, Association of Universities of Latin America and the Caribbean (UDUAL), Mexico*
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Introduction - University associations and the importance of integration

It is undeniable that there are challenges that come from new developments of global society, and mostly from intensively changing political dynamics. Facing these new circumstances, higher education institutions and their organizations need to rethink their insertion - and also their function - in a constantly transforming world.

The search of knowledge, which builds the traditional core of universities, is challenged by a wide diversity of actors that seem to stress the cohesive tissue of our societies, and represent a variety of aspirations to which we - as keepers of canonical wisdom - do not yet have an answer.



Within the framework of this global meeting, mutually recognizing ourselves also in our diversity is a starting point to take advantage of the exchanges we can have in the upcoming days, and the networks that will allow us to strengthen the work in our regions.

Universities play a fundamental role in the empowerment of society, but it is necessary to undertake self-evaluation processes, long-term planning, internal and international dialogue, and negotiation, and a radical self-critical attitude in order to preserve our essential character in society. Amid tumultuous times, allow me please to invoke an old fashioned concept: we need a new Enlightenment.

In other words, we need to radicalize Reason through Reason, universal values through universality.

In Latin American institutional architecture, universities are central and emblematic. They have been and are pillars in the construction of the social and democratic order of which we take pride in many of our countries. The public university in this region has been the core of social mobility, a means for strengthening equality, for fighting poverty and generating opportunities.

Since no country is exempt from living situations that undermine its institutionality, or even that compromise university autonomy and academic freedom, we have the duty to participate in the construction of national and regional agendas to achieve prosperity and common good. The roots of this concept - common good - can be traced back to the Aristotelian notion of “good life”, that is to say a way of collective living inspired by ethical standards and purposes of solidarity, which at the same time corresponds closely to the Quechuan *Sumak kawsay*.

If universities intend to play a worthy and prosperous role in the concert of nations, and in the framework of new global challenges, they must be dynamic and creative, meet the highest quality standards, be inserted in the international context, but very specially they



will have to listen to the often quiet, but sometimes outbursting voices of the underprivileged and excluded.

Promotion of regional and international integration through the academic mobility of teachers, students and administrative staff

Knowledge is now more distributed in the world than ever before. Advanced universities are those open to multidirectional mobility of teachers and students, and those which carry out high-level shared projects, jointly address highly complex issues, and nurture cultural diversity in relationships of respect and mutual benefit.

A complete university must consolidate its position in that academic scenario, now more extensive than ever, emphasizing academic alliances through the formation of broad and flexible networks that allow university groups to place themselves on the stage of science and technology, as well as of art and the humanities at regional and global scales. This poses the challenge of conceiving interdisciplinarity not only as a cooperation between disciplines, but as a multiconceptual, multilevel simultaneity of knowledge production and sharing.

Internationalization by strengthening the internal capacity for international cooperation

In Latin America, we have the challenge of visualizing internationalization as an integral tool of organizational restructuring, capable of participating in the substantive functions, management models and social responsibilities of our institutions.

We know that we must design effective policies in institutional terms, sponsoring a greater participation of all the sectors involved with our work, such as academics, students,



authorities, and others with whom we must generate alliances, not only to obtain resources but to change ways of thinking and structures of knowledge, reactivating a debate about the ethical implications of internationalization.

The idea of structuring and applying an endogenous internationalization model is fertile in opportunities: it opens up possibilities to devise programs focused on pragmatic, relevant or comprehensive internationalization, articulating it with the priorities of institutional development projects, with demands coming from the insertion environments and interests of different stakeholders.

Creation of an ecosystem that promotes scientific and technological development

The transfer of knowledge should contribute to the development of social production of collective benefit that promotes the well-being of groups and communities, particularly the most vulnerable.

Universities must stimulate and take advantage of synergies and interactions with other national institutions and thus consolidate effective policies in that transfer of knowledge to society.

A more fertile and intense encounter between university and society can be achieved through a closer articulation of universities with the most immediate territorial contexts in which they operate. Our motto could be phrased as the achievement of local and national pertinence with universal relevance.

In these territories, there are often health, food production, housing construction, energy, and water quality needs, among others. Many of their solutions require actions from public policy. But solutions can often be facilitated by means of advanced knowledge: they may



require training processes and associated learning, demand scientific and technological research, advice to local governments or other actions available to universities.

e must not forget that the local dimension is very relevant for sustainable development strategies and has a very high significance for knowledge construction processes.

Horizontal creation of programs with the participation of students and the community, with recognition of the dignity of diversity (of knowledge)

By deepening a horizontal institutional framework, a systemic, unitary, comprehensive and efficient institutional concept will be strengthened. That means that each member of the university community must feel how these institutions permeate their criteria, grant them new points of view, and open opportunities and possibilities for development.

The knowledge generated in our institutions must permeate the entire society, throughout the nation, but that permeability must be reciprocal: the public university must learn from the collective knowledge of all social agents.

Contribution to the achievement of the SDGs

In the move towards sustainable development, scientific, technological and innovation activities, together with training, are undoubtedly fundamental.

In Latin America and the Caribbean, for example, universities concentrate a large part of scientific and technological research capabilities, as well as human talent.

The Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (CEPAL in Spanish) has defined a set of priorities that, fundamentally, connect the SDGs with the roles of higher education:

1. The centrality of equality. In the most unequal region on the planet, CEPAL insists that equality is a key issue. The production, dissemination, and use of knowledge are unequally distributed.



2. Balanced integration of the three dimensions of development: economic, social and environmental.
3. A structural change that enables the incorporation of knowledge into production, guarantees social inclusion and allows progress on a low carbon emissions path through a great environmental impulse.
4. Progress in technological innovation, the digital economy, and the information society.
5. Capacity building through quality education.

These challenges are based on the social capacities and weaknesses of our region, but we consider that they are not unique. Therefore, by sharing them, we hope to foster the regional discussion about the capacities of our higher education institutions in their link with these global objectives.

Closing remarks

These are some of the challenges that the future poses. All of them must be seen in the context of a complex and contradictory national and regional reality. The institutional leadership that Latin American universities have forged throughout their history leads us to promote a strong interaction with external social and political sectors, in permanent processes of dialogue and negotiation.

When facing new challenges, we must not fall into self-indulgence and lack of self-criticism. The dialogic attitude will benefit our institutions, as forgers of citizenship and nation builders. Universities should not lose their essence, nor their essential character.