European Network of Socially Responsible Universities

Erasmus+
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Interview with Prof. Andrea LENZI

President, Italian National University Council (UCN)

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Consiglio Universitario Nazionale

What does it mean being a University Socially Responsible?

Talking about university social responsibility means first of all to admit that, at least in Italy, we have assisted to a progressive disconnection between the society and the university. Until the '70s and' 80s the universities were, in fact, not only places for education, but places of authentic growth, of cultural and social debate, capable of orienting the country, of promoting social mobility and offering perspectives. Then the university has not responded critically and proactively anymore to society vices, and rather than helping to limit them it has become their mirror. As a result, today the university is struggling to provide adequate responses to an increasingly complex society.

The university today is perceived as a foreign body, not as an integrated player in the territories and in its civic processes. More as a social cost than as a resource. This happens because universities fails also and above all in its patterns of communication and engagement to the external world. ..

So, I think that social responsibility means primarily reactivate an open and continuous dialogue with the society, picking up three simple but fundamental values:

1. give back the university to young people, because it is a breeding ground for their growth;

2. promote and support scientific research harbinger of technological and social innovation;

3. consider the university as a place of culture, open, to be explored, leaning towards the territory.

The two key words in this process are, therefore, young people and territory that, thanks to university, must be able to activate mutual processes of engagement and cross-fertilization.

If the university will be again a place of culture at 360-degree, capable of interpreting the processes and the needs of contemporary society, it can become a catalyst of responsibility and sustainability at economic, social and environmental level.

How does it apply to university activity? Which are the key elements of USR implementation?

I think that teaching and practicing social responsibility is essential for education and that it should already be present in university curricula as well as in the training of university staff.

The university must be an open institution, which creates breaches and not walls, that practices sharing processes. Educating to social responsibility implies this attitude to openness and collaboration.

Unfortunately, in Italian universities, in all scientific career, from the engineer to the literate, up to the mathematic and the surgeon, it is perceived the lack of a social imprinting that should have been acquired during the studies.

We are, therefore, in a paradoxical situation: we claim for instance that citizenship participate in crowdfunding of our research ideas, but we are not able of engaging it.

What are the limits/ opportunities/ risks for introducing social responsibility in curriculum as a cross-training activities?

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What are the limits/ opportunities/ risks for creating and exchanging good practices, synergies, knowledge etc.? And in creating any work groups?

Exchange and networking are key activities for the promotion of social responsibility, unless it means to create university "cartels".

The working groups for USR should be transversal and open to a wide range of stakeholders: citizens, politicians, non-university institutions.

We are start talking increasingly about the so-called "third mission" of university and I believe that deals exactly with this: a sincere dialogue with the institutions and stakeholders, up to the dialogue with the political dimension to outline strategies, for research and innovation with a specific importance for society and the country in a given context and historical moment.

To this regard, we should use all contemporary channels to activate awareness and inclusion; for example I would like that MOOC became compulsory university activities, to educate - on a large scale - the citizens and give knowledge to all.

Do you have any other recommendations, suggestions, strategic partners, ideas or good practices to highlight or to consider?

At this time the relationship between universities and society is like that of a quarrelsome couple: mutual accusations and lack of communication.

We should bring love back between them through sincerity and reciprocity in dialogue, complicity and sharing of projects for the common good. In this sense I believe we must return to the great mass media, like TV, and to social networks that are able to penetrate into all the houses without any digital or cultural divide. We should also promote meetings in presence to foster an informal dialogue between citizens and research.