



4th Annual Conference¹

Under the tutelage of Politecnico di Torino

**Italian and European Universities within the Innovation Global Market:
Reforms and triggers of change²**

DRAFT

- Concept Note -

Universities represent a vital input towards personal and societal well-being. They produce 20% of European research and most of fundamental research, employ one third of European researchers, generate leadership, improve the skills of the population and the competitiveness of nations, improve attitudes towards science, and contribute to increasing social cohesion. However, despite recognition of their vital role and increased demand from stakeholders, European universities are not well equipped to face existing challenges towards achieving their missions. Indeed, an important contradiction is apparent between high demand and relevance on one side, and the structural weakness of their organizational model.

Reforms of university systems are complex and difficult political and normative exercises that require the buy-in of a diverse set of actors with multiple and often diverging agendas. Further, **systemic reforms are not the right answers**, by themselves, to improving the performance of universities, because of the differentiation of university missions which cannot be addressed with blanket measures.

Incremental change within the system – such as achieved through assessment, ranking and internationalization – could be more effective if triggered by well designed levers and led by credible champions.

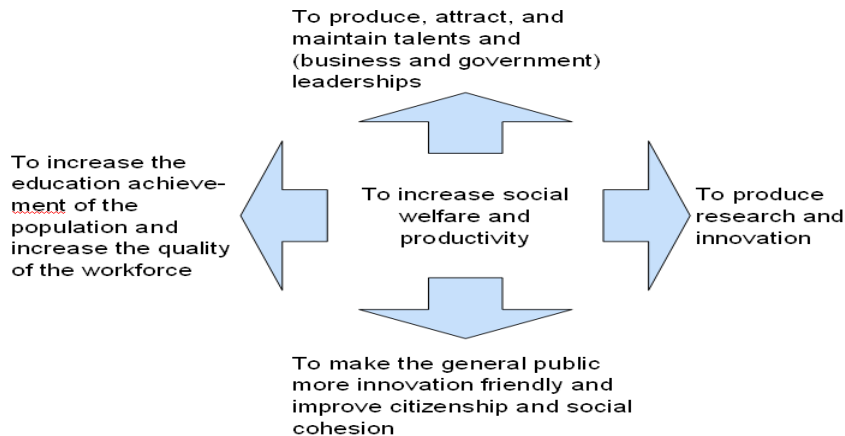
What are the expectations towards universities? In essence, higher education institutions (HEIs) are increasingly perceived as fundamental levers to augment the competitiveness of European countries and the well-being of their societies. Individual HEIs, national educational systems, and university networks play critical roles in producing innovation, generating leadership (both within business and government), improving the skills of the workforce and the attitude of citizens towards knowledge. The following map from previous Vision's projects outlines the five different objectives for a university system:

¹ Series of conferences organized by a workgroup led by Vision in partnership with ISSNAF, AIR, NOVA, URANIA

² The paper is introducing the conference which will be held in Turin on October the 18th under the tutelage of Politecnico di Torino.



Possible objectives of a university system



What is the performance of universities? Richness in terms of quantity, variety and access does not correspond to an easier orientation for users and stakeholders. The multiplication of objectives and of expectations that societies as a whole express towards universities, raises important questions of how to assess and increase the “value” of universities. Students, academics, funding institutions, companies benefit from and leverage on higher education in different ways, trying to make rational choices according to a diverse set of needs and objectives. Not least, the “value” is certainly contextual, depending on the framework used for the evaluation – local, national, international.

In addition, universities are increasingly considered to be in competition both nationally and internationally – for increasing or defending shares of public funding, private sponsorship, research grants and consulting fees, and most importantly, students and academics of the highest possible quality and capability to produce revenues and recognition for their institutions.

Regardless of current relational classifications nationally or internationally, no university system is performing to its maximum ability or living up to the expectations of its diverse sets of stakeholders. This is true of UK universities for example, entities perceived to be at the forefront of European universities, but which are struggling with difficult problems such as funding schemes, costs of education and research, and lack of attractiveness from the private sector. It is more so true for Italian universities, which are evidently struggling to prepare and adapt high numbers of the young work force for the existing national and international climate, struggle with burdening costs and often archaic organizational systems, and are nowhere to be found among the internationally ranked good performers.

How could universities and university systems be revived? We are facing a difficult change management task in regards to universities and university systems, and results of efforts to date are less than optimal at best. Reforms are being discussed and undertaken at university, national, and EU levels, but their effectiveness is questionable – and, in any event, change is unacceptably slow – given the existing results and indicators.



We argue that the system needs a shot of adrenaline – the insemination within the higher education ecosystem of **change triggers**, of levers able to induce institutional and systemic change from within, rather than from outside the system.

Evaluation and rankings are a natural consequence of competition and an understandable policy and strategy response, given the demand of clients/ users/ stakeholders (students and their families, policy makers and taxpayers, funders, employers) to use palpable and comparable instruments in order to make choices and to better allocate resources. In practice, we are witnessing the increased importance and number of institutional and departmental classifications.

However, existing rankings are only **marginally relevant** or useful for change management, mainly because they are single minded, only account for a specific category of indicators that intrinsically favour and overrate some universities and systems while undervaluing others. Further, and equally unsatisfactory, the type of outputs and indicators measured leave entire disciplines unaccounted for.

We strongly believe in the need to diversify and contextualize the ranking and evaluation dimensions. Different parameters become critical, enabling different information, according to different stakeholders' objectives. We submit that reliable performance assessment needs to account for a broad set of variables, including: size of institution; faculty; percentage of international students/staff; percentage of students with higher qualification; peer review; web presence; number of scientific/research quotations; facilities; national and international links; and career opportunities.

Internationalization and re-organization efforts by universities are a desired outcome of these trends, but should be carefully and strategically crafted to account for the particular typology of institution based on its local environment and immediate objectives. Internationalization, measured through the rate of foreign students, professors and researchers imported or exported by the system, can be a measure but also a lever of modernization and relevance. Furthermore, globalization creates an opportunity: no single institution has expertise in all the areas at levels of advancement, and in a growing global context collaborations and joint ventures truly become possible instruments of growth.

In order to exploit the opportunity which internationalization offers in such a context, university institutions are called to play themselves a key role. In fact, if at country level **internationalization can be also a risk** (of losing national talents after paying for them), at university institutions level internationalization means first of all the opportunity of attracting people from all over the world, and the possibility of building (and modulating) specific internationalization strategies towards specific objectives.

Not least, the “value” of higher education per se and of HEIs, on the heels of the systemic crisis and its economic and social well-being repercussions, is also to be gauged through the balance between investment into and return from tertiary education at personal and public levels. At its core, the degree of education is a matter of choice and investment in the future, with public return, opportunity costs and equity considerations which all need to be more clearly understood and delineated.

Given the expectations and performance of universities, as well as the sub-optimal role systemic reforms seem to play towards inducing change, we highlight the need for the strategic insemination of ‘viruses’, of



triggers of change within the universities ecosystem. Evaluations, rankings and internationalization are change management tools that identify champions and encourage good practice, effectively modifying in time the wills and skills of stakeholders towards change.