Why we must reinforce universities as the backbone of a cohesive, open and inclusive Europe

Open letter to the heads of Spanish candidates lists for the European Parliament ahead of the next elections on May 26

Madrid, 9th May 2019

Dear candidate to the European Parliament,

I am writing to you on the occasion of Europe's Day and two weeks before the elections in which we will vote for the Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) who will represent us over the next five years, in order to draw your attention to an essential aspect for the **future of all European citizens**.

Education and training policies must occupy a strategic place in the project to build a stronger Europe. Universities have recently witnessed different identity crises in the European Union and we are convinced that our role is fundamental in its structuring and in the engagement that Europe claims to have taken for the "**knowledge society**". Universities cannot be understood outside their vocation of service because our fundamental mission is social progress, understood as the fight against inequalities in a modern world.

To achieve this, we must all work towards a European Union that is closer and more sensitive to citizens' problems. In this transformation, universities should be key players through student training, research and knowledge transfer. And also play a leading role in **innovation ecosystems**.

The common goal is to move towards a more sustainable Europe, more committed to equal opportunities, more focused on the education of mature citizens able to cope with current disinformation phenomena and more focused on finding innovative solutions to challenges of globalization. In short, to take further knowledge for our societies to continue making progress. For all these reasons, and within the framework of shared values of social commitment and unity, we would like to ask you to **make the University one of the priority areas** of your work in the European Parliament over the next five years.

Recommendations to strengthen universities from the European Parliament

1. Defending fundamental values

Across the world, students and teaching staff are under severe **political pressure**. This situation poses serious difficulties for teaching and research, at the same time as it deprives citizens from real access to knowledge. In Europe, **academic freedom** is a key value central to the European Union and protected by the Charter of Fundamental Rights. Nevertheless, today we witness attacks to this fundamental freedom in Europe. Without academic freedom and **institutional autonomy**, universities are not able to fulfil their mission.

2. Fostering an open an inclusive Europe

Universities are one of the main backbone elements of Europe. However, in order for them to become an effective cohesive element, we must ensure that all citizens can **study according to their abilities** and not to their socio-economic situation. Europe must work for an inclusive Higher Education that is not restrained by increased tuition fees or insufficient **grant system**. Universities must be safe spaces where students can become knowledgeable in their fields, as well as active citizens of a future Europe that leaves no one behind.

3. Deepening academic collaboration

The European Union and its universities cannot be understood without the strengthening of close **international collaboration**, where borders diffuse to the point that they cease existing. Together we must continue working towards a European Higher Education Area that is integrating and transcends borders within the same Union. In this line, we should work towards a **more inclusive Erasmus program** for which more resources are allocated, both for student and staff mobility as well as to foster academic collaboration and the exchange of good practices. The "European Universities" initiative offers a great opportunity, so we must work together for it to have greater impact and benefit the maximum possible number of actors in the European university system.

4. Promoting quality research that meets current challenges

In a period of great technological transformations, developments in research and innovation profoundly transform societies. European achievements in education and research are regarded as models, and Europe should strive to further develop its innovation capacity. In order to unveil this potential, a substantial investment in research and in innovation ecosystems is required, where new creative solutions are proposed. We also need a European Area of Research where free movement of knowledge becomes a reality, particularly through **Open Science**. Universities undertake a critical role in the creation of knowledge, but they need to be supported by a Europe that invests and fosters cooperation.

5. Approving funding programs that protect the Knowledge Society

Funding programs for Higher Education and Research –Erasmus+ and Horizon Europe– are a great advantage for the European Union and its citizens. They are unique examples of multilateral programs that offer students and researchers the opportunity to learn and grow through mobility and collaboration with leading professionals in each field. Universities have benefitted from these opportunities to offer high quality education and cutting-edge research and innovation. However, both programs have received insufficient funding in the past and the current European Parliament has rightly demanded substantial **increases in funding** for the 2021-2027 program (120.000 Million Euros for Horizon Europe and 41.000 Million Euros for Erasmus+).