

Speech by the President of the General Council at the Swearing-in Ceremony for the chancellor of the University of Lisbon, on May 21st 2009

This swearing-in of the Chancellor of the University of Lisbon within the framework of the reform initiated over two years ago is a pioneering and hitherto unknown event. Pioneering because it is the first one that is being completed within the reform process outlined in the RJIES and complementary regulations. Hitherto unknown because it is the first time that personalities external to the academic bodies have intervened in the defining of the guiding lines of the university, in the setting up of its governing bodies and above all in the electing of its chancellor after a public tender open to the whole Portuguese academic and scientific community. Thus breaking with the haughty isolation of the ivory tower that has for centuries been the image of universities.

Universities, like society, are not reformed by law, as has generally been understood at least since May 68.

In this context the swearing-in ceremony for the chancellor has a real meaning and a symbolic one. This reform process comes from the awareness that the university has accepted that it is necessary to respond to the needs of a different world, and to the very new rights generated by a new economic order, through the establishing of new paradigms in interpersonal relations and through a new network in institutional relationships, all based on the massification of technologies that have revolutionized the notions of time, space and accessibility among these.

The university has defined the following as the pillars of the reform it wishes to carry out: opening up to society, opening up to the scientific community, and an orientation towards models of resource management based on best practice and the principles of efficiency, competitiveness and external and autonomous evaluation of its workings. The great challenge is to make all this compatible with the traditional mission as defined by Ortega y Gasset in one of his classic essays: the teaching of an intellectual profession, the transmitting of culture, scientific research and the training of researchers.

The path ahead of us, Chancellor, is a complex and difficult one, laden with very high expectations and very lo scepticisms.

For this reason I wish to share with everyone here the presuppositions and considerations on which the General Council, in relation to the opinion presented to it by the co-opted councillors, based its approval of the Strategic Plan and the Plan of Action that it proposed:

- a) The Short Term Strategic Plan and the Plan of Action for the four-year period of the Chancellor's term of office are in line with the University of Lisbon Strategic Plan approved at the Statutory Assembly in September 2008.

The same documents also reproduce the programme that supported the Chancellor's candidature for this position, so the election of the same General Council has naturally implied the approval of his programme as a consequence.

- b) Out of the strategic guidelines accepted for its programme and among the 100 measures to carry them out, the General Council considers that it should grant particular emphasis and priority to the following topics:

- b.1) The election of the Chancellor culminated a broad, well-participated and prolonged process that defined a new governing framework for the University of Lisbon, and now the moment has arrived to undertake the process of action that will make these abstractly-voted principles real.

Without prejudice to the adjustments that carrying out the reform might demand, the modernisation of the strategic areas and the creation of a new model of management of common resources and shared services, should move on to the phase of immediate application, and should not go back for discussion of its already-adopted guiding principles under any pretext, nor allow the paralysis and blocking of its implementation.

- b.2) The focus of the new government of the university, and particularly of its Chancellor, should be that of strengthening the presence of the University of Lisbon on the international network of prestigious universities.

This aim demands concerted and convergent action in the cooperation with European, US and Portuguese-speaking universities and research centres, and should lead to the conquest of a more ambitious and prestige-bringing place on international rankings.

Opening up to a natural coexistence with university institutions and research centres in these areas presupposes and demands that the University of Lisbon should accept the best practices and procedures of external evaluation and certification.

- b.3) The University of Lisbon must accept the aim of its being a dynamic for higher education in Lisbon, through, on the one hand, a new impulse for the articulation of university institutions with research centres, and for the active participation of teachers and students in the modernization of teaching programmes, and also, on the other hand, in the open recruitment of teachers and students in foreign universities and research centres.

Progress in this field should aim at scale guarantee for its teaching and applied research supply, producing trilateral initiatives: companies, Portuguese and foreign teaching and research institutions.

In this framework a plan of action should be organized that will lead in the middle term to the creation of graduate/post-graduate schools on an international level.

- b.4) The management of human resources and the shared services is the nuclear axis for the University of Lisbon to enter the dynamic of a new era.

The university, which is a centre of excellence by vocation and through coexisting with the areas of progressing knowledge, paradoxically coexists and subsists with obsolete management methods and techniques for the adequate performance of its now wider functions. This situation absorbs disproportionate means, on the one hand, and, on the other, wastes opportunities and resources that should empower the development of its priority areas of action: teaching, research and innovation management.

The experience of other public institutions and companies have unequivocally shown that the success of the reforms in this area implies ruptures and drastic cuts with established routines, and thus a policy of small steps will be paralysed by the choking of the small powers and the supposed peripheral autonomies.

In this particular aspect, the General Council encourages the Chancellor to adopt a project for setting up common services in a top down, coherent, ambitious process financed with the available resources – which, indeed, carrying on with the current situation, would be largely wasted, with what this would imply in terms of a judgement on the level of particular merit and sense of the collective responsibility of the legitimate members of the university's governing bodies.

The 100 measures that make up the Chancellor's plan of action should be included in the major areas of action outlined above, in order to construct within the centuries' old path of the University of Lisbon the history of an encounter with modernity and a bridge to a new world that, without knowing yet what it will be like, we know will not be what it is today.

Chancellor,

You are not alone on the perilous journey you are taking, just as Fernando Pessoa's man at the helm facing the fears and pain of the end of the world was not alone. You have the solidarity and support of the general Council that elected you and approved your programmes, and I am certain that you will also have the commitment of all those

on the personal and institutional level who believe that the university has a nuclear role in the construction of a new story of progress and leadership for a country that has always gone beyond the limits of its frontiers and resources.

Chancellor,

The impossible has been done: now comes the difficult part. Let's do it.