

Dear Rector, Ambassador, Colleagues, Honorable Guests and Students,

And I must say from the beginning, I'm so proud...

It is a great honor for me to receive this award – the title of Doctor Honoris Causa of Mykolas Romeris University.

To be selected for a title that has been bestowed upon many highly respected individuals with different backgrounds, who in various ways stand up for common values, such as peace and freedom, human rights, democracy, the equal right and value of the individual, with international global perspectives and the role universities have in fostering and supporting a societal development is in alignment with those values.

These values are in the heart of my engagement and work in Higher Education – the importance of research and education to create new, develop and disseminate current knowledge and provide competence.

I have had the privilege to experience many academic positions in the university sector and am currently the president of the International Association of Universities (IAU), of which Mykolas Romeris University is a member. I have had the great pleasure to work with Rector Inga Žalėnienė as a very engaged and knowledgeable board member for 6 years.

I will present a global perspective, and my own reflections, on the role of Higher Education, its challenges, but also opportunities, to take on its unique societal role. Highlighting actions needed to strengthen the awareness of and the respect and support for Higher Education in society at large, not the least among politicians and policymakers. To recognize Higher Education as a public good – in support of sustainable, democratic, societal development and to foster peace – to save the planet for the next generations. This is also what the IAU promotes and advocates.

The International Association of Universities was founded under the auspices of UNESCO in December 1950 in response to university leaders' concerns regarding the threats to the role of universities and the relevance in fostering democracy and peace. They saw the need of an international university community, a global voice for higher education. Their concerns are even more highly relevant today.

The International Association of Universities is the global forum for leaders of higher education institutions and organizations from around the world. It is an independent, non-governmental, membership organization. The IAU convenes and connects almost 600 members from more than 130 countries to identify, reflect and act on common priorities.

It acts as the global voice of higher education to a wide range of international and inter-governmental organizations, to UNESCO, of which IAU is an official partner. Members avail of a wide range of services on a priority basis, but these extend also to other higher education stakeholders, such as organizations, institutions, higher education authorities, policy, and decision-makers.

In support of UNESCO, IAU upholds the WHED, World Higher Education Database, which comprises authoritative information on some 20.000 accredited higher education institutions as well as on higher education systems and credentials in 196 countries and territories. It is globally recognized as an official source of information to authorities, governments, organizations.

I do highlight the database to bring awareness of the huge number of HEIs worldwide, which maintain access to higher education around the world and still not sufficient for the needs. Relatively few, often just some hundreds of these are among those being ranked in different systems and they will not be able to fulfill the societal needs of higher education neither nationally nor globally.

Thus, there is a responsibility for all Universities, not the least the top ranked, to share and exchange knowledge and competence in support of quality and capacity building in higher education in all societies. International cooperation in research and education must extend beyond the western hemisphere, west-east and south-north.

In this context, the United Nations has clearly declared, in connection to the Agenda 2030 and the SDGs, the key role of higher education and education at all levels and in all societies. As the Agenda 2030 has been ratified by governments in 193 countries, there is a global commitment to support higher education.

Another global support for the key role of higher education is The UNESCO Future of Education Initiative – with the aim to support how to rethink education for shaping the future. At the UNESCO WHEC in the spring of 2022, the report Reimagining our Future Together – A New Social Contract for Education, was launched. It is a social contract to repair injustices while transforming the future – to strengthen education as a public endeavour and a common good.

With this background – the unique role of universities and other higher education institutions in societies for them to be equipped for a sustainable future and to foster democracy, I will reflect on the challenges and opportunities for higher education.

## 1. Value-Based Higher Education

The unique role of universities, to provide knowledge and competence through research and education, builds on fundamental values and principles: academic freedom, institutional autonomy, equity in access to education and knowledge, tolerance of divergent opinions, freedom from political interference. The United Nations and UNESCO, EHEA, Ministers in Europe, EAU, MCO and IAU, among many others, promote and defend these values for higher education to best fulfill their societal role.

However, we do see an increased populism, de-democratization around the world. Today, more than 50% of the countries are led by authoritarian regimes or are undergoing de-democratization – often accompanied with a governmental and sometimes also societal questioning and even denial of these values. This is also occurring in Europe and nearby countries. This is affecting international cooperation in research and education.

Are universities ready to abstain from student exchanges from countries and institutions demanding curricula control – to ensure students rights to high quality disciplinary education, but also to develop skills to be creative, innovative, analytical and with critical thinking that is in line with the social contract of education? For them it is necessary to be prepared to contribute to societal transformation for a sustainable democratic future. Universities must also reflect on the commodification of international students – dependence of student fees.

Are universities ready to abstain from research cooperation, when freedom to publish is restricted, by any part, where ethical jurisdictions and moral concerns are in contradiction to the fundamental values?

The threats to academic freedom, freedom of expression, human rights, tolerance is also occurring within universities. We do see students in strong opposition to curricula content related to ideological or religious grounds and threats to teachers from students and external stakeholders on similar grounds and faculties being dismissed on these grounds.

The number of scholars at risk is increasing and universities in many countries take actions to help these scholars – not least for them to be prepared to go back and help build higher education in their home countries, when the situation allows. My own experience is that these scholars also bring added value to research and education at their host institution with their competence and experience.

I will also draw attention to the fact that there is an increasing intolerance of divergent views among scientists, which is contradictory to the ground for scientific development and fostering respect for critical thinking.

In this global movement, universities must take responsibility to bring awareness and understanding of the importance of academic freedom, freedom of expression, tolerance etc. – for universities to provide new knowledge through independent research and to educate students, with disciplinary competence, but also with creative and analytical skills and critical thinking. Living those values within the institutions is crucial and must be supported by the leadership.

## 2. Transforming Higher Education in the Digital Area

The pandemic pushed the already ongoing development of technology and digitalization, in higher education and there are many lessons learned, which must guide further development.

Campus education was closed in almost all countries and universities were forced to transfer to online education. The preparedness for this transition was diverse in infrastructure capacity, socioeconomic capacity, teachers' pedagogical skills, etc.

The consequences of the pandemic highlighted the inequality in possibilities to digital transition between regions, countries but also within countries. However, at the same time have opened new opportunities to increase access to higher education and thereby societal equality and capacity building.

Research cooperation projects, conferences and seminars also went online with its pros and cons. Among the pros is the increased inclusiveness – opening up for faculties and students, which for various reasons cannot attend meetings either in other parts of the region but more common international meetings. Reasons behind could be lack of financial support, visa issues, social/family responsibilities, etc.

Another pro is the access to high quality conferences and seminars all around the world – supporting the invaluable research sharing and research cooperation between all continents. Distinguished key note speakers are now sharing their knowledge more widely – due to less time consuming for the speaker and less costly for the inviting university and in line with reducing climate footprints without losing international cooperation's benefits.

The online transformation has thus, in many aspects, positively affected inequality and in particular gender inequality. Women in most countries are taking on more of social and family responsibilities which might hamper their possibilities to attend meetings even beyond traveling.

Cons is that the value of face-to-face interactions between individuals is hampered by such as opening for the not foreseen questions, and new contacts and networks. In my own reflection maybe in particular hampering young and less known researchers to establish new connections. The latter is important for their development as independent researchers and research leaders.

We need to develop and take advantage of digitalization as a complement and not a replacement in research, education and societal cooperation.

Unfortunately, there are also signs that the pandemic has favored research cooperation within the western hemisphere and to some extent west-east, at the expense of south-north cooperation. The pandemic has also resulted in reallocation of research funding to the STEM area, despite that the obvious societal needs to meet challenges include humanity, social science and also arts.

New technology and digitalization provide many opportunities for universities to jointly and in cooperation to act in providing and developing quality research and education in all parts. Universities have to rethink internationalization, a base for its activity, taking advantage of new technologies as a complement to physical mobility. An important step is to equip all societies for a sustainable future.

The digital transformation must be done with eyes on and respect for quality, equality, ethics, and not least security and legacy. The latter being not least important in the context of open science and open access. There is an increasing need for legal expertise at universities and international cooperation in this area.

### 3. Universities' Societal Responsibility

Universities have been around for centuries providing new knowledge and competence to the society at large. They have responded to and taken responsibility for societal challenges, often unpredicted and unforeseen, changes occurring on the regional and global level. Most recent examples are the pandemic and the invasion of Ukraine. As discussed above, the rapid transfer was from campus to online education and research cooperation. Due to universities' strong and rapid efforts of and willingness to care for and support students and faculties that with short notice must flee Ukraine.

The pandemic, regional conflicts and the climate change all have global consequences and underpin the interconnection between the 17 sustainable development goals. To reach the goals and realize the agenda 2030, to meet the global challenges, cooperation is required – within the universities, including interdisciplinarity, and between universities and public private sector and civil society.

There is no ONE model for this cooperation. However, to be successful it must be based on mutual interest, trust and respect for each participant's prerequisites and regulations. For the universities this means that they must be respected for fundamental values and, in my opinion, one has to refrain from collaboration that does not fulfill these criteria.

Cooperation will increase universities' understanding of and needs in societies, bring higher education closer to practitioners and improve research and education with new perspectives and

with interdisciplinary approaches – to facilitate implementation of knowledge to societies and prepare students for working life and to cooperate without compromising academic freedom, its fundamental values and principles, and its unique role in society.

Among the uniqueness of universities is ability to perform basic, curiosity research whose scientific value and societal impact may be recognized only decades later.

Universities must be supported, not least financially, to perform basic, curiosity research. As an example, is the most extraordinary rapid development of a COVID-19 vaccine on the market which would not have happened without decades of basic research in virology, vaccine development and the competence in pharmaceutical companies to develop university findings.

Innovations – not least social innovations, are crucial for a societal development with economic, ecologic, and social perspectives. It is important to recognize that most innovations take place in the private and public sector and/or in cooperation with universities and require competence and creativity and transdisciplinarity.

Thus, higher education, in all disciplines and in interdisciplinarity contexts, must be provided and accessible to students with capacity and interest regardless of socioeconomic background. Universities must also provide education, courses and programs, in lifelong learning. Those who want to change professional fields, find extended knowledge is needed in work life, requested by the employer or foreseen by the individual himself or herself.

#### 4. In Summary

There are challenges for the future Universities, but also opportunities. Societies will in the long term always need knowledge creation and development and education to be equipped to take actions with local relevance and global responsibility for a sustainable future for next generations. Hopefully, the role and recognition of universities to foster democracy is defended and promoted.

Universities must continue to be international and jointly bring awareness and understanding of its unique contribution to society. They must be there for each other, when students and faculties are threatened – to cooperate for the necessity of research and education in all parts of the world.

To be given the Honoris Causa title at your University is for me an appreciation of international cooperation in Higher Education and that this University is, and will continue to be, part of forming the future of Universities in cooperation and cohesion meet the societal needs of knowledge and competence without compromising academic freedom, freedom of expression, human rights, equality, tolerance, ethics.

Thank you very much.