WHAT ARE UNIVERSITIES FOR IN 21ST CENTURY

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Wozu Dichter in durftiger Zeit?
(What are poets for in a time of difficulty?)
Friedrich Hotdertin

It is very good to be back here at Nazarbayev University in this fabulous tropical space. I love the palm trees here: they make me feel that this is a new model of a university, one which is full of surprises, one which proclaims its international ambitions through its building as well as through its academic staff.

The epigraph to my article is a question posed by Friedrich Holderlin, one of the greatest Romantic German poets of the 19th Century. The questions mean "what are poets for in difficult times?" This question is posed in his beautiful elegy,"Bread and Wine". Basically, the poem asks what the purpose and the function of poets are - to which the answer is given that they sing their songs in order to be present in the world and that truth has often been lost and will often again be lost, but can ultimately be traced through the witness of poetry.

This question led on to a meditation by one of the world's greatest philosophers of the 20th Century, Martin Heidegger, in his essay precisely entitled "What are poets for?". In this essay, which is highly spiritual as well as philosophical, Heidegger considers the place of truth and truth-seeking in the world and how we can learn to be properly in the world. He concludes that only poetry itself can answer the question of what poets are for, as they are constantly seeking for truth. So why am I interested in and speaking about poets when this conference is devoted to universities? The reason is that universities are very ancient institutions and, in many ways, they are essentially a western concept - which poses certain issues about the origins and nature of universities about which we tend usually not to think or talk. Perhaps we could discuss this in later round-tables at this conference.

Before universities were created many centuries ago, issues of truth, knowledge and being in the world were thought-through via poetry. In the beginning of our cultures, it was poets who provided a moral compass for their countries and their fellow citizens, even at times when the world was being torn apart by war or poverty or uncertainty. For Heidegger, a key belief was that you must believe in the human spirit in order fully and properly to be in the world.

I open with these poetic and philosophic ideas, because it is vital to recognise that universities are not simply about economic drivers for the future development of individual nation states or individual regions. In this context, it is important for us to look back in history. We all know that universities are now considered by governments to be vital to national development. Indeed this position is now regularly articulated by virtually every government in the world. Yet the history of the university system shows us that what defines and characterizes it most of all is its flexibility In the West, universities are the oldest organisational system apart from the Roman Catholic Church. And both the Roman Catholic Church and the university system have survived precisely because they have known how to change when necessary. Universities do not stay still: they respond to the expectations

and demands of the countries in which they function - whilst also contributing themselves in great part to the gradual change of these societies. People spend a great deal of time these days discussing the different types of universities and establishing various typologies to describe them. However, these discussions tend to describe the different kinds of universities there are without focusing on the need to understand what the primary purpose of universities is. My argument is that universities were, when first founded, a public good and that they can and should again become a public good; in other words, they should serve the needs of the whole of the nation rather than simply for those segments of the population who are privileged in that they benefit directly from outputs of research, from knowledge transfer, from that position of knowledge and skills, etc. If universities are to be (and to be perceived as) public good, they need to work together. We speak a lot about sharing and of partnerships in contemporary debates about universities, but we are also enormously committed to competition. This is quite right, since competition encourages innovation and facilitates the drive with each other towards ever greater excellence. However, competition needs always to be seen in terms of collaboration, whereby universities with different skills and expertise work in complementary ways. The competition that is unhelpful is the obsession with world league table of universities where at any one time there are frequently more than 20 universities claiming that they are in the world's top 10! All that this shows is that we in the universities are very creative with mathematics and understand how to manipulate them. The big issue for universities at present is how we can move into more strategic partnerships than we have at the moment: we have tended to work in ways which are opportunistic and short-termist and which are contractual in nature, rather than being truly strategic partnerships which seek to make a difference rather than to make a fast buck.

We also need to recognise that each of us needs, in different ways, to work locally and regionally also having an eye on the global context. Some of world's best, research-intensive universities will also continue to find solutions to the world's major global problems - but usually by working together. In other words, it seems to me that we should stop being obsessed with where each of our universities sits in the league tables, and that we should strive to be clear with ourselves, clear with each other and with everyone else, about what we do, what we are and what we are striving to do. In these debates, it is helpful to go back to the original meaning of'university'. All too often, people assume that this has got something to do with universality, whereas the origin of the word "university" comes from universitas magistrorum and scholarium. The meaning of this is, broadly, "a community of teacher and scholars", where there is parity of esteem between the teachers and scholars and all live in the same community. This notion of community which was at the heart of the original universities and was reinforced later by such major thinkers about universities as Wilhelm von Humboldt and John Henry Newman - and this vital concept of community is what we are losing in universities around the world.

We need to remember that the first university was created as early as in the late 11th Century - and already then, academic freedom was at the core of what a university should be. Today, the term "academic freedom" is banded around all too easily, often being used as a veil for self-interest. We need again to go back to the origins in order to understand what exactly this meant at the beginning in order better to understand what it should mean today. In the late 11th Century and early 12th Century, when the concept of academic freedom was brought in, it meant quite literally the freedom to cross boundaries without passports in order to gain new knowledge and to share new knowledge. There was therefore a literal,

physical freedom to travel from one country to another and a metaphorical, intellectual freedom to travel from one idea to another. But that sense of being a travelling scholar or scientist is something which became lost for a while as we focused only on national systems of education. Today, however, we are getting close again to seeing mobility as fundamental to the research and teaching workings of a university, although we have some considerable work still to do in terms of making both student and staff mobility fully democratic and available to everyone, whatever their background and financial situation.

Internationalisation is one of the main focuses for universities across the world and one of the major agenda items for our conference here on how to help the universities in the Eurasian region to move forward - and how we, who are not in the Eurasian area, can ourselves learn to move forward in different ways through partnerships with universities in Kazakhstan and other countries in the region. The key thing is to preserve the life of the mind whilst also recognising that the life of mind is not something fanciful; rather, it is and must be rigorous, systemic and sustainable.

The research university emerged largely following the great explosion of knowledge of the Enlightenment period in the 18th century, followed by the Industrial Revolution in the 19th century. Today, the research-intensive university is seen as the most prestigious model of the university and one to which almost all universities aspire. However, is this appropriate or the best way forward? We certainly need to have research-intensive universities, especially ones which are also teaching-intensive, and every country needs some world-class universities which are committed to paradigm-shifting in fundamental, applied and translational research. However, not every university needs to operate at that level; rather, universities need to find their own level, identity, relevance and type of contribution. Again, I would stress that we need to challenge the apparent all-importance of league tables and institutional hierarchies.

Wilhelm von Humboldt, one of the two great founding theorists of the modern university, stated in Theory of Human Education (1793) that: 'The ultimate task of our existence is to give the fullest possible content to the concept of humanity in our person [...] through the impact of actions in our own lives". This view positions the university as vital in terms both of developing individuals and of giving them a sense of responsibility for their actions - which will and indeed must have an impact on those around them. Interestingly, the concept of impact has recently become a crucial criterion for the evaluation of research, especially in the UK, where academic departments are explicitly asked to show the impact of the research that they are doing. Of course, most university research is funded by governments and therefore by tax payers' money, and if we have a publicly-funded system, universities must understand that it is vital that they demonstrate to the world what the point of their research is and why it matters.

The other great theorist of the university in the modern period is John Henry Newman, a thinker and cardinal, who coined one of the very best definitions of a university: "a university must be assemblage of strangers from all parts in one spot" (The Idea of a University, 1854). Whatever a university strives to be, whether it is a research-intensive or teaching-intensive or vocational or whatever university, it must be a place where we can learn to talk with strangers. This does not mean simply that we must learn to talk with foreigners; rather, the notion of stranger applies to all engagements, so, for example, philosophers must learn to talk with theoretical physicists and engineers with linguists and the university must be a

place where we can Learn to talk with people from different socio-economic backgrounds, from different faiths, from different pre-suppositions, from different academic methodologies. And through this talking with strangers, we will learn ever better to view knowledge from a variety of perspectives rather than from any single monovalent one. Interestingly, Newman himself from within the Church also insisted that "a university must first of all be free from censorship" (The Idea of a University, 1854), asserting the need for full academic freedom.

According to these theories, universities need to be places which seek simultaneously after both wisdom and innovation. These are two very different aims, but both are necessary if universities are fully to play their part in society as a public good.

In this context, it is important to be aware of the dangers inherent in our governments' drive towards more and more entrepreneurial or enterprise universities, where economic drivers are seen as the prime engine for change. To focus only on the instrumental and/or commercial aspects of the university is to deny its essence - and its importance. For this reason, we need to be wary about the creation of such organisations such as the Hamburg University, created in 1961 by McDonald's - which is proud of the fact that it was the first restaurant company to develop a global training centre and one of the very few fast food companies to receive college credit recommendations from the American Council on Education (ACE). It is undoubtedly admirable that that MacDonald's wishes to train its staff as well as possible to manage restaurants and deliver their products. However, if a university is merely a brand and a training centre, it has lost touch with how it can genuinely be a public good.

One of the most positive advances over the past decade or so has been the development of the international(ised) university, whereby we have come to understand that we learn more effectively by learning with people who come from different cultures, from different methodologies, from different learning traditions. In the UK, we have certainly learned enormously over the past 10 years of having many students from Kazakhstan, notably through the Bolashak programme, students who have been trained very well but in somewhat different ways than Western students have been trained. What has been important for us has been to recognise the importance of difference in education and training, and this notion of difference or 'strangerliness', which is at the heart of the origin of the university is something which we need to articulate much more and with greater refinement in the contemporary university and in the university of the future.

Within all universities these days, there is also the phenomenon of faculty members feeling overburdened and constantly driven by pressures from outside without enough time for research or the fundamental issues of the life of the mind. Furthermore, the last decade has seen more changes than any other period in our history, as universities have moved towards systems of mass education - and over the next decade we shall see even more change, given that governments are regarding universities with an ever more determined eye, expecting them to deliver on governmental priorities. Our students are themselves changing in what they want and what they expect, and universities themselves are struggling to define themselves in long-term sustainable ways within their own local environments. Private universities are entering more and more countries, and we should welcome this, since the competition will be a useful driver. However, we need always to be very clear on our mission and on the importance of the governance.

Crucially, we need to recognise thatthe world economy is shifting awayfrom the dominance of the West. Economic and financial power is moving to Eurasia, the Middle East, and South Asia and the Far East. Military power still remains in the West, but even that is likely to shift eastwards soon. We in the universities need to examine carefully what the implications of these shifts are in terms of the balance of power. We need also to deal with the often unspoken dimension of balances of power, such as what do we do about the balance of poverty or the lack of equality in terms of access to health care? Or the digital divide, whereby communication is withheld from many billions of people? We need to look as much, if not more, at all the under-privileged as we have traditionally focused those who already have achieved privileges. We need also to recognise that while cultural differences are becoming much more defined today in our globalised world; we need to work much harder at understanding them. Again, we need to ponder the importance of the university as an "assemblage of strangers", which recognises a world beyond the university, one which needs our expertise, and our engagement. If a university has a moral vision, as it should, it should not select only easy, experienced and well-resourced partners, but choose partnerships that will bring new learning as well as maximum benefit to all involved and concerned .

I would now like to consider some of the issues which in my vieware driving the university world that we have at the moment. Our students are much more interested in securing jobs immediately after their studies, and we need to manage this expectation. Students also are much more eager to have physical mobility as well as intellectual and cultural mobility and this will inevitably lead to greater flows of migration throughout the world as students seek to study in two or more countries during their learning period. Employers are working much more closely with universities in terms of trying to persuade us to develop the kind of broad skill-sets that they want. And, of course, our governments more and more see universities as the repository of potential answers to major problems in healthcare, economic stability, the environment, the need to preserve and manage natural assets, and so on. Most encouragingly, all universities themselves now seek to grapple with the challenges as well as the opportunities of internationalisation and there is also increasing interest in the return of social and model values to the curriculum as part of what one could call 'academic globalisation'.

Perhaps the most frequent key word now found in university mission statements and strategies is 'partnerships'. We are all talking with enthusiasm about partnerships, but we must be realistic and recognise that partnerships are hard. This means that we need to find new ways of working - and working across cultural boundaries. One positive example is the new initiative between the UK and Japan, which is trying to get British and Japanese universities and businesses to talk and work together. This initiative, REN KEI (see http://www. britishcouncil.org/japan-about-us-press-room-press-releases-20120313.htm) is teaching us just how very different we are in terms of working practices and business assumptions. On the other hand, the Eurozone and many other developed countries are undergoing a time of austerity and challenge, while there is growing wealth is some countries such as Kazakhstan, the Middle East and China which are, in economic terms, much more dynamic at the moment than most other parts of the world. But for all of us, whether we are undergoing austerity or expansion, there is a need to recognise that this is a time of challenge - and we need to be bold in the ways in which we define the university for the future rather than relying on established, ready-made models. Technology often appears to be an answer and it certainly allows new solutions to be found to age-old problems, but it also heightens the digital divide.

The more and more sophisticated we become in our technology and in our research and teaching methods, the more we make it impossible for those in poorer and less developed countries actually to benefit from what we are doing. We therefore need to spend time in translating technology into systems which can be read and accessed in the developing world.

Universities are above all agents of change, and I would argue that without universities, societies would not move on rapidly enough. Universities can both develop highly skilled human capital and also create new knowledge. With both of these processes, we need to recognise the imperatives of our various governments and we need to work with them. However, we must also challenge our governments in our commitment to wisdom as well as to innovation; we must help business and industry to move forward, and we also must be integral to the growing flows of people across the world taking with them new knowledge, new information and new awareness of moral imperatives as well as economic drivers.

One of the major things that happened in the UK a few years ago was that the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), the major funding body for teaching and research, decided that it wanted to find out what difference universities made to our students. We all know that studying at university brings an economic dividend to students, since they will earn more over their careers than people without degrees. Yet this is perhaps not the major difference between graduates and non-graduates, for HEFCE's analysis discovered that graduates are happier people, healthier people, have better attitudes to ethnic, religious, social and gender differences, and even believe more in the political process than non-graduates. So a university education actually makes your life better rather than simply giving you access to a better job! And it helps us to realise that we all live within a community of strangers...

In the universities, we quite rightly say that we are not just about preparing people for jobs. Rather, our function is to develop employability skills in our students - which is not the same as having a narrow focus on employment. The world itself is changing very rapidly, and we know from evidence from across the world that the notion of the career is shifting. In the UK for instance, we know that many of our students will have three careers in their life: not three jobs within a single profession, but three different careers, so that they may train initially as a psychologist, then become a teacher, then become an engineer or a lawyer or whatever. What is crucial is that they need to be able to change direction significantly during their working lives, and we as universities must help our students to understand this and to develop flexibility, adaptability, team-working and problem-solving skills.

We need to create a truly meritocratic society yet, as we look around the world, if we are honest, in many of our countries we still have a long way to go in terms of becoming truly open and meritocratic; connections and wealth still help a great deal, for instance, in my own country. I would ask you all to analyse your individual countries and recognise how much you may still have to do in order to make sure that the very best will always succeed, no matter what their backgrounds are.

As teachers, we need to learn that we are no longer authority figures or gurus; we are no longer patriarchal fathers of knowledge who generously give our knowledge and understanding to our students. We are no longer engaged in a process of teaching conceived as a direct transfer of knowledge from the wise to the ignorant. Rather, we are about facilitating our students to learn, and the big shift for all of us is to focus much more on Learning processes than on teaching processes. As, indeed Minister Zhumagulov said earlier,

we need a commitment to Lifelong Learning, understanding that Learning does not stop when you obtain your first degree. And the issue which for me personally is the biggest challenge for all of us is how we can insure that every single student and every single faculty member and every single administrator, technician or other worker in our universities understands what it means to be a global citizen, understands what our individual responsibilities are as people living in a very complex globalised world.

In terms of sharing our research, over the past 10-15 years, we have moved from an initial starting point of technology transfer, to a wider conception of how universities can share their research. First of all, we learned to speak not purely about technology but about knowledge in a much wider way in what we called knowledge transfer. This was an important step change in attitude and process, but at the heart of this notion was still the idea that universities know best, that we are places where people know things. Then about a decade ago, there was a further, significant shift to what we called knowledge exchange, where universities understood and recognised publicly that we learn from business and industry, from society, from NGOs, etc. And now we have undertaken what will, I think, be a seismic change: the move to public engagement. This process recognises explicitly that universities can and must learn from people who are not like us, from people who do not watch documentaries, who do not read learned articles, who do not even read newspapers or books but whose lives are deeply affected by the research work that we do in universities. We now realise that we do not need simply to help them to understand what we are doing, but we must bring them into our universities, so that they can help us to formulate the research questions that will underpin our future research activities. Public engagement therefore will lead to participatory research, whereby everyone in the country has the right to be involved in the drafting of research questions. They will not do the research, since they probably will not have the appropriate skills, but because they are thinking, living beings whose lives will be touched by research, they have the right to be part of formulating the questions that we need to be asking in our research.

This move towards public engagement leads universities further onwards towards a much more central role and position in society. And in order successfully to make this progress, we need to look backwards to the origins and founding principles of universities. As the number of universities grows rapidly across the world, it is vital that each of us is clear about our identity and mission. We need to move beyond our current obsession with the 'vertical' hierarchy of league tables towards recognition of the vitality of the 'horizontal' landscapes of universities, where each institution has a clear but different mission. Not every university can be a major global player. However, each university can and should help to develop our students as global citizens and can and should play an important part in the local community in which it is based. We universities need also to learn humility and to understand that everyone, no matter how highly or lowly educated they are, can bring fresh insights to problems. It is easy to say, but it is not easy to do. Nonetheless, as universities we need to do all we can to teach our students that we can all learn from everyone else and to help our students to become better global citizens. This is one of the things at which universities excel: we are good at developing leaders as well as being good at creating knowledge; we are good at disseminating knowledge and now we are getting much, much better in terms of our strategic thinking. As we move forward in our questioning of what universities should be for in the 21st Century, we need to ask ourselves a few questions. For instance, who should pay for universities? Should it be only governments? Should not

students themselves contribute, wherever possible, to the costs of their education which will give them enormous advantages in their future lives? And should not business and industry contribute significantly to the research work of universities as well as to the human resource development in which universities are engaged? The one caveat that I would make about this is that universities should never become the subservient hand-maidens of business and industry, but should keep their own intellectual and scientific independence, no matter who is funding them.

We need also to ask who benefits most from higher education, apart from those who work in it and study within it. I would argue that we all benefit enormously, albeit often in complex and hidden ways. Ideally, universities should function both as a public good and a private good, so that every individual benefits in one way or another from the university system. And this is where we need to create a continuum of education from primary to secondary to higher education and thence onwards to life-long learning. This is a significant challenge, one which is relevant in every country in the world - and no country so far has yet managed to create a truly joined-up system from primary through to higher and then life-Long learning.

One of the best examples of a creative initiative is what is happening here in Kazakhstan in the relationship between Nazarbayev University and Nazarbayev Intellectual Schools, where a major reform in the school system is tied explicitly to its relationship with a university and reforms in the university system. This model is one which we could follow in our own countries and in our own ways, since it offers the prospect of continuity and cohesiveness to all nations as they try to reform their educational systems in order to make them appropriate for the 21st Century.

I would end with one question, again for discussion during the conference. Throughout the world,there are initiatives which are seeking to open up knowledge and the information need for learning to the wider community. These initiatives have such names as Open Source and Open Access initiatives, and they present a different model of knowledge-sharing whereby knowledge is shared in the very moments and processes of its creation. And this is a major opening- up of universities to their communities and into an interdependent relationship with the community, which is changing the way that universities work. If we genuinely do want to create new, appropriate universities for the future, universities which will change not only individuals and countries, but the whole world, we need to think about how we fund universities and, crucially, about how we manage and govern them. We all want to change to the world and make it better; we all want to see the major problems in our world solved. This can happen, of that I am sure. But I am equally certain that we can do it only if we work together, in new partnerships and with a new respect for otherness and for difference.