

Building the Europe of shared knowledge: the rare disciplines projects

The 4 Rector Conferences (CPU, HRK, KRASP, MRK) share a common vision of the stakes represented by rare disciplines. They agreed to consider the great importance of rare disciplines to the achievement of a “Europe of knowledge” based on the ideals and the values of the modern European Enlightenment and academic freedom prerequisite to the unfettered pursuit of curiosity-driven blue sky research. There is consensus on the fact that preserving the stock of knowledge - as well as emerging disciplines with their potential to open up disruptive trends in many fields of research - is less expensive than ignorance. Furthermore, there is agreement on the fact that rare disciplines concern society as a whole. Universities are the main stakeholders for rare disciplines and have the responsibility to be at the forefront of their protection. However, the task needs to be shared with all of society and public funding is needed. The main danger is that we reduce the stock of experts and of knowledge to a point of non-return. It is important to remember: knowledge cannot be “(re)-created” only on demand. The four conferences agreed that if nothing is done and the risks are not identified, then many of these disciplines may disappear.

The rare disciplines concern all the sciences, even though the question is frequently asked about the social and human sciences. The decrease in the number of students in the fields of mathematics and physics as well as in metallurgy, crystallography or theoretical chemistry shows that many research fields, and not only the humanities, are concerned.

The major common stake of these disciplines is the future European position. The disappearance of a discipline provokes, first, the disappearance of the high-level cursus and then progressive loss, due to the withdrawal and non-replacement of the research capacity and knowledge transfer. It is necessary today to build observation and strategic analysis capacities at the national and European levels, which will enable to anticipate those situations and take accurate decisions at every level of responsibility, in order not to be dependent in the future.

Rare disciplines are part of our cultural heritage

Rare disciplines are key tools to protect our capacity of understanding our cultural and intellectual history and thus supporting our diversity. They sometimes represent an independent branch of knowledge. For example, the four Conferences referred to the added value of Coptic to understand the Ancient World and civilization. Similarly, if Latin disappears, knowledge, a means for studying ancient civilization and history, will be lost. Their disappearance could be then disastrous from a scientific, cultural, economic and social point of view. The disappearance of disciplines causing the disappearance of knowledge which might be “dormant”, at a given moment, but which be helpful in the future, should be avoided.

Rare disciplines can help us understand and address today's society challenges

The recent and ongoing refugee crisis and the attacks that took place in France are the most visible examples that rare disciplines, which are necessary to preserve, not only not to lose a living memory and to understand how we built our knowledge but also to be able to correctly analyze the moves of our society since its origins.

Rare disciplines can indeed have an impact on the evolution of a changing world. Europe needs experts on Islamic religion, cultural studies and Arabic language to succeed. These skills are not common, they may have a long history and bring a methodology and added value. Considering this context, it is important to consider not only the societal impact, but also the economic consequence of rare discipline disappearance when making the case for their protection.

Rare disciplines are an opportunity for universities and countries and represent an European competitive factor

As explained by the 4 Conferences in the seminar on the 27th of September 2016, in the future, can we live with only engineers and computers? It is important to define a concept in order to enable future action and to develop the relevant arguments to preserve rare disciplines. In this context, universities must be able to respond to the needs of mass education AND at the same time have specialist researchers for the future. This is only possible at university level through a bottom-up approach and becomes essential when the subject of rare disciplines is raised.

In science, the cooperation with peers is critical for the advancement of knowledge. Due to their low numbers in rare disciplines, researchers and professors tend to work in international networks to achieve critical mass. Hence, rare disciplines can drive the internationalization of institutions and thereby contribute to building the profile of universities and countries, representing an opportunity that cannot be missed. This research can benefit the national and European communities, and more particularly public policies.

Rare disciplines are also undoubtedly linked to risky and blue skies research, and to the possible achievement of breakthrough scientific and technological research. They are unquestionably a pillar of the European excellent research.

But rare disciplines are threatened

By societal pressure

- Today's society tends to steer students to what is perceived as "practical and profitable" subjects. The clear majority of young students do not "choose" rare disciplines, since they are considered "old-fashioned" and having "low employability value". This negative view of rare disciplines does not correspond to the reality and often emerges during the secondary education.

By demographics

- Universities should deal with the ageing of the academic staff in some of these rare disciplines, which raises an issue regarding sustainability, especially in the context of a reduced number of students assuring the continuation of the discipline.

By financial constraints

- Higher education has been the subject of an increased marketization, where the budget of the universities depends on the number of students. In such a context of financial constraints, the pressure for universities to suppress these disciplines is real, in particular for the research-intensive universities. There is a danger that the rationale of instant economic return, may imply a medium-term irreparable loss.
- Another point concerned the temptation to focus resources on the most sought-after disciplines by students. This can be dangerous as it leaves the future of rare disciplines in teenagers' hands as well as our capacity of understanding ourselves. This point also stresses the importance of community-based choices and the need of decision-makers to actively develop policies in support of these disciplines.