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MESSAGE FROM THE VICE-RECTOR

We have been living times of trouble, unprecedented in more than a century, without having a global conflict as the root-cause. There is no doubt about it, regardless of the perspective. The sheer number of people affected, all across the world, in an almost simultaneous way, no matter their sex, age, nationality, occupation, or income level, is there to prove it, even acknowledging some differences between specific cohorts.

In times of trouble, we tend to react, to adapt, and to resist. During a health-related crisis, we firstly turn to life- and health-related sciences, in search for understanding, and, foremost, for feasible and expedite solutions. Then, people may realize the need for engineering and other technological domains, enabling not only production, but also mass-production. Furthermore, when large-scale distribution is at stake, logistics and economics come into play; as does the provision of health-care and social-support structures, the role of public bodies, private instances and the civil society.

However, let us not forget that, during the current pandemic, the first and most decisive response relied mostly on individual and on social behaviour, to mitigate spread and to buy time for scientists and innovators. Behaviour bringing together past experiences, knowledge, communication, trust and mistrust, under a context of asymmetrical consequences of the decisions being taken.

Taking a step back, all that described above is still a rather short-term and utilitarian view of knowledge. For the current knowledge and technological capacities are the result of past research efforts, both curiosity-driven and problem solving oriented, from the observation of the planets, that enabled the development of a communication satellite networks, to the digging of the earth, enabling access to raw-materials. Moreover, the current social fabric is the result of evolution across time, with its own tensions, balances and imbalances.

The very same holds true for the arts, in their diverse forms and formats. Much more than reflecting a moment in time, which artistic creations eloquently do, arts intersect past, present and futures to be. Making use of human experiences, of limitations and opportunities, of new materials and tools, of looking back and looking ahead, of memories and dreams.

Some of the transformative effects of social distancing and social mediating technologies, across all domains, from working models to tourism, from education to research, from media to entertainment, from performative arts to culture access, are yet to be seen.

For sure, the current crisis put science on the limelight, moving beyond the knowledge itself into the interface between scientists and policy-makers, media and the public. Even 20 years into the XXI century, and in face of a more well-educated global population than ever, issues such as the comprehension of the research process, with its limitations and trial-and-error, science literacy, the understanding of uncertainty, critical thinking, media literacy, the boundaries between science and policy, and even science denial, are constantly raised. This goes further beyond the focus on science and innovation in themselves, highlighting the importance of excellent science communication, as a requisite for trust in science.

All together, these are issues at the very heart of a comprehensive university as our own University: creating new knowledge, fostering interdisciplinary bonds, providing an inclusive educative experience from undergraduates to learners of all ages – as the most effective impact multiplayer a University may have are its students – developing awareness and critical thinking, disseminating throughout society, embracing open discussions.

The sense of urgency under which we have been living for more than a year, triggered by immediate and dire consequences, and a global scale without safe spots, enabled response at a pace not seen before in other major challenges, and somewhat subdued competition.

Furthermore, not all troubles are the same and not all troubles, be they individual or collective, will primarily be addressed by science, technology, and innovation. The backlog is long, and not necessarily new: rising inequalities, human rights, war and conflicts, terrorism, the displaced population, amounting to a staggering 80 million fellow humans.

Times of troubles, whichever their nature, are times to think anew, to imagine futures, to challenge the status quo, and to decide which path to take. After the initial moment focused on response, more than on adaptation or prevention, the questions start to emerge. Should we quickly retrace on our footsteps to the comfort of the past, or venture into the unknown of the future? Which one of the possible futures should we choose, or better said, should we attempt to make? Which are the common aspirations and the divisive options? How to build a sense of belonging and direction?

Questions that concerns us all and that require our full commitment!