

***Speech delivered by the President of the Hellenic American University Mr. Chris Spirou at the First Athens International Conference on University Assessment, on Friday May 27<sup>th</sup> at the Hellenic American Union's Theatre-Auditorium***

Madame Minister of Education, Mr. Representative of the European Parliament in Greece, Honored Speakers, Distinguished Guests, ladies and gentlemen;

As the President of the Hellenic American University and Chairman of the Board of Directors of the Hellenic American Union I welcome all of you to our facilities and to the First Athens International Conference on University Assessment.

Accelerating trends towards globalization and regional economic integration, as well as the heightened mobility of the work force, have created an urgent need for professionals worldwide who are equipped to work in increasingly diverse cultural environments.

In Greece and the broader region of the Balkans, the Middle East, and Eastern Europe, there is a corresponding and equally compelling need for graduate and undergraduate education that: a) is informed by innovative teaching methodology and the finest practices of Educational Institutions of higher learning; and b) addresses the particular challenges posed by the emergent market economies of the region.

Hosting this conference is part of the mission of the Hellenic American University to be a leading provider of the highest quality American-style graduate and undergraduate education that is globally focused, inter-culturally informed, and career oriented. Serving Greece, the Balkans, the Middle East, and Eastern Europe, it will prepare its graduates to contribute to economic and social development locally, regionally, and internationally.

In the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, John Henry Cardinal Newman gave a famous series of lectures on the occasion of the founding of the Catholic University in Dublin. In this series, entitled "*The Idea of the University*", Newman suggested that great cities themselves were a kind of virtual university. "London and Paris, are in fact, and in operation, Universities." Newman said.

It is true like the University, the cities are centers of law, politics, science, literature and art. They are a forum for social dialogue and interaction.

Again, like the University, cities are places where talented young people from all over the country and of all social classes throng to, where young people not only, in Newman's words "learn their trade well", but also intermingle and learn about each other, become exposed to new ideas and new ways of life.

In doing so, they are changed in important ways. How important? Just ask anyone who, like me, after years of living in a city returns to visit the village where he spent his childhood years.

But, as Newman himself recognized, there is an important difference between the metropolis and the university. In contrast to the haphazard way one learns in the city, the education a person receives in the University, Newman said, should be "based on principle, formed upon rule and directed to the highest ends."

I am certain that if Newman were writing today he would be pointing out the principles of a University, its mission.

Universities of course have different missions and luckily so. Given the complexity and the diversity of general social, professional and individual student needs the variety of University missions is a blessing. And as you know better than I do it is

on the basis of such a mission that the quality, effectiveness and relevance of a University's education should be evaluated.

But what principles guide a University and its mission? There are several but I would like to mention three that have shaped and are steering the development of the Hellenic American University. **Excellence, relevance and accessibility.**

Of course, excellence in the sense of exceptional quality education is something all Universities strive for. But I am using "excellence" here in a broader and perhaps older sense of the word.

When Shakespeare or Jane Austen wrote of "an excellent young man" or woman they of course had in mind a person who not only was distinguished in terms of achievement but also someone "praiseworthy in thought and manners and taste".

This connection between excellence and virtue is perhaps even more striking in Greek. "aristos", or "excellent", was used in classical Greek as a superlative for "agatho" which means "morally good", valiant noble. By the way, our non-Greek participants may be interested to know that "aristos" is used today to designate honors for a University degree.

To use more contemporary language, these "excellent young persons" were socially responsible, endowed with strong ethics, well rounded and tolerant of others. They had a sense of what Abraham Maslow called "human kinship" persons with social interest compassion and humanity.

But there should be more to quality education than excellence alone. The knowledge and skills acquired in their studies should also be "relevant". What

they learn should not only prepare them for a successful career but should also be relevant to the needs of their society and their fellow citizens.

To me in this day and age, relevance means addressing market demands and social responsibility. It is not enough to learn well or to simply want to be useful to a community. A student today must obtain educational skills and tools that he or she can apply to the market place and to the community of the market place.

Finally, quality education a University offers should not be reserved for the privileged. It must be accessible to anyone who has the intelligence, the talent and the commitment to pursue the studies required.

Today accessibility is restricted by one's financial condition, one's ability to get a student's visa to attend the school of his or her choice, or accessibility can be restricted by political considerations or constitutional restrictions.

In the case of the Hellenic American University for example we have tried to make quality, relevant American higher education affordable and accessible to students from Greece, Europe, the Balkans and the Middle East by establishing a campus in Athens.

An open society presupposes a system of evaluation. In a democracy, this evaluation comes primarily in the form of elections but also through legislative, judicial and administrative checks and balances, as well as in the watchdog role of the media.

In a university, evaluation should also have a system of checks and balances, through its various consultative and decision-making bodies and committees, such as the Board of Trustees, Faculty Input, Ethical Review Boards, and the like.

Evaluation also takes place through various mechanisms of accreditation and assessment, and here, as with the freedom of the press, the autonomy and objectivity of the evaluators and assessment organizations must be respected.

As a new institution, the Hellenic American University is committed to incorporating evaluation into all aspects of university life, and using the results of this assessment to improve the quality and effectiveness of the institution. In doing so, the University can rely not only on a long tradition of evaluation of American educational institutions, but also on the support and experience of the Hellenic American Union.

The Hellenic American Union has a long history of public service in education and culture, and, as a European institution with strong American affiliations, it has embedded European as well as American models of self-assessment in its activities.

The organization of this Conference, I believe, responds to the three challenges of excellence, relevance and accessibility. The standard of **excellence** represented by the experts assembled here today from Europe, North America and Asia will, I am sure, be given further expression in the insightful presentations and fruitful exchanges of opinion and experiences that will follow the panel discussions.

The themes and topics covered in these sessions are more **relevant** than ever, particularly in Europe in light of the Bologna Process, and especially in Greece, where stakeholders—faculty, students, parents, employers and the State—are recognizing the need for evaluation of higher education.

Finally, our intent in organizing this Conference has always been to make the discussions as **accessible** as possible to Greek and world educators and to have

the Conference serve as an open workshop for dialogue on higher education evaluation.

As the birthplace of democracy and the bedrock of philosophical, political, and scientific inquiry and achievement, Greece occupies a special place in the cultural and educational landscape of the West. Ancient Greece—home to the first “University”, Plato’s Academy—which was located just a few blocks away from here, lives on in the imagination of all who prize the life of the mind and the ideals of excellence and intellectual rigor.

The Hellenic American University, and the Hellenic American Union, reaffirm those ideals today, by hosting this Conference-“Demonstrating Quality in Higher Education” here in the land where the value of education was first enshrined.

I hope that you find the Conference stimulating and fruitful. I am confident that the Conference will give us an opportunity to explore questions in assessing quality in higher education and to learn from the experience and insights of our speakers and each other.

I encourage you to participate in the discussions following the presentations of the speakers and hope that your input and feedback will encourage us to follow up this conference with other events on this most timely of issues—QUALITY, RELEVANT HIGHER EDUCATION.

Thank you.