



*Inauguration of the 775<sup>th</sup> Academic Year*  
*October 28, 2015*

*Speech by the Rector of the University*  
*Professor Angelo Riccaboni*

Autorità,

Magnifici Rettori,

Colleghe e Colleghi Docenti e Tecnici Amministrativi,

Studentesse e Studenti,

Signore e Signori,

quest'anno sono particolarmente lieto di aprire il 775 anno accademico del nostro Ateneo poiché abbiamo l'onore di avere presenti con noi Rettori e rappresentanti degli atenei di 89 Paesi, venuti a Siena in occasione della Conferenza Annuale dell'International Association of Universities.

Conferenza che quest'anno è dedicata al tema dell'internazionalizzazione, così importante anche per la vita del nostro Ateneo, tanto che rappresenta uno dei quattro assi strategici individuati nel piano triennale 2013-2015.

Proprio per la presenza di tanti Colleghi stranieri mi permetto di presentare la relazione in lingua inglese.

Prima di procedere, consentitemi di ringraziare il Sindaco Bruno Valentini per averci concesso la possibilità di svolgere la nostra cerimonia in questa splendida sede del teatro dei Rinnovati.

Your excellencies, colleagues, students, ladies and gentlemen,

I thank all of you for joining us today for the opening ceremony of our 775th academic year. The University of Siena was, in fact, founded back in 1240.

We are particularly happy and proud to have you all with us today to celebrate an event so important for our community.

With its nearly 17,000 students, 15 departments, 750 professors and 1,000 administrative and technical staff, the University of Siena has a long tradition of high quality in both education and research, as is constantly

demonstrated by the excellent results obtained in the National Research Evaluation Exercise (named VQR) and the CENSIS yearly evaluation of universities, as well as in international rankings.

All over the world, countries are undergoing profound changes at institutional, environmental, social and economic levels.

There is an ever-growing awareness that research, innovation and higher education can play a key role in dealing with the challenges before us.

Our University is fully conscious of this responsibility, and of the necessity to promote learning, and produce valid research and innovative solutions capable of improving the wellbeing of our communities.

Global citizens need to be able to interact with different cultures, think critically, and seize arising opportunities. Social and technological innovation is required in order to reduce the consequences of climate change, diminish inequalities, support social inclusion, create job opportunities, and ensure healthier societies. Individual entrepreneurship and a more sustainable way of doing business should be promoted.

These tasks are not easy to accomplish, especially when, as it happens in this country, public and private investments in research and education are constantly decreasing. Only in recent months, have there been signs going in the right direction.

That is why I would like to take this opportunity to thank the researchers and administrative personnel of the University of Siena for their motivation, cohesion and commitment, which represent the most important factors in facing the challenges before us. I would also like to welcome the 35 incoming professors who start their new roles in the coming academic year. Recognition of merit and potential is at the basis of University life. We are all working hard in order to create new opportunities for young talent, to enhance the best academic experiences and to promote skills and opportunities for administrative and technical staff.

In light of challenges in front of us, the 2013-2015 Strategic Plan states that the University of Siena intends to define itself as a public university with an international dimension, focused on the quality of its research and the attractiveness of its study programs, and for its attention to its graduates' employability, students' services and sustainability issues.

We have taken these strategic pillars very seriously, being careful to define our financial planning and operational activities, both at university and department level, in line with such priorities.

The international element plays a central role in putting our Strategic Plan into practice.

During the next few days we will have the honor of hosting the annual Conference of the International Association of Universities.

I would like to thank the Board of the International Association of Universities, Prof. Dzulkifli Abdul Razak and Dr. Eva Egron-Polak for accepting our invitation to organize the meeting in Siena, and for participating in this ceremony together with our other friends of the Association.

I'd like to take advantage of this occasion to share my thoughts with you about the significance of internationalization for our university.

In concrete terms, and in coherence with our Strategic Plan, internationalization acts as a catalyst:

- 1) to increase our students' skills and employability,
- 2) to contribute to cooperation with less developed countries,

3) to reinforce the growth of local and regional economy.

Before dealing with such topics, I would like to say a few words about the relationship between internationalization and research.

Even though research has always been international, today it is very difficult to imagine quality research done purely at a national level.

The fact that research at our University reaches high positions in national and worldwide research evaluation exercises is because it is truly international.

The real challenge faced by all universities, however, is how to make teaching and other educational activities benefit by relevant research initiatives and partnerships being conducted.

Administrative constraints imposed by national regulation on education make such links even more difficult in Italy.

Initially, some internal resistances had to be overcome inside our community, while little support was available from national institutions to promote such a strategic process.

Now we are very pleased about the path being taken and the results achieved, which will soon be briefly described.

Internationalization is a challenge. At the same time it provides a great opportunity for our researchers, students and stakeholders. I strongly believe that a greater general awareness of it would make it easier for Universities to get involved, and would contribute in reducing the drawbacks of globalisation on our societies.

Let's focus, now, on the three objectives previously mentioned.

1) University internationalization as a tool to increase students' skills and employability

The world and education as we have known them have rapidly changed in recent decades, and higher education Institutions face new challenges every day.

Our students will live and work in a complex environment. As universities, we have the enormous responsibility in preparing them to grasp and understand such complexity, thus being able to fully express themselves.

Knowledge and technical skills represent the necessary bases for a successful graduate, but such a success depends, today more than ever, on the existence of a critical way of thinking and on the acquisition of additional skills, including soft skills.

Higher education Institutions should lead such processes, instead of being overwhelmed by them, taking advantage of the emerging opportunities. This might happen by developing the ability of students to work in a multicultural environment, to approach new labour market demands with a critical eye, to face global social changes with an open mind, to understand reality and its multiple facets.

As a consequence, internationalization of higher education is "an inevitable process" as much as globalization of our economies is.

However, internationalization in itself cannot be a goal.

According to Hans De Wit, it is rather *“the intentional process of integrating an international, intercultural... dimension into the purpose, functions and delivery of post-secondary education, in order to enhance the quality of education and research for all students and staff and to make a meaningful contribution to society”*.

The acquisition of intercultural competences lies at the core of the internationalization process.

As Darla Deardorf has observed *“intercultural competence is not a naturally occurring phenomenon, we must be intentional about addressing this at our institutions- through curricular and co-curricular efforts”*.

The positive outcomes of study-abroad experiences have been well documented in the last few years. In 2014 the European Commission released a specific Report on the impact of the Erasmus Programme, stating clearly that the exchange program has a great *“potential as a contributor to social equality within countries through its positive impact on employability”*.

International student mobility, in part due to the Bologna process, has reshaped European citizenship and Europeans’ perspectives of the society in which they live.

As a sign of the relevance of student mobility, indicators related to it have been recently included to calculate annual contribution to Italian universities by the Ministry of Education and Research.

However, internationalization is no longer only about mobility. It includes many more issues such as recruitment of both students and staff, strategic partnerships, internationalization of curriculum, double and joint degrees, relationships between academia and business, and international collaborations through MOOC (Massive Open Online Courses) and COIL (Collaborative Online Learning).

This is why today it is possible to develop not only internationalization abroad, but also, and more so, internationalization at home.

As far as Internationalization abroad is concerned, the University of Siena has a long tradition of exchange programs at a bilateral level as well as within the Erasmus Plus Framework. The steady incoming number of exchange students demonstrates the appeal and quality of our teaching. Siena ranks among the top Italian destinations.

Another major tool in promoting internationalization abroad is in the management of facilities far from home. The University of Siena is creating the so-called Siena Campus, in cooperation with the Institute of Cultural Diplomacy, which will allow for teaching and research initiatives in Berlin.

And speaking of Internationalization at Home, this year the University has opened up its 10th degree (the first at BA level) taught completely in English. A further degree in Cultural Diplomacy will be offered next year, with a multidisciplinary focus on international relations and humanities.

The main benefit of this relevant international presence is the increased number of *“intercultural classrooms”*, a challenge and opportunity for both students and teachers to innovate the learning process.

Our University also offers special courses in Italian culture and language to our international students, in order to give them the possibility to better understand the traditions and culture of our territory.

Also, the number of Double Degree programs has recently increased to 14, covering several fields of studies at Master degree level (Economics, Engineering, international Relations).

In addition, The University of Siena is working to boost partnerships with study abroad programs offered in Siena by international universities. Students from our institution now have the opportunity to take part in

summer programs organized in Siena by prestigious institutions, such as, among others, Harvard and Purdue Universities.

Siena will take part in a national pioneer project run by the Association of Italian Rectors aiming towards the accreditation of both courses taught in English, and language skills of academic staff.

Furthermore, participation in COIL (Collaborative Online Learning) networks and the launch of the first University of Siena COIL platform contribute to internationalization at home.

## 2) University internationalization as a tool to contribute to cooperation with less developed countries

Internationalization is a crucial means by which universities play their social role in the field of worldwide cooperation.

Nowadays, this inevitably means contributing to the enactment of the 2030 Sustainability Agenda, recently adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations.

As everybody knows, on September 25<sup>th</sup>, for the first time, all 193 Countries of the United Nations committed themselves to working towards substantial improvements in terms of poverty eradication, social inclusion and environmental sustainability.

I had the privilege of attending the General Assembly as scientific delegate of an international organisation, and I was struck not only by the great awareness shown by heads of state and government about the relevance of issues at stake, but also by the role that world leaders, during their speech, gave to education in order to implement the 17 Sustainable Development Goals being adopted.

As a matter of fact, a quick glance at the 2030 Agenda is enough to show how intensively Higher Education Institutions should get involved in the effort to reach the Sustainable Development Goals.

Universities should play a central role, first of all, in raising awareness on sustainability issues and promoting the knowledge of SDGs to students and society at large.

Education should be able to turn out global citizens who share the needs and values of sustainable development, who understand that economic, social and environmental issues are strongly interconnected, and that each and every country has to deal with sustainable development issues.

A great contribution in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda is expected, furthermore, from the fields of research and innovation. This is a major responsibility that all of us must share.

To meet global environmental, social, energy and health challenges, academic knowledge must be flanked by the capacity to translate new ideas into concrete solutions adopted by individuals, communities and enterprises. Indigenous knowledge should also be taken into consideration.

Universities can also contribute to international cooperation in terms of so-called science diplomacy, that is, through research partnerships, and by contributing to shared capacity-building initiatives.

This allows not only to improve research performance but also to have a better relationship with countries and civil societies, including those with which traditional diplomatic relationships are difficult.

The University of Siena is particularly active in this field. In the strategic areas of Medicine and Life Sciences, for instance, through common research projects to combat malaria and an international Master in Vaccinology, organised in cooperation with major global players.

We are also playing a leading role in the preparation of the PRIMA initiative, a Euro-Mediterranean integrated program on food systems and water resources whose purpose is the development of inclusive, sustainable and healthy societies. It is based on the concept that a strong scientific integration is strategic for the stability of the area.

PRIMA is organised according to the principles of co-ownership and co-funding among all Euro-Mediterranean countries, with financial commitments, so far, already exceeding 200 million euros.

Moreover, our university is the Mediterranean hub of a global initiative called Sustainable Development Solutions Network, promoted by the UN General Secretary Ban Ki-Moon and led by Jeffrey Sachs from Columbia University. Its main goal is to promote the enactment of the 2030 Agenda based upon the crucial contribution of science and innovation.

The increased number of courses taught in English previously mentioned currently enables the University to welcome students from over 70 countries around the world, many of them coming from less developed countries. This creates new relationships and interests.

By educating society's leaders of tomorrow and by developing cross cultural competences, our University is thus contributing to the creation of a more equitable society both at a national and international level, aware that education is the key to peace, stability and development.

This also means playing a role in the refugee crisis. The University of Siena has recently taken action, by joining the EU Commission "Science 4 Refugees" initiative and the "Scholars at Risk" network, by waiving tuition fees for refugees enrolling in our programs, by establishing a special task force cooperating with local institutions and non-governmental organizations in the management of refugees present in our territory.

### 3) University internationalization as a tool to reinforce the growth of local and regional economy

All universities are fully aware that, in order to fulfil their mission, they need to address the planet as a whole.

At the same time it is well known that universities find interesting opportunities to improve the quality of their research and teaching through the promotion of social and economic growth. This is more likely to happen when territories possess unique features in terms of artistic and environmental beauty, social structure, and business scenario dynamism, as found in the case of Siena.

Examples of measures beneficial to our university and our context include projects with the Municipality of Siena for making students full citizens of the city, with the Foundation Monte dei Paschi in the field of sustainable growth, and with local banks to introduce innovative job opportunities to students. Other remarkable initiatives include participation in distance learning and technology transfer programmes organised with associations of entrepreneurs and Chambers of Commerce of Southern Tuscany, and with consortia created in Arezzo and Grosseto.

Greater internationalization of universities represents a benefit for both local and regional economy, as well as for the universities themselves.

First of all, internationalization produces better quality graduates who will be able to create new economic enterprises and job opportunities in the area.

The presence of international students, exchange and degree seekers, is also a direct source of revenue for the city. Students coming to Siena will learn to love our city and its territory, to respect its history and to share

its traditional values. They will be the first to promote Tuscany all over the world and be ready to come back again.

Internationalization represents a great opportunity for the city and its cultural life, which becomes richer and more diverse. A good example is the success of the “Nice to Meet You” events, designed to present traditions and values of single foreign communities to students and citizens.

On the other hand, It is becoming clear that economic development depends more upon competition among territories, than among single firms. In a global world, countries need to be able to deal with different cultures and perspectives. If Universities become international, they are able to give a valuable contribution to the competitiveness of their town, region, country.

This likewise implies the creation of stronger links with business.

The development of the Siena Life Sciences Industrial Cluster is a clear example of how an international university can simultaneously contribute to economic growth and to its reputation. Excellent relationships between our researchers and businesses of the Cluster attract new investments and, at the same time, improve our research, doctoral and teaching activities. This would not have been possible without the international dimension of our researchers.

Similarly, the newly created Santa Chiara Lab, an interdisciplinary centre which aims to promote soft skills, entrepreneurship and employability by working together with local institutions, is inevitably defining its work in an international perspective. Not only by hosting international scholars and events, but also by attracting foreign students and creating partnerships with similar worldwide centres.

I would also like to emphasize the initiatives organised with Regione Toscana in the field of biomedical research, in the creation of regional PhD programmes and in promoting study in Tuscany. All of them are characterised by a global perspective. In addition, the very productive collaboration built in recent years with the Universities of Pisa and Florence, not to mention the reinforcement of the traditionally strong relationship with the Università per Stranieri, have allowed to improve projects with an international aspect.

In conclusion, internationalization is “an inevitable process”, with acquisition of intercultural competences at its core. It implies both ‘abroad’ and ‘at home’ elements and a strategic approach to be followed. Its outcome allows for increase in students’ skills and employability, contributes to cooperation with less developed countries, raises awareness on sustainable development issues, reinforces the growth of local and regional economy.

In recent years, we have been working intensely with city and regional authorities to promote Siena more and more as a university city. That is, a city where university and knowledge are the engine of social and economic development, through a strong cooperation with its stakeholders, as well.

The University of Siena was created almost eight centuries ago as a consequence of scholar mobility. Throughout its history professors and students have come to us from all over the world. We are a centre of multiple international networks and activities, both abroad and at home. Siena is rich in cultural and educational institutions and known all over the world. The number of participants in the Conference is the greatest in IAU recent history.

All these are good reasons to further advance our ambitions and, together with local institutions, make Siena an international university city. A city where the task of promoting global citizens and equitable development is at the core of its strategies, able to welcome highly-qualified individuals with new viewpoints from all over the world and to bring relevant local experiences to international attention.

This goal will not be easy to reach, but its results will be rewarding.

I am sure that you all share this viewpoint and will contribute to its enactment.

And now, forgive me for going back to Italian in order to officially declare the opening of the academic year by reciting the traditional formula, which says that I will be inaugurating the 775<sup>th</sup> academic year, inviting all of you to wear your caps.

Signore e signori,

se per cortesia il discorso è stato tenuto in inglese, l'apertura formale dell'anno accademico non può che avvenire in italiano.

Prima però vorrei evidenziare come il Convegno internazionale dell'Associazione Internazionale delle Università che si aprirà più tardi è quello che ha riscontrato il maggior numero di partecipanti nella storia recente della IAU.

Questo costituisce un'ulteriore conferma dell'attrazione di Siena e dell'Università di Siena nello scenario globale.

E ribadisce la bontà del percorso attivato dai nostri organi di governo con le istituzioni locali e regionali per caratterizzare sempre di più Siena come città universitaria, o ancor meglio, città universitaria internazionale.

E allora, cogliendo volentieri questo messaggio di speranza, sono ben lieto di

dichiarare aperto il 775° anno accademico dell'Università degli Studi di Siena.