What is the role of university in the contemporary society?

Jaakko Lindfors, Eva Mihaylova, Jan Müller, Valerio Venturi

1.   Introduction

In the following chapters the authors examine the various roles of the present universities. Four different aspects are discussed: the mission of education, the autonomy of universities, the responsibilities of universities, and the relationship between universities and academic excellence. The universities are seen as essential fragments of contemporary thinking and societies – both these days and in the future.

2.   The mission of education

In a few words, the XIX century theologian, John Henry Newman managed to underline the mission that higher education must accomplish in order to play an active role in shaping the contemporary and future society: "University training is the great ordinary means to a great but ordinary end; it aims at raising the intellectual tone of society, at cultivating the public mind."[1] Nowadays there are some very important challenges that threaten the future of education in contemporary society. They can be contextualised in three directions. Firstly, ivory towers exist between universities and the society as well as between professors and students. Furthermore, the lack of practical application of knowledge leaves students unprepared for facing the labour market. Lastly, the education systems' void in transmitting moral values slacks the pace of the development of society.

Within the framework of the increasing pace and speed of today's social changes, the mission of education and of the university in particular, is to achieve a twofold objective. First of all, it must transmit culture by spreading the knowledge created thanks to research in both scientific and humanistic fields. Secondly, university should enable students to develop a critical thinking approach to understand society in depth and to be used as a compass in order to orient towards a positive evolution.

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[1] John Henry Newman, *Idea of a University.* Dublin, 1852, p. 178

In order to achieve these two goals academic institutions must free themselves from an "ivory tower" attitude which generates a dichotomy, on the one hand between professors and students and, on the other hand, between university itself and the society. The first one could be eliminated by a deeper involvement of students in the research process in order to take advantage of the energy and the innovative mental approach typical of the young generation. The second could be overcome by emphasising, both in the press and the media in general, the significant contribution that academics can provide to the society by means of their proposals and scientific achievements.

Practical education should be implemented in the curriculum of universities to reduce the number of graduates who plunge into careers without the abilities necessary for the labour market. As a result, universities should offer their graduates a day or at least an hour in a working environment. This can be achieved by conducting an agreement between the university and a company or organisation. The exposure of students to a working environment can be done in a time-sparing and cost-minimising way. Graduates can be allowed to observe the daily work of employees without disturbing their daily routine and at the same time without causing any additional expenditure. An agreement such as this can be beneficial not only to university graduates who will be thus able to choose their career path more easily, but it will also help employers in the selection of their personnel. Thus the implementation of practical education in the curricula is important for redefining and strengthening the role of universities in contemporary society.

To fill the void of education of moral values universities should incorporate an ethical approach in the education process of every single student. It is crucial that universities still preserve their fundamental functions such as teaching social justice and nurturing values. These values cultivate a more just and righteous society. Universities can incorporate the education of values by exposing graduates to the study of psychology and philosophy. Thus even engineers and medics would be taught to think not only rationally but also honorably.

University is a fundamental pillar of society, but it is able to play such a role only if involved in an osmotic process within the society itself. If the important challenges that threaten the future of education are resolved in the proposed way, then the labour market and society as a whole would benefit more from the new graduates who would not only be very well trained professionals but also fully conscientious members of society.

3.   Who should define the role of contemporary universities?

Universities must be allowed and enabled to define their roles autonomously. Nevertheless the expectations of several stakeholders and the increasingly important civic role of higher education

institutions must be taken into account. In order to achieve both, we propose increased student participation in the governing bodies. Furthermore civil society representatives should also be involved in those bodies in order to better involve universities in the society and prevent the development of the oft-quoted 'ivory towers'.

In this context, elimination of financial constraints is important for universities to independently define and pursue its roles. Diversification of financial sources, not going together with decrease in public funding, is essential to reduce the dependence of the university from each financing agent. The overall funding should allow strategic financial planning by employing either multi-annual budgets or project finance. In general, if a national government puts forward the goal of having independent, high-level academic institutions, the necessary public funding together with a minimum of political interference will be inevitable in most cases. These efforts however are likely to attract top-level scholars to the universities and therefore will massively benefit the country's society and economy in the long run.

One big problem that arises automatically when it comes to privately funded education is the exploitation of universities by the funding source, in most cases the industry. For example, curiosity-driven basic research could be redirected to meet the immediate goals of private companies and laboratories. Here, a close monitoring of the sponsor's interests and influence by the aforementioned academic governing bodies is essential, to keep the responsibility of defining the role of a university within the institution itself. Academic, student, and civil society representatives in the governing structures should be enabled to exert this role.

Taken together, we think that it is a necessity to equip universities with appropriate governing bodies, funding, and political freedom to independently define their roles. If these measures are carried out in an effective way, the country will benefit sustainably from such institutions not only in an economic but also intellectual way.

4.   Responsibilities of universities

Universities can be seen as problem solvers. They are bound to constant academic research, with the objects of the research varying from theoretical to practical phenomena. Therefore the universities can be seen as potential expert bodies, when forming relevant scientific information about both local challenges (e.g. local education system and taxation) and global crises of our time and future (e.g. climate change, financial crisis, global inequality and limitedness of natural resources) – as well as creating conceivable proposals for action. On the other hand, a democratic

will-formation requires that the universities are also able to provide scientific information about both local and global issues to the public – via the contemporary media.

The holistic problem solving processes of various phenomena pose a demand for involvement of scientific expertise for the political will-formation. Academic researchers are needed as scientific experts – informational sources – in the decision-making organs; where necessary, they would also able to challenge backward-looking, questionable habits that might endanger the sustainable development of our societies. As an example of the problem solving processes of global crises, transnational commissions of experts and policy-makers can be seen as pertinent organs for active discussion and political decision-making.

Furthermore, universities can be seen as pedagogical institutions. Among the regional education systems universities take part in the fundamental task of raising responsible citizens of the World – new cosmopolitans, who would be able to build responsible co-operation and ethically high quality communities, and what is more, to answer to already existing regional and worldwide challenges. The educational mission of universities gives birth to the need of lifelong learning possibilities for everyone – arranged by way of free opportunities for all individuals to attend university courses and its holistic activity – and in the end to attend in the formation of the university of the future.

5.   University and excellence

We believe one role of universities in modern society is equal opportunity, i.e. to give the possibility to all students who have the intellectual ability to enter a higher education school to do so. This role acknowledges that no physical, environmental or financial constraints should be a hindrance to go to university.

First of all, laws should be created or enforced to ensure that all physically disabled students can move freely across campus, attend classes and social gatherings organised by students, or go to the cafeteria and the library. Moreover, in many European countries people sometimes need good connections to access the job they are seeking and in these cases students from lower background are often disadvantaged. It is the duty of the university to weaken those social differences by giving the opportunity to students to create they own networks, to give them the possibility to interact with professionals in their field of study, but also to push student associations to organise gatherings where students, teachers, deans, and others meet and share ideas and experiences.

Equal entrance to university does not only start with the admission papers. We believe that even in high school there is work to be done. Some students, especially from a low social background, do believe that they will never be able to success at a higher level education school or in certain faculties because of running myths saying that success in these is reserved to an exclusive elite. To face this problem, France had the idea of sending university students to high schools to give the message that, yes, university is sometimes hard and some faculties more than others, but that whoever is able to get a high school diploma and put his heart in his studies has a shot at it and may succeed. The professional world is way too far from adolescents to actually have a real impact. Such messages may be better understood when they are sent from students to students. University could arrange credits for this activity to motivate university students or simply make such "ambassador work" mandatory.

Another big debate nowadays is the question of excellence. Should we rank universities? Our opinion is that all European universities should have good teaching standards. They should all offer qualified teachers and sufficient materials and classrooms to enable students to prepare for their future. We believe that it is important to engage the challenge of setting basic standards for European universities, therefore increasing the level of competence of some universities without decreasing the opportunity of entrance to students. Nevertheless, there will always be a financial and educational gap between some schools. As students, we do not think that a ranking is the best way to settle those differences. We would rather see a classification like the stars system that is in use for hotels, where each star would refer to a certain quality aspect of the university. This is to push the higher education institutions to a lesser degree into a competitive system where they want to be the best, and rather focuses on creating a system in which they want and can be better.

In practice, universities face one major problem: financing. It is asked to pose no constraints, to create opportunities for students, to enrich them with the teaching of good lecturers and prepare them well for the upcoming working world and all this at an affordable price. No tuition fees is not even enough sometimes, as some students do not have time to work for money. This is subject of disagreement for us. One the one hand, some students argue that there should be no tuition fees. On the other hand, some individuals point out that tuition fees are sometimes motivational. They argue the no tuition fees may be understood as free university, which is not the case. University costs a lot and cannot afford having every student repeating their year. From this point of view, fees are conceivable but they should be low. There should also be a possibility to be exempted of the fee if money is not available and there should be scholarships given to cover other necessary expenses. A scholarship system has to be based on a serious study on different living aspects of individual students such as life costs, personal income, particular abilities and employment

possibilities. It must not depend on each country's policies. Europe has to uniforms scholarship policies and to fix common criterion to give equal chances to each European student.