Topic N.3
What is the role of the university in the contemporary society?

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As the XIX century theologian John H. Newman stated:

“If then a practical end must be assigned to a University course, I say it is that of training good members of 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”

John H. Newman “The Idea of a University” Dublin, 1852
Newman’s statement is universally valid, without any time or space limitation, both in the economically advanced countries, as well as in the so-called developing countries.
Within the Sub-Saharan Africa, one of the most politically and socially stable states is Senegal where, differently from other ones, a system of education and academic institutions has been created since the XIX century.
From the historical point of view, University has always had a dynamic role in contributing to the improvement of society by means of a dialogue of reciprocal enrichment.
Within such an osmotic process, university has always played a sentinel role by forming intellectuals capable of analyzing the changes of society and formulating proposals for its evolution.
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- The contemporary society has equally dynamic needs, mainly linked to both the scientific research progress and the technological development
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- The response which university is currently providing is increasingly focused on training qualified technicians and skilled experts in specific fields.
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- If university satisfies such needs of the society by exerting a didactic role solely based on the transmission of knowledge, it provides a valid but “static” answer
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- Such an answer has to be considered “static” when university limits itself to satisfying the needs required by the society at a given point in time.
Due to the university reaction timing, if compared to the society speed of change, a “static” answer becomes factually inadequate.
It is highly desirable that university provides a “dynamic” answer by taking equally into account:

- the need of specific training, finalized to transmitting to students the knowledge required by the labor market
- the need of ensuring intellectual self-awareness of students, which is fundamental to enable them to become citizens fully conscious and capable of contributing to improvement of the society
By exerting again the proposing function typical of the academic world, it would be possible to achieve the manifold result of a university capable of being simultaneously:

- a catalyst of scientific and technological progress
- an intellectual gymnasium where to shape the civil consciousness needed for improving society
- a forge of ideas and proposals able to anticipate and stimulate the evolution, the progress and the social growth
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In practical terms, these objectives could be achieved by:

- reforming the curricula for all disciplines by including history and sociology exams
- adopting a “long life learning” model to ensure a dynamic mental approach to face the future challenges of our ever-changing society
Today’s world economic globalization process is by definition creating an extremely homogeneous environment in which each individual is considered as having the same needs as everyone else.

The consequence is that the society inevitably tends to become increasingly impersonal.
Within such a scenario, the university seems to be one of the few, if not the only, environment in which people can still interact and compare their ideas as single individuals.
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Such an University would become fully capable of transforming students into active and conscious citizens for the benefit of the entire society.
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- Imagine University as a social laboratory in which students express themselves and cooperate together in order to play an active role in shaping the contemporary and future society.
As Albert Einstein once said:

“Imagination is more important than knowledge”
Thanks for your attention!

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