



World University: Global Strategy for Higher Education*

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Abstract

The paper presents some ideas about the development of contemporary universities. Being probably the oldest existing institutions in the modern society, universities are ready to face challenges of globalisation, combining old traditions and new thinking. In principle, universities should always be some steps ahead of the society, both in terms of education and research. Education in universities should not address the current needs alone but equip graduates for activities in the future. And in research one should understand that contrary to pragmatic ideas about innovation, research is much wider including studies about man, society and the world, about culture and human perception. To be effective, simple rules should be followed: support quality, support young people.

Universities have a very special place in the society because they have faced challenges over centuries being probably the oldest existing institutions in modern society. The Bologna University was founded in 1088, followed by Oxford, Cambridge, Salamanca, Padua and others. Their assets were and are wise people and independent thinking and a clear idea to educate young people. It is well known that mankind has faced many problems during the last millennium of its existence and that the role of universities has been enormous in all fields of human activities. The reason is simple: the research into new knowledge makes people involved to find rational arguments and to base the solutions on scientific evidence. In a nutshell – as it is said in old British universities – university is a place where people think. Certainly, thinking is not enough and the motto of WAAS enlarges it in the following way: promoting leadership in thought that leads to action. And wise actions are needed in the contemporary world; otherwise, society cannot find its sustainable way for the future.

We live in a networking society and its academic subparts – universities, academies, research centres, etc. – have complicated links with the whole. Much has been spoken about the challenges faced by mankind i.e. society. Indeed, the problems of welfare, environment, health, energy, poverty, natural hazards are all to be solved. But sometimes, the most important problem is overlooked which is how mankind could cope with it all. It means how individuals, groups and countries behave and communicate and manage in our complex world. Clearly, the new ICT technologies have changed the environment which leads to a new question how people will manage to live in such a world. It is noteworthy that in the EU the new framework called Horizon 2020 stresses the importance of humanities and social sciences.

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The problems around us are acute and it is no wonder that the pragmatics would like to get the results immediately. This also concerns the attitude towards universities. There is a growing tendency to see universities as sources of marketable commodities, but universities are not enterprises with a defined product. A detailed analysis on the role of universities in the contemporary world is presented by the League of European Research Universities (LERU) – see G.Boulton and C.Lucas, *What are the universities for?* (LERU, 2008) and here their ideas are followed.

If we use an extremely simplified scheme then we could say that universities make knowledge from money, economies/industries make money from knowledge. Society, however, needs both – knowledge and money. The question is how to balance all that and move on in the most optimal way.

A more detailed look at universities gives two main keywords: education and research. In both fields of activities one should find new ways to act not forgetting this enormous experience universities have gathered in their past.

First – research. Following the ideas of LERU, research not only contributes to innovation and to economic development, it is about man, society and the world, about culture and human perception, about inquiry into phenomena, a response to societal problems, to natural hazards and to climate change, a way to improving health and education and so on.

Second – education. Education in universities should not address the current needs only; it is to develop the thinking and the mental and conceptual skills and habits that equip the graduates to adapt to the changes and steer changes in the future. Even more so, the graduates should be able to face uncertainties of the world.

It is very difficult to determine a new paradigm for future strategies of universities. The existing celebrated rankings of universities do not reflect the real role of universities; that is why new value systems are now elaborated by many communities – in the EU, for example the U-Map, the U-Multirank, etc. Characteristically to those, the attention is not only to the research performance or the number of graduates but also to the role of every university in a local environment.

In general terms, however, society should also understand the immediate and future needs and to be sometimes more flexible in funding activities which will be useful in the future. In this context, education is important; decision-makers and politicians all the more so. Let me give an example from one of the smaller EU countries – Finland. About 20 years ago, a venture capital Fund SITRA started courses for policy-makers. As my Finnish colleagues told me, the first reaction was not very positive but after some years the courses by SITRA became popular. We know that now Finland is doing pretty well both in research and education (cf PISA tests). One cannot forget the science education at the early age in order to prepare children for inquisitive work.

The universities from their side should not only perform facing the future (see above) but also explain to society what they are doing, what the new knowledge is and what could be done using the new knowledge.

And what is important in the society is mutual understanding about all the activities of its actors. Although the principle of understanding is not a new idea, it should probably be a basis for a global paradigm and joint efforts. The key words for actions could be flexibility, openness, networking and trust. The communication as known in semiotics of sign systems between the parts of the system is decisive for understanding each other.

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I am tempted to finish by using some notions from my own field of research – nonlinear dynamics and complexity. In the theory of fractals usually simple rules govern building up a very complicated structure which is not only characteristic for a certain process but in addition has a special beauty. Only these simple rules must be applied many times consecutively. In a university two simple rules are important: support quality, support young people. But this support should be applied every day, every term, and every year in order to get results.

I agree that the unemployment of young educated people is a general problem. However, the voice of young researchers gets stronger and stronger. At the Annual meeting of New Champions organised by the World Economic Forum in Tianjin (2008), the InterAcademy Panel (IAP) and the European Federation of Academies (ALLEA) organised sessions for young scientists. They said: “Making a better world needs better science – we young scientists are ready to contribute our share”. Indeed, equipped with such a support, ALLEA has constantly stressed the importance of young people in formulating the EU’s future strategies. And youth academies have been launched in several European countries (the Netherlands, Germany, Austria, Sweden, Poland, etc), who bring the voice of young researchers to society including the policy-makers. The Eurodoc society unites European PhD students and junior researchers. It works on many themes such as social security and unemployment which are important for young people.

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