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PRIORITIES FOR THE UNIVERSITY EDUCATION, AND DELIVERY METHODS

Abstract

I deal in this paper with two main topics: the priorities for university education and delivery methods, looking both at the ideal goals of a university and at the practical situation. Nowadays the challenges in the knowledge and information society require high educational quality for large groups of population, and tertiary level education is needed for individual development, for cultural and economic progress and for competent active citizenship. It implies rethinking the role and the education forms of this ancient institution without losing its quality, paying attention to new challenges, like preparing students for a job and carrying out research for both scientific and economic development. I address the following issues: university mission, intellectual, research and teaching freedom, internationalisation and European integration, democratisation; I focus on delivery methods, thinking about innovative forms of teaching, learning and evaluating. High education should promote rational and critical autonomous thinking, wisdom, social competences together with research. Active teaching/learning methods, international exchange and formative/participative mid-semester evaluation encourage students to work better. Articulating explicitly how students are expected to perform in their learning process facilitates their success, amd develope a basis for continuous improvement lasting after the university time.

Introduction

I deal in this paper with two main topics: priorities for universities and delivery methods, looking both at the highest goals of the university and at the practical situation. The university is an ancient institution and has a special role to play in the society. Young people are the decisionmakers, the team members, and the citizens of tomorrow.

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I start from the premise that the high-level qualifications pursued in the past by elitist groups are needed nowadays for much larger groups of population, and universities should be able to guide students to achieve them in the context of intellectual freedom, autonomy and internationalism.

Preparing students for the 21st century challenges is not only teaching them the technical aspects; it means preparing them for highly qualified living and working habits, guiding them to develop wisdom and transversal competences, as it used to be for the privileged social classes in the past.

That includes overcoming obstacles at the institutional and at the practical daily level. Funding is one of the biggest problems, although it is not the only one; standardisation, ranking, marketisation are the worst dangers in the fields of research and education.

Among several influential factors, the teaching and assessing forms at university play an important role, keeping in mind that different ways of teaching and assessing lead to different aims, and guide the development of general and specialized education.

The research methods used in this paper are both practical experience from teaching at university, observation and analysis of data and of authoritative studies on the topic.

1. The Traditional Idea of University and the Challenges in the 21st Century

When we think of the priorities for universities we cannot forget that university education in the past was the preserve of a small social elite. In fact the society, the political systems and the working places were structured in a very different way in comparison to the contemporary era.

Nowadays citizens and workers at all levels need more than passive working skills; they encounter increasingly complex practical situations and are required to have sophisticated comprehension of what it means to do their job in the best way. Both the so-called "white collars" and "blue collars" need awareness and responsibility. At the present time, all students should be equipped with the knowledge, skills, working habits and motivation they will need to pursue good results in their studies and challenging careers after graduation, with potentially significant consequences for our economy, democracy and society.

The best higher education should be accessible to a higher number of students. ET 2020 aims at the ambitious goal of pushing tertiary graduation rates to at least

40% of the population (Official Jurnal 2009), promoting social mobility and smart and sustainable growth.

The staff-student ratio used to be very low in the *élite* university. At the beginning of the 1960s (Robbins Report 1963), university education still reached only 4–5% of the age group. It was not until the 1980s that the participation ratio passed 15%, which is generally seen as the tipping point between elite and mass education. We faced the growth of student rate in favour of mass higher education in the late 20th century.

The Oxbridge model, which emphasized residence and close relations of the teachers and the students is financially unsustainable, however some key ideas are still irreplaceable parts of the university in our time: cooperation among education and research, independence and intellectual freedom, internationalism and academic community. In the contemporary era it is difficult to have interactive teaching strategies typical of the academic community because of large numbers of students, however student academic support is still the first component of success and may be improved with tutoring and peer tutoring face to face and on line.

The central Humboldtian principle, after the reforms of Wilhelm von Humboldt starting with the University of Berlin, founded in 1810, was the "union of teaching and research" in the work of the individual scholars. The function of university was to advance knowledge by original and critical investigation, not just to transmit knowledge. The idea of a university in which teaching and research were combined in the disinterested search for impartial truth is still to be seen as a vital activity in itself, contributing indirectly both to scientific education of students and to industrial progress, military strength and social welfare. The union of teaching and research becomes problematic when degree work embraces every sort of training, regardless of whether it can be linked to a research base, and this situation should be avoided even in binary systems, aiming to bring together liberal and vocational forms of education.

The quality of education expected by the traditional "learned" professions (law, medicine and the church) to which "liberal" education gave a distinctive ethos of service and social responsibility, is nowadays needed at all levels.

Since their earliest days, universities have been international institutions, started when the *clerici vagantes* in the Middle Ages moved from town to town all over Europe in search of culture. Although universities did not escape the powerful force of nationalism in the 19th and 20th centuries, the cosmopolitanism of research survived in most fields. In the contemporary world, higher education institutions in Europe and round the world embrace mobility of students and professors in recruitment and networking; research priorities and prestige are defined by the international disciplinary community, not by national governments. Engaging in a common task should be more important than competing with each other.

Scientific research demands the right to organise its discovery processes according to its own rules and some freedom to select research topics in accordance with its own agenda. Humboldt argued that universities did their work best and were most useful to society and the state when they were isolated from immediate external pressures. Science and technology are always intertwined with the economic and political system, and outside pressures, from donors as well as from the government or from inappropriate standards, contest their demands for autonomy.

The ancient idea of university autonomy and "academic freedom" enjoyed a measure of corporate identity and autonomy; in many countries it has been included as a specific freedom in national constitutions. Individual scholars and scientists should be free to pursue the truth and to teach and publish their findings, following rigorous intellectual criteria immunized from religious or political interference. It includes the right of the academics to be active citizens and to comment on political questions, universities being the homes of independent cultural thought.

The Bologna declaration of 1988, signed by 388 university rectors and described as the Magna Carta of the European universities, declared that "research and teaching must be morally and intellectually independent of all political authority and economic power" (Magna Charta Universitatum 1988). The Lisbon Declaration of the European Universities' Association 2007, an update of Bologna, still asserted the need for universities' autonomy, but its wording tended to water down the clear declarations of 1988 and to defer to the managerial and economic priorities of governments.

There is nothing new about universities being expected to serve economic ends, in fact they used to have social functions ever since their foundation. The question is how far the response to economic demands should be driven by priorities determined outside universities, rather than by the internal development of disciplines. Knowledge economy depends on the quality and independence of knowledge. Academic self-government has the chance to be responsive to social demands, without external managerialism.

The marketisation of universities should be avoided by all means. The risk arises when independence and critical thinking are neglected. In the classic view, the university is a "community of scholars and students" engaged in a common task, not a place where students are customers.

2. Aims of Tertiary Level Education

The university's fundamental mission is the advancement and dissemination of knowledge and understanding. The main aims of university studies are stated in their curricula (Bologna Process 1999, Dublin Descriptors 2004, Lisbon declaration of the European Universities' Association 2007, National Guidelines), and interact with societies in different historical eras.

Achieving goals like learning to learn (metacognition), scientific work, problem solving, self-initiative, responsible decisionmaking, communication, awareness of one's own decision making process are compatible with general, liberal education; critical thinking, analytical reasoning, problem-solving, written communication (called "generic skills" by the OECD 2013) and disciplined thinking are needed for decisionmaking even at work, and not only for top level leaders.

Developing students as independent learners, self-directed thinkers with a clear understanding of themselves and of the society implies supporting them to develop the competences for acquiring information, analyzing, selecting and evaluating it (autonomy in looking for information, choosing sources, awareness of different points of views, precision, etc.), initiative and entrepreneurialism (coping with ambiguity, assessing risks, curiosity and imagination, ability to organize and plan the work), includes self-knowledge and awareness of their own skills for their personal, cultural and future professional life, improving their self-confidence, fostering the interest and the energies in a gradually self-regulating planning.

It is important to develop the attitudes and dispositions like social skills (group collaboration and leadership, conflict prevention and solution), and intercultural competence, respect for diversity, cross-national perspectives replacing stereotypes in a multicultural society, a sense of belonging to one's own community and to the world.

It is not easy to reconcile utilitarian tasks of the university as preparing students for a job and contributing to research for economic development with a view of general education, the traditional "liberal education" which includes transversal competences. Certainly it is not possible with standardised systems and with bureaucratic measures. *Studia generalia* were predominant at a traditional university. Nowadays we have to adopt the concept of "the exemplary in teaching and learning", and to discover the building opportunities in all subjects. In polytechnics, where the priority is to solve practical problems related to the pure pursuit of knowledge, students will be required to reason about their professional tasks, reflecting on the quality of thinking occurring in how they reason in their working practice.

To develop innovative competences, tertiary level educational institutions are expected to be aware of their role, caring both for vision with strong values and for good organization, developing an effective teaching and learning framework, updating educational measures, using innovative materials and new evaluation forms in student teaching.

3. Delivery Methods. Teaching, Learning, and Educational Strategies

Learning is an active process with the emphasis on the learner. From this perspective, the outcomes of learning are partly determined by the way in which students process the information they encounter. The directed instruction model has been used for centuries as an educational strategy in all institutions of learning. Basically, the teacher delivers the lecture content, controls the instructional process, and the students listen to the lecture; the teacher used to be the sender or the source, and the student was the receiver of information, nowadays the role of a student is more active in accessing the sources. Information technology is dramatically altering the way students, faculty and staff learn and work. Internet-ready phones, handheld computers, digital cameras and MP3 players are revolutionising the college life; multimedia elements can be converted into digital form, modified and customised.

Learning requires firstly fundamental basic skills such as literacy, numeracy, analysis and summary abilities, written and oral communication, ICT and media literacy.

Students must be committed to developing their mind as self-directed, independent critical thinkers and to use scientific methods, practising the intellectual process of applying skilful reasoning as a guide to belief or action (Norris, Ennis 1989). It means the ability to think in a logical manner, using a multi-perspective approach, caring for coherent argumentation, giving reasoned motivation for one's own opinion. It is striving to be documented, clear, accurate, precise, significant and fair, eliminating confusion and ambiguity in the presentation and understanding of facts and ideas. It includes adherence to intellectual standards, a commitment to competent use of thinking skills and of abilities for practical judgments and safe decisionmaking.

University teaching should reconnect with the question of purpose in education (Biesta 2009) and should include opportunities for students to engage in the community in order to participate in governance processes, and to be involved in decisionmaking. The working climate refers to a system of attitudes, values, norms, beliefs, principles,

rules, teaching methods and organisational arrangements which have to be coherent with the aims.

Useful methods, besides the traditional ones like lecturing, are: seminars, interactive and experiential learning, reflective learning, multidisciplinary approach with the collaboration of external experts, critical self-reflection, blended learning (MOC ecc), although ICT teaching is not expected to substitute face-to-face teaching, trips and visits, links between formal and informal learning (e.g., practicums, mobility, community services, fieldwork, laboratory experiences, internship placements), making connections between theory and practice.

For example, educational strategies such as project work, project-based learning, case studies tend to be cross-disciplinary and students may have to apply a variety of skills, new ways of analysing and processing information, while also taking initiative, thinking creatively, planning out the process, and working collaboratively in teams with other students.

Small group activities with enquiry tasks for students, cooperative learning, pairwork to solve problems and student-led seminars, all create space for powerful peer-to-peer learning and meaningful discussion with classmates/teachers, encouraging students to assume some responsibilities.

Students learn best when the educational process is purposeful and collaborative; the best educational approach is based on interactive teaching/learning methods. Openness in discussions is an opportunity for students to make up their own minds, to further inquire about the studied topics and to develop skills, values and behaviours. The use of innovative methods in educational institutions has the potential not only to improve education, but also to empower learners; a problem-solving attitude supports both the learning process itself and an individual's ability to handle obstacles.

The teaching and learning enterprise involves the formal and informal teacher--student interaction, and the overall learning environment in the university. Teachers ask for transversal skills however not all of them pay sufficient attention to clarifying what they appreciate and neglect the development of the explicitly needed skills; they should be more intentional about articulating the learning goals and the evaluation forms explicitly to the students.

Teaching quality should be as valued and recognized as research in the promotion and tenure process, and pedagogical support for educators is a component required to create a teaching and learning environment that would foster student participation and engagement both through effective instructional strategies and commitment.

4. Monitoring and Evaluation

Assessment goes parallel to the whole learning *iter*, and the assessment methods have a major influence on how the key competences are learned. The assessment of students' learning should be a transparent process, focusing on contents and on transferable transversal skills (Tuning 2003; Villa, Poblete 2008), on the thinking structure in the awareness that students need to develop their own values and decision processes to deal with their future and to give a contribution to the society at the local, European and global level.

The Dublin Descriptors (2004) give good advice to signify the completion of the different higher education cycles. Mostly, it is easier to assess knowledge and it is more difficult to assess traits of liberal education, or competences, defined as a combination of knowledge, skills and attitudes appropriate to the context. Key competences are those which all individuals need for personal fulfilment and development, active citizenship, social inclusion and employment (European Commission 2006).

At the end of courses, the final evaluation and marking is mostly summative; in contrast, formative evaluation is administered at mid-semester and provides instruction in order to allow for improvements. Formative/participative strategies of assessment help learners to identify the intended outcomes, provide feedback during the instructional process, encourage students to learn from mistakes by identifying strong and weak areas, and are not linked to grading practice or other forms of assessment. Formative evaluation includes structured mid-term feedback. The teacher reports back to the students about the results of this evaluation. The way in which the outcomes have been agreed upon, described and assessed may influence what the learners are motivated to achieve.

Assessment forms consist of oral interviews and written examinations, supported with reasoned arguments, open book tests, outputs of research, projects, case studies, critical reports of seminars. Some strategies of assessment stress passive repetition. Tests or quizzes should not be the main form of assessment and should include several types of questions (short answer, multiple-choice, true-false, and a short essay) to allow students to demonstrate what they know. Alternative forms of work and assessment like preparing an exhibition, posters, a journal online, filming and exchanging DVDs, podcasts, etc.

Cooperative learning, projects, performance in practicum allow for a broad range of learning processes which are assessed though different tools, among them observation and quality of the output, but ascertaining that rating scales are not used in a mechanic way.

It is important that students know the assessment criteria clearly in advance in order to reach them and to develop good assessment habits for their professional life. Articulating explicitly how students are expected to perform facilitates their success, empowers young people for the self-evaluation process and constitutes a basis for continuous improvement after the university time.

Assessing outcomes through self-evaluation against clear criteria (sheet, group and individual discussion, portfolio) includes reflections on their own learning and it is helpful for the development of skills and values, because it develops the ability to judge and identify one's strengths and weaknesses. The weight of assessment applies both to individuals and to education and training systems in general (Looney 2009).

Organisation, teaching, learning and assessing methods vary considerably across countries; the exchange of good practices among universities at the European and international level, cooperation among courses can take place face to face, with meetings and visits, and on-line in videoconferences and webinars, performing bilateral work.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The tasks of the university are highly demanding in our time, as it has to cope with the need for new standards of high quality education for larger groups of population. Universities are expected to educate students for the 21st century challenges for the personal and political life, and for socio-economic goals, both preparing for a job and developing open-mindedness, critical thinking and commitment. University education is more than a tool for getting a job; specialized training, in our era, cannot be separated from the pursuit of the main traits of a broader liberal education.

The university should combine teaching and research and care for building an academic community, cooperating at international level, especially in Europe. Innovative teaching and evaluation forms, including formative assessment, effective ways of developing and assessing transversal competences of the students and participatory evaluation strategies improve both the quality of the outcomes and the students' awareness of their learning processes.

Universities are not "ivory towers" existing outside the historical and social context; the demand for economically and socially relevant research is acceptable when it doesn't overlook the academic freedom and autonomy.

University is one of the most precious pillars of society at the present time. The high ideal of university is dead under a utilitarian and managerial mould, no

matter if it comes from a political authority and economic power, or inappropriate standards. It should create the conditions both to promote research and to contribute to the development of cultivated men and women. In case that its traditional roles get lost, it cannot be called 'university' any more.

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