

Rethinking the Mission of Universities in View of Nationalist Revivals

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Major political power changes make universities realize to what extent their conditions and opportunities are subject to government policies. In many parts of the world, this realization is a constant. Elsewhere, institutions of higher education and research like to think their autonomy is stable, sustainable and comprehensive. To them, recent developments in the European Higher Education Area and in North America have been a wake-up call, loud and clear. The UK's decision to separate itself from the European Union and the emergence of new-style American politics since the 2016 elections are quite prominent incidents of political change. They will most probably for many years perturb the academic status quo in the countries concerned. Yet they are not alone. Changing government policies in Hungary, Poland and Turkey are already jeopardizing university freedoms to a degree that until very recently was beyond plausibility.

A stark focus on *national* interests is the common denominator and the main driving force of these political power changes. Nations want to be strong and successful. They feel they must reposition themselves in the international arena and rather prefer the confrontational to the collaborative mode: erecting walls rather than building bridges. Precisely this core characteristic explains why universities are suffering the negative impact of the political adoption of new style nationalism. Over decades the collaborative mode and especially a keen sense for the benefits of international cooperation have driven the agenda of individual universities and national higher education systems alike. With the motto "internationalization in times of globalization," a range of positive connotations have entered university policies. So it doesn't come as a surprise that some observers see the present nationalist revival as the end of an era and predict that the theatre of the internationalizing university world will move away from North America and Europe to Asia, Africa and Latin America.¹

In my opinion, we should dig deeper. Nationalist policies are clearly the most visible expression of the new rule in the US and parts of Europe. It should, however, not be forgotten that this new rule enjoys strong support by the electorate. It clearly echoes disillusion and a sense of being left behind that reside with many. Others may have prospered in times of globalization, open economies and open borders. Many have seen no benefits and feel threatened. To them it is about time for a change, a new rule that will honour and protect the people that have been left out of the equation. This is where the nationalist revival links up with populist concepts and campaigns. Although pure and unadulterated populism is a much more sporadic phenomenon than popular opinion has it, many of its traits have become quite common and fashionable.²

What message does all of this send to universities? How should they respond? Concerned about the consequences for existing arrangements of international cooperation? Apprehensive that they might be deprived of major funding options? Afraid for loss of market power in domains like student mobility and research talent acquisition? Such worries are quite understandable. Yet, they easily lead to defensive responses, efforts to maintain existing positions of privilege and rank. I would like to suggest that a deeper rethinking of the mission of universities is called for.

The traditional narrative about higher *education* (widening access opens up a bright future both for the individual and for the community) has already lost much of its strength in view of inequalities in the labour market and fragmentation in society. The promise of a good job after graduation isn't true for all.³ And why would people spend their tax money

1 Philip G. Altbach and Hans de Wit *Global higher education might turn upside down as West turns inward* (Times Higher Education, February 16, 2017)

2 Jan-Werner Müller *What Is Populism?* (University of Pennsylvania Press 2016)

3 Phillip Brown, Hugh Lauder, David Ashton *The Broken Promises of Education, Jobs, and Incomes* (Oxford University Press 2011)

on the education of those with whom they feel no common ground whatsoever? The widely acclaimed worldwide success of scientific research also has its flipside. International journals favour international themes and topics. Worldwide rankings measure accomplishments that are visible and measurable on worldwide scales rather than a research agenda driven by national, regional and metropolitan agendas. Global competition easily drives out local engagement and logically favours technology and the natural sciences over social sciences and humanities. Solitary scholarly voices fear that too much unregulated globalization leads to social disintegration and weakened democracies.⁴ In the wake of all this, shouldn't universities seriously re-consider their research agendas and seek to re-balance them? And re-frame their mission in teaching and learning?

Quality assurance and accreditation traditionally focus on *how* to do things well and *how* to possibly improve. They are not only driven by the professional ambition of the academy to perform well, but even more by the need to nurture and maintain trust among stakeholders and clients. Both arrangements, however, assume that there is agreement on what universities do and should do. And precisely these aspects, visible in institutional strategies and mission priorities, are usually not being inspected and scrutinized in quality assurance practice. Peer review and advice seek to assist colleagues in their striving for high quality professional performance, but rarely analyse their strategic positioning and the soundness of their chosen mission. In other words, the *is-this-the-right-thing-to-do* question is completely overshadowed by the *how-to-do-things-right* task. This is not so much of a problem as long as there indeed is agreement on what universities should do. It seems, however, that, in at least some European and North-American societies, the social contract underlying the mission of higher education and research has become much less stable. The concept of universities for the public good, producing benefits to all, is under attack. Critics see it as a sham, covering up for the self-interest of academics and present stakeholders, and easily range universities with 'the elites' that must be dismantled in the interest of 'the people'.

Whether, and if so to what extent, such criticism is legitimate, is open to question. In matters of perceptions and reputations, however, impressions and suspicions had better be taken seriously. Even when only partly justifiable, they are signalling cracks and fissures in the once solidly positive image of academia and the status of trust that came with it. And as usually the case with reputational harm, defence and denial are wobbling weapons and feeble friends. It would – in my opinion – be much wiser if universities would respond by reviewing and rethinking their mission and priorities. Are we not misleading ourselves by past success (celebrating growing enrolments in higher education and great accomplishments in research) and have we not gone too far on the road of focusing on excellence and profiting from competition? At the time of the 2009 financial crisis many critics looked up professional values in the curriculum of management and business schools. They found it hard to come up with good examples where independent critical powers and truly social virtues were seen as crucial skills.⁵ A decade later the searchlight is not on any individual sector of higher education or on one type of institution. It is the system of higher education at large that is being challenged to check its virtues and values.

In conclusion, there seem to be several good reasons to engage in rethinking the mission and profile of higher education systems. The success of mass higher education is not the success of all participants and of all of society. Its benefits are very unevenly distributed and thus contributing to basic inequalities in society. Similarly, the leading university model as it is reflected by international rankings is not the model of preference for all of society, because social engagement as a research priority and honouring deep diversity of cultural background, social status and early schooling in teaching and learning are being overshadowed by striving towards research excellence and relying on the mechanics of individual careerism. As a consequence, higher education in many countries has been promoting inequality and forgotten basic equity. It should not come as a surprise that support for higher education comes mainly from those who (expect to) benefit from it, while large segments of the general public have lost trust and we in higher education are still mesmerized by decades of growth and success.

New-style nationalist policies with their populist flavors are no doubt posing serious threats to higher education and research systems, menaces that shouldn't be underestimated and against which a vigorous defense is called for. At the same time, they sound wake-up calls and offer compelling reasons to rethink the social contract underlying higher education, the values driving individual institutions and the priorities of their agendas. This new social contract, with its renewed values and priorities, should inspire a new approach to quality assurance.

4 Dani Rodrik *The Globalization Paradox: Democracy and the Future of the World Economy* (W.W. Norton 2011)

5 Sijbolt Noorda *Future business schools* (Journal of Management Development Vol. 30 No. 5 2011 519-525)