
On the ‘Innovative University’. A few Challenging Reflections

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‘Progress is shaped by the ability to question, to criticize and to enquire. Ensuring progress is one of the responsibilities of Academia’. Could there be any future for non-conformist, heterodox, non-marketable knowledge, next to transforming truth value into the market truth value of knowledge, as was the tendency over the last decades? And what will be its impact upon criteria of excellence? The enjoyment of academic freedom requires the autonomy of the university. European countries have witnessed exciting developments in achieving a common space of convergence in higher education and research. But to encourage creativity there is definitely a need for more differentiation among universities, rather than uniformity. Autonomy is that degree of self-governance necessary for effective decision-making by universities in relation to their academic profile, work and standards. However, self-governance must be consistent with systems of public accountability. Universities must show that they are responding to the needs of society and they must perform according to standards of excellence and creativity in teaching and research. However, the balance, if there is any, has to be questioned. Should a shift of the role of the State be envisaged and should different types of governance be developed in order to counter the statement that academic freedom of higher education staff has decreased? Does a new relationship between government and university require the establishment of a modest set of ‘principles of good governance’ to reduce the overdetailed university regulations? And how to ensure that the search for creativity will also strengthen academic integrity? These questions are decisive for the future mission of the University.

1. Preliminary

The paradox seems obvious. The history of Europe is largely interlinked with the history of its universities but we should bear in mind, that over the ages, university reform was not initiated by the universities themselves. ‘*The History of the Universities in Europe*’¹ remains an interesting source of critical thinking.

It's obvious that the reform of the University throughout the centuries occurred only with huge difficulty and mostly *not* under the impulse of academia. Even in modern society, the legislator, as defender of the interests of society, had too often to take the decisive initiative to break down the 'reluctance to change' of the universities.² In the new epoch, the University has to focus on his third mission, *Innovation*, which will inspire and interpellate both other missions, i.e. *Education* and *Research*.

How can Governance steer the process of Innovation – knowing that Governance of Higher Education has become another key policy issue of the twenty-first century?

2. Basic question

Could there be any future for non-conformist, critical, non-marketable knowledge, and for professors, researchers and students pursuing it? If not, can we still call a university an institution that only produces competent conformists and never competent rebels, and that only regards knowledge as a commodity and never as a public good?

My overall statement reads as follows:

Progress is shaped by the ability to question, to criticize and to enquire. Ensuring progress is one of the main responsibilities of Academia. Does the University fulfil that mission?

European universities have their roots in civic society – which has been gradually controlled by the State. They became, in a certain sense, 'state organs', although not immune to the 'market' of which they became, in some respects, a part of. This development is in line with the growing diversification of the mission of universities, which reinforces their hybrid character.

However, universities will only realize their missions if they agree on a guaranteed maximum degree of independence. A servile 'public service' setting is unlikely to enable academia to fulfil their rights and duties. This autonomy transcends State, market, and civil society.

If universities seem to be a part of the current crisis as well, then they must bear witness to their true mission, and remain places of free and independent thought. The university should be the place where diversity is pursued instead of uniformity and conformity. Only then can universities be considered as the opponents of the economic, financial, environmental and energy crisis, and seek positive solutions for social conflicts, terrorism and insecurity, migration and other social challenges.

When Queen Elisabeth visited the editorial board of the *Financial Times* in 2010 she asked a very simple question: 'Why could academia and the press not foresee the 2008 financial crisis'?

The answer was shocking and disarming: 'We really do not know the answer. We have to raise the issue'.

In response to the question, on 5 April 2011 an appeal to academics, coordinated by the University of Fribourg, was launched on 'Renewing research and teaching in finance, economics and management to better serve the common good'.³

The authors of this appeal were deeply concerned that more than three years since the start of the financial crisis – which highlighted the pitfalls, limitations, dangers

and responsibilities of mainstream thought in economics, finance and management – the quasi-monopolistic position of such thought within the academic world nevertheless remains largely unchallenged.

This situation reflects the power that the proponents of mainstream thought continue to have on university teaching and research. This domination, propagated and spread by the so-called top universities, dates back at least a quarter of a century, and is effectively global. However, the very fact that this paradigm persists despite the current crisis highlights the extent of its power and the dangerousness of its dogmatic character.

The Fribourg Manifesto asserts that this situation restricts the fecundity of research and teaching in economics, finance and management:

The present situation requires the opening of the disciplines of economics, finance and management to a fundamental questioning, free of the constraints of the dominant conceptual framework, which is required for their regeneration. However, such efforts face strong resistance within the academic world and must therefore seek external support. Affirmation of the need of the disciplines of economics, finance and management for plurality of approaches entails debate concerning these disciplines' epistemological, ethical and anthropological foundations.⁴

The University has to foster and guarantee a pluralism of research tracks.

Christian de Duve, the 1974 Nobel Prize for Physiology or Medicine, wrote to me a short time before he passed away:

De mon temps, la pratique de la science reposait implicitement sur la notion d'objectivité, de rigueur et d'intégrité intellectuelle. Il était admis que tous les chercheurs se conformaient à ces principes. Mais il y a toujours eu des exceptions. Le plus souvent, les scientifiques ont fait 'le ménage'.⁵

Academic integrity is under attack in almost all countries in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, but they have not the monopoly, for example, on academic fraud or selling diplomas – as can be seen in the cases in several Western EU member States.⁶

The strong argument from the European Commission vis-à-vis the Hungarian Law on Higher Education⁷ was highly welcomed to stress the principles of Academic Freedom, university autonomy and the rule of law within the common Higher Education Space and EU legal framework.⁸

These thoughts bring me to one of the most intriguing fundamentals of the university: academic freedom – a guardian of Democracy by excellence.

3. How Relevant is Academic Freedom Still?

Can the principle of academic freedom within the academic metier, still be considered as a modern and unconditioned principle? And what are the consequences?

In the ranking of 'rights and freedoms', academic freedom scores particularly high. It is a basic 'human right', 'directly linked to Human Dignity'. The US Supreme Court declared in 1967, in *Keyishian v. Board of Regents* 385 US 589:

Our Nation is deeply committed to safeguarding academic freedom, which is of transcendent value to all of us and not merely to the teachers concerned.⁹

The concept is complex – both omnipresent and abstract. It is called 'self-evident' but seems, at the same time, in many aspects, miles away from any evidence.

I would suggest approaching the notion of academic freedom with caution. Academics often, pretentiously, claim academic freedom but – unfortunately as an argument of the status quo – as an alibi or an excuse for not implementing necessary reforms, for example in the case of a review of the status of the academic staff or the renovation of the curriculum, of external or internal control. The pressure to compete for external funding should not always be perceived as 'eroding' academic freedom. The term 'academic freedom' needs perhaps a 'demystification'.

I had the opportunity to co-draft or comment on laws on higher education in central and East Europe.

The implementation of academic freedom provoked the most thorough discussions with governmental officials.

A comparative study should be conducted about the interpretation of academic freedom in national law to examine to what extent academic freedom could be considered as a 'common constitutional principle' within the EU framework – besides the reference to art. 13 of the Charter.¹⁰

Nevertheless, a series of non-EU countries guaranteed academic freedom a prominent place in their constitutions. This is, as noted, especially true for the young democracies; the example of South Africa is a characteristic example.¹¹ They remember the 'older' democracies, and note the uncompromising nature of academic freedom as a basic requirement for any democracy, along with university autonomy to its full scope, for which, for example, some Constitutional Courts are repeatedly calling.¹²

Let me focus on tensions with academic freedom in a few areas.

- (a) The 'hybrid' character¹³ of universities – public functions and economic activities – affects the professor and the scientist. The technique of corporate finances does provide additional funding for research but raises the issue of the unbound character of the established research and/or education. The university leadership has to promote partnerships but should also deliver evidence that systematic control is provided whether the holders or beneficiaries of grants or contracts can still independently decide on the aims, methodologies, and uses of research funding and resist the pressure to produce 'results'. Freedom requires trust *and* accountability.
- (b) Of a different sort of tension was the discussion that erupted in the international academic community with the creation of a campus established by Yale University in collaboration with the National University of Singapore. Can academic freedom thrive in a country where freedom of expression is reduced and where the overall state policy is characterized by 'a culture of control'?¹⁴
- (c) Almost all documents of the Bologna Process repeatedly refer to the principle of autonomy,¹⁵ although we found – screening education laws and policies – completely divergent (various) interpretations among member States.

However, academic freedom was finally but rather reluctantly recognized as a key issue for the common ‘European Higher Education Area’. Both principles are even not imposed as a condition for membership in the Bologna Process. This lack should be repaired and the national evaluation report has to be explicit in this respect, inviting an external review per Member State.

The trend towards more autonomy of the university seems not completed by an increase in academic freedom, or at least this is the perception:

... Findings reveal that autonomy of Higher Education institutions (HEIs) has increased in 38 percent of the countries covered in an EU study, academic freedom of higher education staff has decreased in 35 percent of the countries, together with a decrease in democracy in HEIs in 31 percent of the countries and a decrease in participation of academic staff in 38 percent of the countries.¹⁶

In conclusion: academic freedom is not ‘a privilege’. The assurance and enforceability of academic freedom, the first condition for innovative thinking, should thus be a prominent and daily agenda item for the academic and official leadership at micro-, meso- and macro-level regardless the private or public law status of the university.

4. Governance

Governance is a key policy issue of the twenty-first century. Whatever the type of governance in higher education – the market-oriented model, the state-centred model, the academic collegial or self-rule model, or mostly a mix of all this classifications – and whatever the role of the State – control, supervising or steering from distance – how should governance foster creativity?

It should definitely *not* be an option to promote a unique governance model. To put it in a rather provocative way: to some extent a university should reflect an ‘organizational anarchy’.¹⁷ A small margin of sweet chaos can be fruitful to promote the ‘unpredictable’. Some ‘inefficiency’ can be proven to be highly efficient. To put it in another way: rigid uniformity, chiefly within a University, kills quality. Pluralism of research tracks is vital.

Despite the diversity in governance models, some common characteristics of conformity are indispensable. Preference should be given to a common framework of ‘Principles of Good Governance’: they aim to reduce the overloaded burden of state regulations and suggest more coherency in the higher education landscape.¹⁸ They promote the swift move from ‘Government’ to ‘Governance’.

Governance patterns have, in many respects, changed. The existing balance of power between academic staff and professional management favoured the latter. The traditional monopoly of governance by academics disappeared because of the participation or involvement in the management and policy-making of other groups, both from within and outside the university. Professional management and the university bureaucrats should be invited to prove how they cope with the Innovation Agenda.

These and other developments triggered a wave of reforms in the culture and in the standardization of university management, administration, policy, and so on, in almost all areas of academic activity.

University needs a culture of dialogue and co-ownership among all internal stakeholders. In an interesting paper 'Towards a culture of creativity', Wilhelm Krull proposed an interesting model of seven 'Cs' as the main components for innovation: Competence, Creativity, Commitment, Communications, Cooperation, Continuity and Centres.¹⁹

Reference could be made to another and complementary set of six, highly demanding components fostering creativity in higher education:²⁰

- (a) *Diversity*, in terms of talents, interests, previous qualifications, experience and social backgrounds among students and staff. Universities can still be considered as too homogeneous, certainly within the academic leadership.
- (b) *Prior and profiled attention to the Human Potential* – the radical autonomy on recruitment, selection and mobility of students and staff, staff development and incentives, with a culture that is tolerant of failures and promotes the members of the university community to question established ideas, to go beyond conventional knowledge and strive towards originality.
- (c) *Future orientations* – employing a proactive attitude, to continuously seek to influence future developments, rather than be grounded in the past or simply react to external pressures. Often, transformation capacity seems more of a 'reactive' than a 'proactive' nature.
- (d) *Quality processes* – who has the capacity to strengthen innovation and focus on the capacity to change as a way to incorporate a future dimension?
- (e) *Values* – ethical principles should form the essence and the major strength of governance, *a fortiori* in the modern moral and economic climate.
- (f) *A 'learning organization'* in its approaches to governance and management. This means an organization in which all members seek to reach common goals by expanding knowledge, complemented with cultural concerns. Note that it is not by accident that article 13 of the *Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union* and the European Constitution treat the arts and academic freedom as a common freedom: 'The arts and sciences research shall be free of constraints and shall be respected.' The notion of 'respect' does not immediately offer the most extensive protection, but case law will have to clarify its degree of enforceability.

University leadership has a central role to play in managing change processes, transforming the institution into a 'learning organization'. This requires the use of a combination of top-down and bottom-up approaches and organizing new research clusters, namely multidimensional centres for cooperative research, overcoming the division of disciplines and partnering with external stakeholders.

Such an approach strengthens 'curiosity-driven' research, as well as 'goal directed research', combining entrepreneurial and scientific performance in academia. Research has proven that such partnerships reach excellent outputs, without hindering university ethics.

Immanuel Kant refers in *Der Streit der Fakultäten* to the mutual conflicts of academics in the bosom of the university:

And so the theologians have the duty, to uphold faith in the Bible. But they must do so without impairing the freedom of the philosophers to subject this faith continually to the critique of reason.²¹

Innovative governance should do more: creating research clusters, composed of scientists affiliated with different departments and external partners, including industry. Creativity contains the promise to transcend the division into disciplines into a new synthesis. Do many universities show good practices?

May I mention an interesting experiment? In 2012, the complete staff of a leading European top research institute were invited to answer the questions:

How to improve the capacity of innovation and creativity? How to attract the highest profile researchers? How to improve the cultural capital?²²

The overall finding was: ‘The critical issue is... that the institution has a “core ideology” that gives guidance and inspiration to people inside the academic community and lives its values’. ‘Core ideology’ stands for core values and a common purpose. The ‘value audit’ detected the top desired personal values as, and in order: ‘honesty, responsibility, willingness to cooperate, self-reliance, flexibility’. And what hinders creativity? Clearly ‘lack of long-term perspectives, bureaucracy – mostly top-down, overdetailed control, disproportionate internal competition and a lack of open communication’.

What came out of the 2016 updated survey as the desired cooperate values were: ‘creativity, vision and long-term perspectives, strategic alliances and sustainability’. Lessons could be learned how *not* to run a university. The Leadership was invited to innovate governance and management structures.

What has been the outcome? The Governance model, favouring innovation and creativity, has to take the firm opportunity to tailor governance structure to the specific organization needs and, secondly, to promote the consequent devolution of power, coupling with processes on accountability and ethics at institutional level.

What are the weak points to cope with innovation? These are the middle management – a shift in the power of Deans is recommended, from a representative of his peers to the exercise of managerial functions – and the involvement of external stakeholders in the decision-making bodies. The University needs a significant external influence to upgrade self-governance.

5. A Final Consideration

A relevant source of international benchmarking and of national country analysis remains the annual *Global Competitiveness Report*.²³ The annual report looks at more than 140 countries, considering the impact of the higher education system and of innovation – both as basic pillars of the national economy.

Unfortunately there is no indicator on ‘the innovative character of the university’.

The 15 existing global university ranking systems²⁴ continue to focus mainly on the research function of the university. They are still not able to do more justice to research

carried out in the arts, humanities and social sciences. Several issues relevant to academic quality cannot be measured but the creative feature of a university should be articulated more prominently and visibly in the future format of such rankings.

The concept of a University embraces a 'Search for Truth', referring to both the duty to be free as an attitude, a '*qualité d'âme*' and to the university 'ethos' a creative 'climate'. University governance should be assessed (and ranked) according to how that mission is fulfilled and how the academic community guarantees his commitments.

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