

The role of higher education in saving societies in challenging circumstances

El papel de la educación superior en salvar sociedades en circunstancias difíciles

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ABSTRACT:

Higher education for active citizenship has been a key development in social policies over the past two decades which led to a number of initiatives. Despite the growth of initiatives designed to promote active citizenship, there has been comparatively little focus on the role of universities in saving societies. The authors of this article attempted to consider the challenges of today's societies and the necessity of teaching active citizens through educating critical voices. It demonstrated that radically-changing approaches towards teaching the individual are essential today. Drawing on both literature and personal experience, this paper reviews to what extent universities can create conditions for fostering problem-solving; critical and reflective thinking of students; their tolerance and understanding that will eventually lead our societies towards a higher-quality and more democratic governance.

Keywords: higher education, active citizenship, student-centred learning, enquiry-centred approaches, civic participation.

RESUMEN:

La educación superior para una ciudadanía activa es clave en las políticas sociales para las últimas dos décadas que condujo a una serie de iniciativas. A pesar del crecimiento de las iniciativas diseñadas para promover la ciudadanía activa, ha habido relativamente poca atención al papel de las universidades en las sociedades de ahorro. Los autores de este artículo intentaron considerar los desafíos de las sociedades actuales y la necesidad de enseñar a los ciudadanos activos a través de la educación de voces críticas. Demostró que los enfoques que cambian radicalmente hacia la enseñanza del individuo son esenciales hoy en día. Basándose en la literatura y la experiencia personal, este documento analiza en qué medida las universidades pueden crear condiciones para fomentar la resolución de problemas; pensamiento crítico y reflexivo de los alumnos; su tolerancia y comprensión que eventualmente llevará a nuestras sociedades hacia un gobierno de mayor calidad y más democrático.

Palabras clave: educación superior, ciudadanía activa, aprendizaje centrado en el estudiante, enfoques centrados en la investigación, participación cívica.

1. Introduction

The world we live in is a world driven by change, with unprecedented developments in technology, which are completely shaking up a number of paradigms. Thus we are forced to rethink almost all of the concepts in which our societies are rooted. The world today is experiencing globalization; political instability; increasing poverty; social and educational inequalities; increasing racism; declining trust in nearly all major societal institutions; including those in higher education. Declining civic participation and engagement both have an influence on the world economy and the knowledge-based society; – a society in which knowledge and innovations are perceived as the raw materials that shape a country's economy.

Time and space are probably among the most significant of the various changes that can be identified in almost every human activity. Information technology has reduced the whole world to just one point; the time interval to one tick. Indeed with conference calls and similar tools, we seem to be everywhere on this planet, sharing business, friendships, concerns, even small talk simultaneously all around the globe (Polushina, 2016). It might be said that we, for the first time in human history, have started to consider this entire planet as our home: - the 'global village'. Yet this home does not look familiar. It is strangely divided into small parts where people speak different languages, believe in different deities, have different traditions, consider themselves to be members of different nations or tribes, and have different economic means and different aspirations. Despite such fragmentation, we do all have our share of responsibility for its well-being.

Faced with the challenges posed by so many differences it seemed natural to look at the younger generation suffering from a growing indifference passively threatening their societal development. The indifference or "no-question-asked" attitude is potentially a breeding ground for populism and for the shift to the intolerant right or left, as recently experienced. Today's societies in many countries are living through what Bruno Kaufmann calls an 'ethno-nationalistic backlash': from Finland to Bulgaria, from Austria to Denmark (Kaufmann, 2011). Did tolerance and solidarity and cross-cultural interest just disappear?

The fact that a society can be preyed upon by populist politicians is a clear consequence of the indifference and apathy that means people no longer care for those poorer members of society; for those attacked; for the sick; for the refugees – for their fellow citizens.

Study after study has confirmed that higher education is the principal factor in civic participation and community-building (Verba, Lehman, Brady, 1995).

Within the current research, the authors start off with the assumption that the role of higher education is fundamental within the knowledge based society, and that members need to play an active role in making the major decisions about what kind of society they want.

The role of higher education in preparing students for the labour market is essential, but it is not the only role for higher education in our societies. The Council of Europe has identified these four main purposes of higher education:

Preparation for sustainable employment;

Preparation for life as active citizens in democratic societies;

Personal development;

Development and maintenance, through teaching, learning and research, of a broad, advanced knowledge base (Bergan, 2012).

The multiple purposes of higher education are also now being recognized in the context of the European Higher Education Area by statements such as 'The aim is to ensure that higher education institutions have the necessary resources to continue to fulfil their full range of purposes, such as preparing students for life as active citizens in a democratic society; preparing students for their future careers and enabling their personal development; creating and maintaining a broad, advanced knowledge base; and stimulating research and innovation'

(Bologna Process, 2009).

1.1. Target setting

What is outlined in this article is how present - day students in co-operation with the academic leaders of today can change their tendency to indifference, their likely future and, most importantly, how higher education is the key to any of these changes through taking inter-cultural understanding and active citizenship to the next level. Higher education has a role in saving societies at two levels: a macro- and a micro-level. The macro-level describes the public debate on the questions connected to society as a whole. The micro-level concerns the individual and changes within that individual.

1.2. Problems with the study

A university is an independent body able to criticize, propose radical ideas and challenge dominant paradigms. It is a place where ideas can be exchanged across the sometimes rigid boundaries of academic disciplines, a place of synthesis and discovery, and a place that, out of necessity, encourages openness to free thinking. Any responsible university is also a place where students are made aware of their right to participate on every committee, and where their engagement can be seen as an obligation to achieve a common social goal. To save today's societies in such challenging circumstances it is necessary to search for any correspondence between freedom and education, or freedom in education. The problems within the study were related to demonstrating that radically-changing the approach towards the individual is essential today. The individual student has to learn active citizenship from the start of his or her academic enrolment. To educate any critical voices within society, both the teaching and learning practices have to change other, much larger, factors than simply the quality of teaching that will be affected by these new teaching practices.

1.3. The objective of the study

To disclose the ways through which universities can take intercultural understanding and active citizenship to the next level; to demonstrate how higher education can serve to overcome the increasing passivity in our young communities.

2. Methodology and study methods

When structuring initial ideas on the present topic there were those that are inherent in the concepts of pedagogues that are in the forefront of both national and foreign higher education developments: -

Ideas for the ideologies of a freedom based education;

Innovations of teachers in the XXI century;

Concepts of "student-centered" and "enquiry-centered" ways of learning.

At the initial stage observation and content analysis were used. Methods of extrapolation and modelling were the principal ones used at the active research stage. In the final stage methods of systematization and generalization, evaluation of the findings were applied in retrospective and perspective plans.

3. Results of the study

There was carried out a performance analysis of a number of Russian and European higher educational institutions. Teachers and lecturers have also made a definite contribution to finding approaches for educating active citizens. The results obtained are promising.

Considering a university at the macro-level, we can treat it as a player in our society and as a force that can steer – or at least, be heard – and, hopefully, influence public debate. Higher education is crucial in maintaining the consciousness of our collective history and in transferring that consciousness throughout the generations. It helps to learn from mistakes made in the past; it teaches us about the birth of human rights, it makes us understand the

acts, values and world views of different cultures, and it should help us to live together in peace. Higher education should henceforth be accessible to all in accordance with their abilities and aspirations; non-discriminatory so learners from all levels of our society may have access to this history and knowledge and thus they can be developed into active citizens. An active citizen is considered to be a contributor to the political; economical; social and moral 'character' of the country.

On the basis of the information obtained, higher education should furthermore serve as a guardian of our democracy. It should be at the center of our communities as it creates educated citizens that can then serve as models in our societies. This would then enable other citizens to depend upon and trust them for the maintenance and guidance of our societies in a democratic way (National Center Public Policy and Higher Education, 2003). It allows for a belief that the university should be able to play a significant role in public debates. Subject-specific knowledge as well as transversal competences should be immune to market interests and political views, especially nowadays as societies become more culturally diverse, economically interlinked and vulnerable. Considering the experience of several European universities it should be noted that when the priorities of higher education institutions became those of basic economic survival, and when leadership has private interests to defend, the consequence is that the leadership, and hence the university as a whole, has little interest in participating in the public debate (Kleshchina, 2011).

The micro-level focused on the individual. Apart from the deeply engaged student who actively sought more knowledge than was provided in the classroom, many European universities have become battery cages in which students are fed information with little opportunity for interaction and independent thinking.

It highlights the fact that a real paradigm shift is needed. If Europe maintains these passive forms of learning, fostering apathy among students, this will severely affect the well-being of their society. By introducing student-centered learning, higher education institutions could stimulate students to become active citizens, ask questions, seek improvement and become active contributors to the welfare of their societies (Romashina, Shishov, Rabadanova, Mayer, 2016).

Student-centered learning and mobility will help students develop the competences they need in a changing labour market and will empower them to become active and responsible citizens. ... The aims are to ensure that higher education institutions should have the necessary resources to continue to fulfil their full range of purposes. Such purposes as preparing students for life as active citizens in a democratic society; preparing students for their future careers, and enabling their personal development should all be addressed. By creating and maintaining a broad, advanced knowledge base and stimulating research and innovation, students would be encouraged to participate (Bologna Process, 2009).

What exactly is meant by "student-centered learning" and how can it be implemented? It is paramount for students to be able to fully develop their potential; for universities to offer skills for the anticipated future workforce and to create the best leaders for tomorrow.

According to the European Students' Union, student-centered learning can be defined as follows:

Student-centered learning represents both a mindset and a culture within a given higher education institution and is a learning approach which is broadly related to, and supported by, constructivist theories of learning. It is characterized by innovative methods of teaching which aim to promote learning in communication with teachers and other learners and which takes students seriously as active participants in their own learning, fostering transferable skills such as problem-solving, critical thinking and reflective thinking (European Students' Union, 2010).

It can take students out of their ordinary situation of listening and reproducing what they have heard, and transforms them into actors in their own education, guided to excel beyond their own expectations but also allowed to do their own studying in co-operation with their colleagues. Certainly after receiving a broad introduction they may then define and decide how and what they want to learn. The teachers should then know the expectations of their

students, and the students become more autonomous in creating their own curriculum and progress (Shishov, Kalnei, 2017). The new ways of learning should be independent and problem-based. The student-centered model does not exclude the teacher from their education, as a lot of support is still needed at the entry level. There are examples of universities that have even abolished examinations and leave the students themselves to work on projects and assess each other's performance in later years. All this is mentored by a teacher, but the student learns to be independent and entrepreneurial. The students also learn how to debate with colleagues and how to develop ideas, gaining those valuable transferable skills that are needed to function in any labour market and society. It makes students 'think outside the box' and perform in the interdisciplinary environment around them. It will make students question the information that is given to them; they will go out into society ready to change whatever is going wrong and protect the values they adhere to. It activates the student, and it teaches the citizen inside the student how to be active (Kalney, Shishov, 2017).

This will involve discussing a paradigm shift, a total change of mentality, a shift in education and curriculum design by which both the teacher and the student have to arrive in the classroom with different attitudes.

Looking at some institutions critically, several questions were raised. What kinds of values were already in the universities' curricula, and how could we express the core values of the university campus in seminars? How open to all political and ideological views was the society of the university? How could teachers act as role models when it comes to being inclusive and caring – while at the same time encouraging intellectual enquiry? (Bikbulatova, Yulina, Rabadanova, 2015).

From one perspective education is an attribute: that is, it is something individuals either have or do not have. By contrast, the process of understanding and reflecting on what students have read, heard and said, allows for the development of an understanding of knowledge on behalf of which they may act. From another perspective education is static and has a given duration, though the use of this education is a never-ending process of making knowledge meaningful – a process of maturation that usually takes place in each individual (Bostad, 2012).

With reference to classical philosophy, a notion of general education emerged that was related to the concepts of virtue or capability: mastering life was a matter of refining one's personality or character (Bostad, 2012). In Plato's ideal school, general education did not occur through passive acquisition of facts and skills, but rather through a unique matter of self-knowledge. Even if the platonic ideal of education lifts the rational, free individual up as an ideal citizen, his or her concept of general education may yet be fruitful in our current context. In the sense that education is about being able to be deeply convinced of a claim, a reason or an argument, as opposed to being allowed to be persuaded. A person who has been persuaded may have accepted facts or skills without reflecting on them: perhaps by simply repeating something more or less automatically, whereas a person who is deeply convinced understands why, and should have a considered, personal relationship to the knowledge they have acquired (Bikbulatova, Orlova, Rabadanova, Shishov, Yulina, 2016). In other words, the teachers attempt to convince the students, not only by showing them the pros and cons of the discussion – the support behind the arguments as well as that appertaining to any counter-arguments – but also by being in the explorable unknown, an open arena with the students. This implies a fundamental shift in the way of looking at the relationship of teacher and student – it is not purely a "student-centered" way of learning; it is an "enquiry-centered" approach to academic knowledge where the common aim for both teacher and student is to succeed in evaluating a serious enquiry. The teachers and the students are in this together, trying to delve deeper into an unsolved problem, analyzing a concept together, and looking at it from shifting perspectives. It is an essential democratic element in the dialogue that shifting perspectives are encouraged and elevated as an ideal. The common methods follow a specific pattern intended to lead the parties in the dialogue to greater clarity and an understanding of general issues related to human life; this may be achieved primarily by uncovering problems but also by searching for good, tenable arguments, viewpoints and perspectives to work with. These enquiring methods are open

and invite a range of creative and impulsive hypotheses. Ideally, the structure of the dialogue has no room for ready-made solutions and predefined answers: ultimately it rests on the possibility that individuals can draw conclusions that may well be changed in the next round of discussion. To lead this type of academic dialogue presupposes authority and knowledge of both the subjects and the methods of enquiry where the teacher/conversation leader encourages new quests (Bostad, 2006), asking provocative questions and encouraging students to think in new terms.

The praxis of philosophical enquiry is a "happening", as Hannah Arendt puts it (Arendt, 1958), something unpredictable, uncontrollable and unexpected, which challenges every theory and method of pedagogy. To ask and make enquiries in a dialogue is to place the question itself out into the open, in contrast to repeating what is a common truth. To ask open questions leaves the topic itself and its different possibilities "floating", as Gadamer puts it (Gadamer, 2004), and thus reveals distinctions between understanding and reflecting or thinking, which also implies that the process or understanding that something may never be fully understood.

The tradition of 'mindful' pedagogy, encouraging and accepting thoughts and emotions that are revealed in a learning situation (Hansen, 2008), is to be distinguished from any philosophical praxis of critical or creative enquiry into knowledge, wisdom, beauty and meaning. This praxis is more rebellious and unpredictable. Even the concept of "being in the open" is a fruitful perspective on the process of understanding and grasping knowledge as something different from thinking, a framework of care and dignity is missing in this philosophy. Participating in an academic dialogue requires an environment with academic values, such as respect, equality, autonomy, sincerity and some sense of the unity in its diversity. Moreover, it enhances the tolerance and understanding of the individual (Abdulaeva, Gireeva, Bikbulatova, Rabadanova, Yulina, 2017). The social reproduction of education is one of the major challenges to education today. Other challenges include the power relations that can exist in all forms of learning, and which require an understanding of the existence and use of the cultural capital within society for its instrumental perspectives on learning pressures and learning outcomes.

Apart from the active citizenship created through student-centered and enquiry-centered learning and the societal welfare created through having an active university in the public debate, the university can also be a model of democratic governance. Giving student representatives access to the highest levels of decision-making in the university is a vital factor to set the right tone in active citizenship in students' development.

3.1. Discussions of results

The research has been carried out at the Foreign Languages Department at Razumovsky Moscow State University of Technologies and Management (First Cossack University). The lecturers discussed their experiences gained from attending European universities such as University of Malta, Glasgow University, University of Bergen, and the Charles University in Prague. It was conceded that the role of the universities in addressing locally based civic, social and political challenges has had comparatively little focus both in Russia and Europe. Performance analyses of a number of Russian and European Universities have made a definite contribution to studying the challenges that higher education is facing today, and the necessity to fundamentally shift in the ways of finding new approaches to educate active members of society, raising tolerance, solidarity and cross-cultural interests.

Comparing the last two decades it can be said that in the 90's one would probably have been more optimistic about the then-prosperous European society. Students were discovering the benefits of academic mobility, eager to open up a connected academic society. Those students saw the birth of the Bologna Process; a promise to establish a pan-European higher education area in which they could travel, study and work freely in a stronger Europe, in welfare and harmony. Today, however, European students are worried about their future; their society where prosperity is distributed by rating agencies (Tett, 2010), where education becomes a mere trade-off between the need to have a degree for the job market and the ever-increasing cost of it. There are still requirements of the European Students' Union

(ESU) where it is calling on the European Union not to restrict co-operation within education to that only for the EU member states, but to develop the initiative in alignment with, but not replacing, the already existing European Higher Education Area with respect to all the Bologna commitments (European Students' Union, 2018). Therefore there is a threat of some societies facing a future in which multiculturalism has been declared a failure, and in which a tolerant citizen becomes a rare phenomenon.

The identified problems have been addressed at the round-table discussions, Boards of Studies and seminars. The argument concerning the fundamental shift in teaching methods and models of education in general raised the following questions: -

What parts of the learning methods and curriculum ought to be elective and which elements should be decided by the universities? How much of the curricula should be compulsory? How should the protection of an individual's right to intellectual and spiritual freedom be balanced against the recognition that their values may be expressed and reasoned for differently in different religions and belief systems? The answers to these questions depend upon the ability of universities to stimulate and create autonomous individuals – who think independently, pose critical questions, make ethical choices and participate in social debates (Artemieva, Yulina, Rabadanova, 2013).

The discussion provided important insights into key aspects of the work of the lecturers of MSUTM through which the following are being unambiguously observed:

- the goal for higher education is not merely increased tolerance, but understanding too;
- the individual student has to learn active citizenship from the start of his or her academic enrolment;
- the role of the teacher and the relationship between teachers and students should be reconsidered;
- an enquiry-centred approach to academic knowledge will promote participation in any academic dialogues;
- the social reproduction of education is one of the major challenges to education today;
- giving more freedom to students in creating curriculum issues and giving access to the highest levels of decision-making in the university will help to develop an active citizenship mentality in a student;
- the new ways of learning should be independent and problem-based;
- new techniques and effective approaches should be applied in teaching students how to debate, develop ideas, and gain transferable skills such as critical and reflective thinking;
- more innovative community engagement projects should be initiated;
- more international student exchange programs should be proposed by member countries.

The participants of the discussion have argued for a new non-profit perspective on higher education appealing to humanistic values. A new humanism is required where education is a moral tool not only for respecting diversity, but for improving our understanding of the current complexities in society.

4. Summary

The universities should thus play a role as a model for our societies, teaching their students how to interact with governance and how to change what is not going well through joint decision-making. This will develop skills within the students to become involved and hence significant citizens themselves, rather than easily influenced consumers of a flawed democracy. It is possible to achieve such changes on condition of allowing a fundamental shift in the approaches to academic knowledge where the common aim for both teacher and student is to succeed with a serious enquiry.

5. Conclusions

The described experiences consistently prove that the universities at the macro-level play an

important role as institutions of independent wisdom that are crucial to creating and shaping the future attitudes of society. A university can be both a reflection of the democratic organization of our society and also as a training institution for its citizens.

The introduction and development of student-centered learning can once again spark active citizenship in students and create the statesmen and – women who will be needed in the near future to lead our societies towards a more tolerant, high-quality and democratic governance.

The research provided an insight into methods of preparation of students for active citizenship not only by what a university teaches but also how it teaches it. Under these conditions higher education will be able to prepare creative, innovative, critically thinking and responsible graduates needed for economic growth. These graduates will enable sustainable development; engage in public debate and seek to influence our future.

The role of education is not only to set requirements in terms of knowledge and skills but also to provide context and discourse. In higher education, the goal must be to build and develop universities that are responsible to society – locally, nationally and globally. In this way higher education will provide knowledge and understanding; the ability and the will to act, and to engage in the public arena, to act ethically and to consider the long-term as well as short term implications of its actions and priorities, and their impact on societies in sometimes challenging circumstances.

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