

From Elite Higher Education to Mass Education

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Even though, the universities originate from the Middle Ages, XIX and XX centuries can be considered as the meridian of traditional university. The universities started to develop especially fast after the Second World War, when the supreme mission of university was connected to serving the society and humanity. By the beginning of XXI century, it was clear that especially universities play unprecedentedly important role in the transformation to innovation-based economy. Therefore, university education cannot be only public, it is also of private and personal interest.

From modernistic values to postmodernistic

Formation of a new university or higher education model at the end of XX century, which also influenced the proliferation of higher education considerably, has been closely related to fast paradigmatic changes in society. Transformation from industrial society to information society, globalisation of economy, formation of knowledge-based economy, rapid development of democracy, etc. set new requirements, also for higher education. In the conditions of globalisation, international competitiveness depends more and more on innovatively thinking employees. The ability to think in a critical and complex way and high speciality professionalism are the most desirable skills and knowledge in today's rapidly changing society. But to cope with these rapid social changes, we need to continuously study and retrain.

Changing radically and with speed Western society has been named post-era, characterised by the conceptual notions like "post-industrial", "post-modern", "post-liberal", etc. Stressed is essential difference of the post-era society from those of agricultural or industrial and manufacturing societies. Agricultural society is mostly influenced by the surrounding natural environment, industrial society mostly from the technology and production. The central role in the post-era society has been taken by information. Therefore are challenges, met in the post-era society, first and foremost controlled by information, not so much by territory as before (according to J.-F. Lyotard, 1984). Those in the possession of information have power. Fast technological development of science, progressive vagueness on the borders of real and virtual world, etc., have driven situation to the point where science is more dependent of the technological development than ever before. Two of the main functions of science – research and forwarding of the acquired knowledge – have already felt the influence. Example for the first might as well be genetics, owing its theoretical paradigm to cybernetics. The other function is un-separable from the commercialisation of the info-devices and diminution of their measurements. All this has considerably changed the ways of acquiring, using and having access to knowledge. In the world of unification processes due to the fast technological development and rationalization of socio-political systems, the questions of values have emerged with new acuteness, which in the opinion of Georg Henrik von Wright (1996) are primarily and closely connected with the questions of humanity and solidarity.

From the aspects of system of values has hard critic fell upon great modernistic stories about freedom and equality, truth and justice, etc. J.-F. Lyotard has stressed that postmodernism is the most provocative way of interfering with the discussions about science, knowledge and technology and thus the enlightenment needs once more to be asked from: can mankind be rescued by scientific knowledge and technology? Has the total alienation from oneself and the society, where the Western civilization is finding itself today, been the utmost aim of the enlightenment? Is there escape of that alienation? Can one find it through education and to begin with the higher education, which has in the contemporary society turned into mass education?

From elite higher education to mass education

Humboldt's education model of the unity of science and teaching and of freedom of teaching and learning, on which the traditional higher education is based on, is mainly professor-scholar-centered higher education. Professor is the one who says what, why and how to teach. The highest objective of traditional university is to raise and educate national elite. It is thought that the elite knows and sees further and more than others. Therefore, it is elite's task to show the masses a way to freedom, wealth and happiness. I think that this professor-centered university model has not completely disappeared yet. At least from Europe. And thank god, because plurality is what advances life all together. Europe's and especially England's higher education system have always been more elite-centered than in America, for example. Reputedly, up to the beginning of 60's of the last century, the degree of participants in higher education was only 5% of the respective age group (18-23-year-olds) in England. Regardless of the fact that even now, the feel of the Middle Ages and the nostalgia of so called "professor-scholar republic" can be felt, in a good way, in several Europe's old and dignified universities, the most of these old and traditional universities have gone along with new societal challenges, which are closely related to conversion to mass higher education. Berkley University professor M. Trow (1988) drew attention to proliferation of higher education already on 1973. In his opinion, we can talk about mass higher education in those countries, where the number of young people (18-23-year-olds) involved in higher education is between 15 and 50%. In countries, where this percentage is higher than 50, we are already dealing with universal higher education, and where it is less than 15%, we can talk about elite higher education. It means that higher education is available to relatively small amount of people from the relative age group.

Transformation to mass higher education is shown mainly by the rapid growth in the number of students during the last 20-25 years. And this in the entire world. UNESCO notified of transformation to mass higher education in its 1998 international congress. According to UNESCO, the number of the respective age group (18-23 years) has grown from 13 million on 1960's to 79 million in 2000 and by 2020 the number of students is prognosed to grow to 125 million. By proliferation of higher education we mean that today, on the average, over 40% of high-school graduates all over the world continue their studies in universities. In rich OECD countries, for example, the number of students in universities has doubled during the past 25 years. When in 1975 the rate of students in universities from the relevant age group was 22%, then in 2000 it was already 41%. During the past 20 years, the growth has been especially remarkable in the Nordic Countries. For example, the rate of students in universities in Finland, from the relevant age group (18-23), has grown between 1980 and in 1998 from 32.2% to 74,1%; in Norway from 25.5% to 65% and in Sweden from 30.8% to 50.3%. During the mentioned period, the growth in Estonia was from 24.5% to 41.8%. From the mentioned list of states, Finland gives a serious competition in proliferation of higher education even to the United States of America, where the number of registered students during the mentioned period grew from 55.5% to 80.9%. And even England, which has been promoting elite higher education for a long time has seriously changed the course because during the past 18 years, the respective figure in England has grown from 19.1% to 58% (see Unesco and World Bank data).

The process of proliferation of higher education has also involved developing countries. For example, the number of students in Latin America has grown from 270,000 students in 50's to 9 million in 2004. Even in less developed Asian countries the increase of students has been high. China, for example, doubled its number of students during the 90's. Last year in China, on a conference of international association of universities, the author had the opportunity to get more profoundly acquainted with Chinese program that directed at proliferation of mass higher education. And it was really impressive. The entire national system of resources has been planned for it. One part of this deals with sending more talented young people to prestigious universities in the West, especially the United States of America. While getting acquainted with China's relevant program on the mentioned conference, one American professor asked from a talker whether the Chinese have a program for how they will bring these talented students back to China after their graduation. The Chinese just laughed politely. Later, while talking to this American professor, it became evident that Americans are truly worried that the faculties of many American prestigious universities have been "conquered" by talented young people from Asia, especially from China, since they are more hard-working, dedicated to studies and therefore more competitive. India is trying to walk the same path. Even though, the numbers show that China and India have a long way to go on this road. For example, in China

during the 1980's only 1.6% of young people were in higher education studies from the respective age group, in 1998 a. this number grew to 6.0%. Respective figures in India are 5.2% in 1980 and 8.0% in 1998.

For Western countries Chinese and Indian education market have become very attractive magnet in relation to fast aging and decreasing of population during the next few years. Last year in China, the author had the opportunity to visit the education fair of great countries, where Japan, Russia, England, Spain and Scandinavian countries stood particularly out. It seemed as great countries have realised what could become of their education system in the near future and through this the entire economic development, when many lecture-halls will be empty. By the way, it was interesting was the fact that Scandinavian universities advertised themselves in this fair as a common economic area in Europe, which also included Baltic countries. And thereupon the author thought that if when seen from China's side we can be seen as common economic area, then why there is no Baltic university represented on Scandinavian street. Chinese young people were especially interested in and crowded the so called English street. Apparently this plurality was also connected to the fact that the English distinguished from the others with their better organisation in bureaucracy. Even migration officers were present, from whom people got immediate competent information about visa and residence permit applications and fill out the relevant forms on the spot. So that fast and competent information and proceedings have become one important advantage in competition.

Competition obliges

Increasingly tightening competition, which is connected to transition to knowledge-based society and the struggle of great powers for hegemony has also perked up the competition between universities. Universities compete with each other for better students, greater research grants, external market, private sector investments, etc. Fast economic growth in several OECD countries at the end of 90's of the last century (for example from 54% to 59% in Germany and from 45% to 51% in England) has brought new and quite big investments to universities from private sector. During the past decades, the private sector has started to more and more connect their economic success with investments to higher education. They not only invest in people but also in laboratories, libraries, technical infrastructure, etc. Active intervention of private sector in shaping university education has alerted the proponents of traditional university model, who sometimes just fight for their lost position in university. Therefore, we can often hear stories about the downturn of mass higher education, declining quality, etc.

There is no need to deny that sometimes these complaints are connected to simple struggle for one's place under the sun. Hence the "glorification of old good professor-centered university", where students were smarter and more dedicated to their studies, where professor's salaries were higher and work load lower, where professor's academic freedom was guaranteed up to high age and where the professor didn't have to intervene into solving various questions that were not directly connected to their work. For professors, university was like a temple that protected them from external influence and allowed them to dedicate themselves to "eternal academic worship". But today, the academic conservatism of professors is not enough. It doesn't help. The life goes on by its path. The essence of higher education has changed considerably. Today, the student depends way less on professors and their lectures. Many study materials are available via Internet. Internet-based distance education has become the form of transnational higher education. J.-F. Lyotard (1979) has noted that the time of Humboldt's type universities and great lecture sessions was already over in the 60's of last century.

Higher education quality

What about the higher education quality in a new situation, to which there is a lot of attention paid lately. What to understand under quality? Client-centeredness has become the central principle in modern quality philosophy. The client is king! The client is the one who tells what objectives should higher education serve to reach certain competences. On institutional level, these objectives find an output through the mission of a university. But on the level of curricula, through the results of studies (knowledge, skills, attitudes). The results of studies are marks for students and employers. The quality of teaching must be closely connected to performance and effectiveness of teaching and learning. But the latter depends on the objectives and results

of subject courses. Lately, it has been stressed that such standardised and utilitarian approach to the quality of higher education is actually very closely related to the society model that is based on great production, where they are trying to rationalise everything, effectively define and control. G. In the opinion of G. Ritzer (2000) and D. Hartley (1995), today's universities have become as fast-food restaurants and higher education itself a burger that can take us fast and effectively to achieve the purpose, but soon we will have a need for a new burger. By using symbol language for characterising the quality of mass higher education, it has been compared with Lada car that is replacing Rolls Royce. If the first production is based on the principle fast, cheap and a lot, the Rolls Royce was a real engineering masterpiece, which was miraculous and expensive. Therefore, it was accessible only for few and the most dignified. L. Harvey (1999) and L. Harvey & D. Green (1993) has stressed that client-centered and instrumental approach to higher education has changed it into a regular production of mass production. In a word, higher education has become one certain production line. But the production itself is changing upon the transition from industrial society to information society. Cost-based economy is being replaced by innovation-based economy. But what does it mean for higher education?

Management guru P. Drucker (2003) has noted that during the past 30-40 years, the campuses of many big universities have become relics. Many American universities have also gone bankrupt because they haven't been able to go along with very rapid changes in society. In America, the bankrupt universities have been replaced by new and rapidly developing online and private universities, which often correspond better to the needs of rapidly changing society since they are smaller and more flexible. It is believed that already in the short term, online universities may begin to influence significantly the present higher education system. During the era of universal internetization, big campuses of universities are losing their former meaning. Full-time students have been placed in serious danger. But in the situation of internet-based mass higher education, professors have rather transformed from omniscients to rather consultants-advisers, who must cope with consulting an enormous amount of students via Internet. How to combine new way of teaching with research? How to measure the results of research? Should it really be only on the basis of CC articles, which's publishing period may stretch to 5-6 years. And how to even measure the quality of higher education in a situation, where the majority of world's universities have opened the access to higher education on the global market. And in the situation, where more and more countries have began to understand the economic potential of higher education as modern service export sector.

A serious problem for the designers of new generation education policy during the next few years will be the question how to create such a transnational higher education system, which could balance between very good higher education and mass higher education. How to involve modern technology in a way, which would carry eternal humane and national values? Solving this question is closely connected to creation of a new system of higher education, its organisation and financing model. Is Estonia ready for this?

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