

I. Quest of New Identities in Higher Education

Universities in the Changing World

Professor Peeter Kreitzberg
Chairman of the Cultural Affairs Committee of the Riigikogu

The replacement of the modernist society paradigm with the post-modernist one that is connected with the transition from industrial society to informational society has equally got a direct relation to the realm of values, in other words, higher education. For this reason, the large societal rapture calling into question many of the previously great narratives of freedom and equality, truth and knowledge, justice and fairness etc. equally has to be viewed from the education point of view.

The age of modernity „developed under the impact of science, technology and rational thought, having the origins in seventeenth- and eighteenth- century Europe Western industrial culture was shaped by the Enlightenment- by the writings of thinkers who opposed the influence of religion and dogma, and who wished to replace them with a more reasoned approach to practical life" (Giddens 1999). Having said this, it is important to emphasise that in the age of modernity, university acts as one of the crucial carriers of the rationality idea - rationality, which, in the industrial society, has increasingly transformed into instrumental rationality. Within the framework of instrumental rationality, human mind transforms into merely an instrument serving a higher cause - economic profit and progress. In this situation, universities have gradually started to lose their previous function of cultivating intellectual elite. While monopolising the production of knowledge and being isolated in an ivory tower trying to perform the part of the sole objective and impartial expert, universities are increasingly becoming utilitarian and functionalist - not knowledge for the sake of knowledge and truth, but knowledge for the sake of getting profit. Both M. Weber, at the beginning of the 20th century, and J. Habermas, at the end of the century, drew attention to the dangers posed by the endless race for technological progress. Universities are more frequently compared to an iron cage where all people have to do is to choose the means for reaching the objective totally prescribed to them from the outside.

Already in the middle of the last century, a number of thinkers having adopted an anti-positivist stance started to search for a way out of this general situation of alienation and loss of freedom. However, it was not before the 1970s that the greatest opposition to modernist culture and system of values emerged in the form of post-modernism.

In the case of post-modernism, we are dealing with a continuous and equivocal challenge to the assumptions of the Western culture that have started to evolve from 15th century and, in some cases, dating back to 5th century BC. These include the issues of structure and identity, transcendentality and particularity along with the questions relating to the nature of time and space. Regardless of the equivocalness and eclectics, post-modernism mainly rests on two premises. Firstly, the view that there exists no or will exist no common denominator in the world that would secure neutral and objective thinking; secondly, all human systems are first and foremost functioning by means of a language, and mostly represent self-reflective reference systems. These are systems with different functions which construct various meanings based on the ruling ideology and system of values. Rather than being a programme discourse, post-modernism is, thus, an antifundamentalist one seeking to crumble the monopoly of truth.

Post-modernist statements have been made since 1954 when the term was first coined by the English historian A. Toynbee. M. Foucault who is often considered to be a post-modernist thinker does not recognise

the existence of a particular post-modernist philosophy and age. Nevertheless, extensive discussions are devoted to the post-modernist age which is seen to be related to the fading of identities and boundaries having evolved between institutions, to globalisation, the rupture of continuity, nonlinearity, crisis and loss. It is equally related to the emergence of many local knowledge clusters which require no other justification for their existence than someone's statement of their usefulness. The world is globalising, while knowledge is contextualising. Everything is possible, although dangerous, according to what M. Foucault claims. Both the society and the individual become increasingly free from such construction as societal needs. In philosophical terms, it is increasingly becoming more difficult to consider something of high quality and to evaluate quality. It appears strange if we consider the reality we live in. Noteworthy is the fact that, in practice, the reaction based on the notion of quality and efficiency, and managerism, which de-professionalises both universities and university staff (not to mention school teachers) have strengthened since the 1960s. A similar process took place in America at the beginning of the last century when the antifundamentalist Dewey was the person quoted most often and administrative regulations were produced on the basis of tailorism or - in other words - managerism. It is not known whether the more frequent exploitation of the notions of quality and efficiency constitutes a counter-reaction to post-modernist claims, an attempt to avoid chaos in good faith or the desire to keep processes in control in order to have power over them. The age of post-modernism is definitely not about disengaging modernist thinking and pre-modernism but about these two functioning against a wider background as certain possibilities, and not as something inevitable.

The role of universities has undoubtedly changed; universities have by and large lost their identity, their power, their monopoly in terms of producing, promoting and controlling knowledge. Universities have amalgamated with vocational training, merged with other universities, the enterprises that they serve, and cannot any longer exist in isolation. They are increasingly transforming into service enterprises. The role of universities as the sole knowledge experts is generally declining. Virtual science communities are capable of competing with official universities.

Coming back to M. Foucault and post-modernism as an age and some sort of a school of thought constituting the world, two aspects can be brought forward. Firstly, the ethos being characteristic of modernism which manifests itself in a critical attitude towards everything and everyone, and in the courage to use one's mind in perceiving the truth according to Kant's recommendation. Secondly, the philosophical dogma that modernism in the end degenerated into in the form of positivism by means of firm criteria of objective truth and methodical fundamentalism. Hence, the functionalism and tailorism along with its managerism, which is equally characteristic of today's education in Estonia in general, and higher education in particular. The new Estonian higher education strategy provides the most prominent example of fundamentalism that characterises functionalism. In fact, the search for the unique premises underlying knowledge is not a new phenomenon. Already Archimedes stated: „Give me a place to stand and I will change the world." The modernist culture starting from R. Descartes' *cogito ergo sum* and progressing to the positivists' principle of the verifiability of knowledge took the same tradition further. Anti-fundamentalism that is equally characteristic of post-modernist opposition has since the sophists of the ancient times and up to the days of F. Nietzsche and contemporary American pragmatists proclaimed that the truth is always something personal, relative and subjective. For this reason, the search for universal premises and methods of perceiving the truth is an activity that, according to F. Nietzsche, can at the end of the day put an end to any kind of truth. On the other hand, one cannot possibly avoid functionalist approach insofar as just as all the other educational, science and culture institutions, universities constitute a part of the larger socio-economic system which to a lesser or a greater extent conforms to societal needs. The licensing and accreditation of universities renders universities institutions where the so-called professional scientific activity is cultivated. The latter is inextricably connected to the creation and perception of new knowledge. This, in turn, is related to the use of appropriate scientific methods. Recently, the viewpoint has become spread that the over-administration of teaching and scientific work with the purpose of conserving professionalism is particularly dangerous at the time of a paradigmatic rupture of society where the old ways of making science and describing the world have exhausted themselves. Yet, the new ones remain to be found. The time has come when there exists no consensus amongst scientists with respect to the scientific ways and methods, the time when, according to P. Feyerabend, everything is allowed. In this context, a very interesting example can be brought from the life of M. Foucault - the distinguished scientist of 20th century - at the end of 1950s. M Foucault failed during the pre-defence of his PhD thesis at the Uppsala University since he fell outside the framework of the paradigm of normal science by presenting problems that the experts deemed as completely incomprehensible and senseless.

The post-modernist way of thinking allows for activity and development of universities with very different missions, along with those of many different schools and schools of thought within the framework of one university, thus reaffirming the relativity and contextuality of knowledge. For students, post-modernism implies various educational possibilities and choices. This equally pertains to choices and changes of one's individual identity. However, claiming something is one thing, and reality is a different thing.

Because of its pluralist and relativist nature, proclaiming post-modernism an age often reminds me of what I experience after having prepared some report on discussion on the topics in the curriculum. For example, in terms of academic curricula, the importance and significance of critical and creative thinking has been emphasised for over 100 years. On the other hand, teaching continues to stick to the style of „correct answers to correct questions“. In this sense, one can refer to the actual curriculum as to a hidden curriculum - that is, a curriculum used to achieve objectives different from what has been claimed. The activity of many of our politicians, who claim certain things and do completely different things, can equally conditionally be referred to as a hidden curriculum.

As a matter of fact, J. Derrida constantly ridiculed the double morality characteristic of modernist universities. For example, J. Derrida believes that the academic freedom rhetorics should mostly be considered as the freedom of the members of staff to impose upon students their understanding of things. Possibly, he was more right to claim so than we would like to admit. It is also one of the reasons behind the fundamentalist way of thinking pig-headedly making its way in the society.

Due to their conservatism, the majority of universities today hold the post-modernist way of thinking back as opposed to pushing it forward. The cultivation of expert culture helping towards distinguishing between ignorance and competence has always been in the interest of universities. This constitutes an economic and status interest for universities. However, this university activity has frequently prevented the emergence and development of innovation.

In the conditions of a quickly changing and globalising society, the question should be posed whether persecuting CC articles and ranking universities etc. will have a developing and stabilising or rather a destabilising effect on society today. The same question could be asked with regards to the total assessment and control over students. One can do nothing but agree with M. Foucault that examination - and not prison - constitutes the most influential instrument of power today, insofar as frightening can have a smaller normalising effect on society than the learning of correct answers to correct questions. Knowledge and power are the different sides of the same coin.

Those who speak of post-modernist age today refer to globalisation, information technology revolution, terrorism, antagonism, floating definition of identity, unrestricted choices, the threat of war, increasingly uneven distribution of wealth etc. Great changes are referred to, which affect everything, including universities. However, the humanity has not lost the opportunity to stand against all of these processes. I cannot imagine how one can institutionalise the dissensus characteristic of post-modernism. J.-F. Lyotard claimed himself happy since he did not have to pass J. Habermas' examination.

Universities can no longer legitimise themselves as the temples of knowledge production. The difference between technology and science is often blurred. Science as an objective and neutral undertaking has today been deconstructed at least by the top-level philosophy. This equally reduces the independence of universities.

At the same time, there is no doubt that post-modernism strongly disputes the conformity of functionalist universities with the needs of society and with other institutions such as labour market, as well as a firm corps of knowledge based on certain assumptions and systematisation methods. The discourses circulating in the society (including scientific discourses) stem from human interest and it is the interest of power that motivates and stimulates them. The monopoly over defining the truth constitutes one of the greatest privileges of power - e.g. what and who should be financed in the scientific process. In Estonia, the monopoly is in the hands of the representatives of scientific discourse dealing with global affairs and being less familiar with and interested in Estonian matters whose objective is to write articles for international journals and to make everyone else do the same. As a result, the scientific community becomes estranged from Estonia's own problems. This is a pure bodycheck accompanied by the following discourse elements. Distinguishing between applied and fundamental science is wrong. No applied science or development can exist without applied science. Science has got an international character and only high-level scientists are worthy of funding. Science in Estonia is significantly different from science in many other countries in terms of its fundamental science and development proportion. It is evident, that only a little share of fundamental science

can be preserved at a high level and the rest has to be imported from abroad. The Finnish Nokia imports 98% of the scientific knowledge it requires. In addition, the whole cycle comprising fundamental research, applied science and development does not necessarily have to be concentrated in the same hands. Furthermore, it appears that in certain instances the global science slogan acts as a cover for epigonism. I would like to repeat: the privilege of defining the truth is the greatest good that power provides. On the one hand, post-modernist philosophy and treatment of the truth gives the right of existence to different truths and interpretations. On the other hand, it renders it easier to give preference to certain interpretations over others, to finance certain research projects and repulse others. Why not do so if one project is considerably different from another, not better and different criteria can be used for evaluation that is equally neither better nor worse than the others. Relativisation does not only facilitate a new birth, it also facilitates its prevention.

Estonian universities are not particularly active in participating in the so-called global science. I find Estonian universities rather reserved. At times, they produce the impression that our public universities have misunderstood their autonomy by treating it as sovereignty, even though post-modernism is rather sceptical when it comes to declaring something wrong or right.

Information technology undeniably threatens the functional cohesion and coordination of society insofar as it increases the possibility of alternativeness. This gives rise to doubts in the ethics that has evolved, the ways of telling the truth, paradigms of scientific thinking etc. Powerful virtual communities are in the process of being formed.

The possibilities to think alternatively and to deconstruct the evolved systems of knowledge have augmented. It is becoming increasingly difficult to defeat an opponent by merely using one's scientific authority or the title of professor or academician.

The changing world has undeniably entailed the transformation of the concept of university along with the entire context that universities are functioning within. Supranational entities such as the European Union have come to replace national states, economic flows increasingly are passing to international corporations, and competition is mounting. The notions of state and market are beginning to blur. Interconnection - merger etc. Universities are intertwining with business. Originally, the production of new knowledge was important, then the place was occupied by teaching; at this point - business is what matters. Linear science conception has receded. Interdisciplinarity is deepening, different schools are emerging. Yet, at the end of the day nothing happens against our wish, even the end of all including the end of the world will not come unless we want it.

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