Consumerism or humanism: educational values in the University of Bologna and beyond

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Context

The traditional values of universities are closely related to the idea of humanism, still valued and preserved in the Magna Charta Universitatum that was signed by University Rectors during this event. But when talking about contemporary higher education, there are parallel discourses present such as the idea of consumerism, in which teachers and researchers are redefined as producers and students as consumers (Scott, 2004). Universities are captured between the marketisation of higher education and a decline of public funding and have to find a balance between traditional values and the modernisation of higher education (Smerek, 2010). In this World Café session special focus was placed on academics and how they see their role in promoting values within higher education and society.

Content of the session and catch-phrases

The session was based on fieldwork that conducted by Sina Westa as a visiting researcher supported by the Magna Charta Observatory and the University of Bologna in 2014. The qualitative study included eleven semi-structured in-depth interviews with academic staff from different disciplines covering the issue of academic values and their work at the University of Bologna. Drawing on the interview material this session addressed three questions: (1) what are educational aims and values of academics? (2) what is the relation between the university and society? and (3) what role do different stakeholders play in shaping the way how universities are seen in society?

Key points that were raised by the participants of the interviews were:
(a) Educating the whole person is more important than "just passing on knowledge".
(b) Passing on ethical values is important for social change and this needs innovation in teaching.
(c)   The use of "economic discourses" like consumerism is dangerous for higher education as it often implies that learning and teaching can be delivered and consumed like any other good.
(d) Being involved in research activities is important for academics in order to provide high quality teaching for students.
(e) Universities struggle to fulfill their obligations towards students, parents and society.
(f)   Quality assurance that is only based on numbers might endanger high quality research and teaching because its shifts the focus away from time-consuming basic research towards easier publishable applied research and focuses on numbers instead of people.
(g) There are multiple links between universities and societies but the kind of link depends on the discipline.
(h) Academics feel that they are lacking the ability to communicate the value of their work and universities in more general to the public.
(i)   The media takes on an important role in promoting a certain image of universities not only in society but also among students, parents and academics themselves. This image includes the idea of consumerism and the 'failing university'.
Putting the statements above in form of catch-lines, does not intend to raise the impression that the academics who participated in the interviews did not offer a more complex and well-balanced view but should serve as a basis for discussion.

World Café sessions
The three world café sessions were lively discussions around the statements. Each group chose the statements that they found most interesting to talk about, so the content of the discussion was rather diverse even if there were overlapping themes. The chosen catchphrases were either selected on the basis that participants found them controversial or agreed with them fully.

First discussion group

The first group consisted of academics and Vice-Chancellors from Lithuania, Argentina and Sweden. The discussion began by pointing out that the sample was not representative of all academics and this could skew the answers. You would, for example, get different answers from research and from teaching orientated academics.

The main point discussed in this session was the relationship between teaching and research connected to statement (d). The relationship of research and teaching was somewhat controversial as participants in the round table thought this point was not as straightforward as it seems at first sight.

During the discussion two main opinions arose. One group of academics thought that students want first of all good teachers and some exposure to research. This means that not all teachers need to be actively involved in research and not all researchers need to be involved in teaching as being a good researcher is not necessarily connected to being a good teacher. Nevertheless, it was clear from the discussion that university teaching needs to be based on the state of the art knowledge and that all academics should keep up with scholarship in their own subject. Different definitions of research were mentioned in this context. Research might be understood in a broader sense that also includes literature research or in a more narrow sense relating to active research activities. Another group of academics emphasized that it depends on the teachers and the students to define what they want and need.

This group raised the point that even a good researcher might be a mediocre teacher; he or she should be able to transfer the ambition to research and knowledge to the students. Examples from Argentina and Sweden mentioned during the discussion showed that it was important for a teacher to also be a researcher in order to develop students' knowledge and skills. Students in both countries needed to do a research project in their final year and hence need good researchers as teachers in that phase of their studies.

The second major issue discussed in this group was connected to statement (b). It was pointed out that the term 'ethical values' is very vague as values are different for different subjects and people. In some disciplines ethical values are very explicit such as in Medicine with the Hippocratic Oath. In others, values are much more contested and less obvious. One of the academics suggested to rephrase this point to "having an ethical reflective approach" and stated that academics should be honest to the students about their own ethical values.

Second discussion group

The second group was rather small with one student representative from Germany and one Vice-Chancellor from Sweden.

The session started with reflecting on the nature of universities and the traditional dichotomy between teaching and research. It was unclear whether the divide between teaching and research is still a constructive one as the nature of knowledge and the way that it is being acquired is changing.

It was pointed out that the task of universities was always two-fold, the passing on of knowledge but also the production of knowledge. Knowledge was seen as a motivation for attending and working in a university. One particular challenge was when academics and students are both involved in the creation of knowledge. Namely, the need for academics to examine their students which produces an inherent power relationship that might hinder a common knowledge creation. Participants of this session agreed that it is important to think about both teaching and learning. It was mentioned that a lot of times the best teachers in higher education are those doing some research or who were at least up to date with their subjects and who are able to enthuse students.

The relationship between teaching and research was not seen as a one -way road. It was stated that teaching can inform research and vice versa. Researchers can for example motivate their students with examples from the field and they can be challenged by their students to be clear about concepts used.

As in the first group there was a lively discussion about ethical values in teaching and learning. The conversation made clear that there is a need to differentiate between different types of values such as ethical and political ones. The main question raised concerned value neutral teaching and how far it was necessary to reveal his or her own values as an academic to the students. On the one hand, there was the argument that it was important not to share personal values and beliefs with students for example about political ideas. It was argued that in times of internationalisation including values into teaching is a huge challenged as students from different cultural and religious backgrounds are part of the university. On the other hand, it is important for students to know where their teachers are coming from. This will allow students to understand their professor's standpoints in discussions and critically reflect the way in which different perspectives are presented in class. In the end, there was an agreement that it ultimately depends on the teaching content. There needs to be a reflection on what is important for students to know about their teachers' values.

The third aspect of the discussion was related to (h). It was pointed out that communication between academics and the wider society can be a challenge. It was emphasised that communication needs to be practiced and developed and that it is important to talk from time to time with people who do not know anything about research. Teaching and hence communicating well with students can be a valuable ground for this practice.
At the end of the session the topic shifted towards consumerism (i). There was an agreement that consumerism has already entered into many aspects of university life such as accommodation and employability. A question about the role of student unions in this respect was raised but not answered. It was agreed that there were some areas where the idea of consumerism had not penetrated such as teaching and learning as it was recognized that these areas could not be seen as a commodity.

Third discussion group

The last group consisted largely of students and student representatives from the University of Bologna – this was especially interesting as the session was based on academics' statements from the same university. One academic from Ireland also attended this table.

The discussion started off with analysing the tension between a university that has to be financially sustainable but on the other hand has to improve student learning. The main challenge is to balance both these dimensions. It was mentioned that 'a university' is not monolithic but made up of people and therefore there is no linear assumption about what a university should or should not do. One of the students mentioned that most of the statements would resonate with the people in the University of Bologna and that balancing different demands is the most important task for modern universities.

Replying to the question of underlying values in teaching, one student pointed out that academics should be more reflective and open-minded. The student referred to the experience in the university that there are "right things to do and that there is a certain way of doing things". Teaching in this approach assumes that there is only limited amount of possibilities and it is the teacher who decides what is right and wrong. Usually students adopt the view of their professors which can be but might not be useful.

The economic discourses that become part of university life mentioned in (c) was seen as one of the major challenges for contemporary universities and society. It was pointed out that education cannot be dealt with in purely 'economic' ways and that consumerism cannot work. But some students felt that treating education like a 'good' is very obvious in their daily experiences. They felt, for example, pressured to conform to the new 'Bologna system' and its inherent time pressure. These students thought that they have to plan their studies in a very strategic way concerning time and grades in order to enter a Master course. In Italy, not every student is eligible for a master course but only those who finished their bachelor degree with a certain mark. This point was followed by a controversial discussion about whether each student should be admitted to master studies automatically or not.

Talking about financing studies the role of parents was mentioned as they usually pay the fees. It was not clear from the discussion which role parents should play within the university. Money was not seen as the most important investment in higher education but the students' and teachers' time and effort should be considered as well. There was an agreement that if you invest that much time in your education you should expect 'good things' from it. Employability was mentioned as one aim of universities and it was emphasized that it is also an aim of students. Employability in the discussion was put in relation to (a) in form of developing the whole person instead of only passing on knowledge. An analogy given to explain this was "it is better to learn how to fish than to be given fish every day". Teaching and learning were seen overall as being different from knowing as it involved applying and understanding knowledge.

In this group, the separation of research and teaching did not work from the viewpoint of the participants. It was emphasized that being a good researcher does not automatically mean being a good teacher but that both are needed at a university. For some students the plan to consider a career in academia was that it was seen as the only place where you can get a job in research.

The final remarks of this group discussion came from a student representative, mentioning that it is good to see that in reality both students and academics seem to be on the same page and that a honest dialogue between both sides might foster understanding and common goals.

Final Remarks

In all three round tables, topics connected to the relationship between teaching and research and values in teaching and learning were discussed thoroughly. As expected there was no consensus, especially on the topic of openness about one's own values. The introduction of 'economic discourses' such as consumerism and employability caused a lot of concern in the discussion groups. More work needs to done on balancing financial sustainability and traditional university tasks such as teaching and learning according to participants at the tables. Another interesting point of discussion was about the attributes of a good teacher and how learning and teaching could be improved. Overall, bringing different stakeholders around a table for discussing general assumption about universities, teaching and learning helps to adopt a more reflective approach and mutual understanding such as that seen at the end of the third session.

Literature:
Scott, P 2004, 'Ethics 'in' and 'for' Higher Education', *Higher Education in Europe*, vol. 29, no. 4, pp. 439-50.
Smerek, R, E. 2010, 'Cultural Perspectives of Academia: Toward a Model of Cultural Complexity', in J Smart, C. (ed.), *Higher Education: Handbook of Theory and Research*, Springer, Dorecht, Heidelberg, London, New York, pp. 381-423.