

Counterpoint from an educationalist

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*We know about them, but how do we deal with them?
On the weaknesses inherent in the development of the
idea of the university.¹*

The discussion on the development of the university and its underlying idea has in recent years been lively, often interesting as it oscillates between being very optimistic and somewhat pessimistic. However, in this general discussion, I think there are serious weaknesses that are perhaps acknowledged by those who participate in the debate but are not sufficiently addressed by all of us, unfortunately. Even if the continued strength of the universities is not at stake, the academic establishment should indeed not only pay special attention to the weaknesses described below but

¹ These pages represent reflections on Prof. Blasi's address in Bologna: they have been developed somewhat for publication and I am grateful for the substantive comments my colleague Páll Skúlason made on my interim draft.

also 'proact'² to them. These weaknesses will be considered from three perspectives:

- *The connection between research and teaching* in the university, what has been called here by Ulrike Felt the teaching-research nexus: have we analysed sufficiently why this relation is important, what it entails, how uniform it is and how universally it applies to academic disciplines?
- *The question about the unitary character of the university*: how do we harmonise on one hand our discussion about a multitude of functions – the multi-task university mentioned here by Michael Gibbons and Paolo Blasi – that can lead to a variety of universities or to the setting up of multiversities, and on the other hand our implicit unitary idea of the university?
- *What is the functional rationale for the university*: is the post-Humboldtian notion of universities national or universal (global)?

The research-teaching university nexus

Have we analysed sufficiently what it entails and how homogeneous it is?

Wilhelm von Humboldt really set the stage for the research-teaching nexus that we now take for granted as a fundamental characteristic of the university. But why is it so important? Humboldt had a fairly clear-cut answer³:

² This play with the word-pair, *reactive-react*, suggesting the analogy *proactive-proact*, underpins my belief that universities should be proactive rather than reactive.

³ Humboldt, W. v. 'On the Spirit and the Organisational Framework of Intellectual Institutions in Berlin', an 1818 text published again in 1970 in *Minerva* 8, pp 242-250.

‘At the higher level, the teacher does not exist for the sake of the student; both the teacher and student have their justification in the common pursuit of knowledge. The teacher’s performance depends on the students’ presence and interest – without this science and scholarship would not grow. If the students who are to form his audience did not come before him of their own free will, he, in his quest for knowledge, would have to seek them out. The goals of science and scholarship are worked towards most effectively through the synthesis of the teacher’s and the students’ dispositions. The teacher’s mind is more mature but it is also somewhat one-sided in its development and more dispassionate; the student’s mind is less able and less committed but it is nonetheless open and responsive to every possibility. *The two together are a fruitful combination* (p. 248, my emphasis)’.

Are they a fruitful combination? And why? I think it is important for universities to reflect on this general question and try to figure out an answer. The philosopher Alfred Whitehead⁴ echoes and elaborates this very idea with great clarity, thus helping understand better why – and perhaps to what extent – it applies to the model situations we usually have in mind:

‘The justification for a university is that it preserves the connection between knowledge and the zest of life, by uniting the young and the old in the imaginative considerations of learning. The university imparts information, but it imparts it imaginatively. At least, this is the function which it should perform for society. A university which fails in this respect has no reason for existence. This atmosphere of excitement, arising from imaginative consideration, transforms knowledge. A fact is no longer a bare fact: it is invested with all its possibilities. It is no longer a burden on the memory: it is energising as the poet of our dreams, and as the architect of our purposes (p. 97).’

⁴ Whitehead, A.N. *The aims of education: and other essays*, New York, New American Library, 1929 and 1949

For both Humboldt and Whitehead, it is quite clear that engaging on their own either in teaching or in research is certainly not sufficient to make an institution a university. Both functions are required. And when these functions are conducted in concert two crucial elements should emerge: the combination of imagination and zest that is fostered within the framework of the university, on one hand, and, on the other, the transformation of facts into knowledge that takes place within the university environment. These are the Humboldt-Whitehead criteria that I suggest must characterise the relationship between teaching and research in an institution if it is to be classified as a university.⁵

That a university has a teaching function is not debated. But what about research? This is not entirely clear.⁶ Thus, may we ask: what is the function of research within the university arena?

In recent times one definition of the university, the high profile *research university*, has become the prevailing prototype; however, the over-riding emphasis it gives to research is not required by the historical argument and its pre-eminence does not indisputably follow from the primary aim of the institutions of higher education. In fact, this definition draws from the rhetorical norm and the role models which have developed, especially in the United States, in the 20th century. The model of the research university can perhaps be traced back to Humboldt and his contemporaries

⁵ This is a narrow perspective and additional criteria could be considered. See Nybom (2003, p. 144) who suggests five cornerstones for the Humboldt university.

⁶ This is for instance explicitly not required by Newman's idea of the university (Newman, 1852). But I do not think anybody would suggest that a research institution that has no teaching function should be classified as a university.

since the personal and cultural characteristics of these visionaries have indeed contributed to the inherited features that shape this 'idea of the university'. Yet, this does not close the issue considering that there is still a wide spectrum of fundamentally different institutional arrangements allowing for a fruitful relationship between research and teaching, even if they have little in common apart from an inspiration from university traditions going back to the German neo-humanists.

May I suggest five different levels of combinations between research and teaching in order to point to the importance of the nexus' various shapes? These are presented in cumulative or hierarchical layers:

1. The inquiry level (the critical attitude)
2. The research participation (or research impregnated) level
3. The research training level
4. The knowledge production level(s)
5. The interpretative level - the public research space.

In their own right, these different levels may all be taken to characterise the research/teaching relationship that is required in an institution called *a university*.

1. The inquiry level

The first reason for weaving inquiry into all disciplines is the reflective, critical stance it fosters, an attitude now generally considered to be crucial for university graduates, whether in an academic or in a professional course, as they are all supposed to take initiatives in the dynamic development of their field of work. Beyond such a pragmatic rationale for emphasising a critical and inquisitive attitude in all learning situations, inquiry has also a pedagogic and personal value since investigative approaches are very valuable for learning. We label this research function the *inquiry level*, or

research at the first level. This form of systematic inquiry-oriented methods is current at the primary and secondary school levels,⁷ and such approaches are now finding more and more their way into tertiary studies, for example through case-based studies, which are best known in medicine and business administration. It is interesting to note that, although research is said to be important for university studies, it rarely permeates, by tradition, the province of teaching.⁸

2. The research participation level

Another reason for universities to engage in research is that modern society now accepts – or even requires – research to be an important and integral part of the development of every field of activity. Thus, in addition to the critical stance contributed by a research atmosphere, it becomes sensible and even necessary to introduce research activities in all institutions of higher education, thus familiarising⁹ a variety of professionals with the ethos, language, techniques and importance of scholarship and research, i.e., the work modalities that most graduates will be exposed to, mainly at master's level, or will be using to an increasing extent in their future occupations. Thus, a serious introduc-

⁷ There is a variety of approaches characterised inter alia as Socratic learning, discovery learning, inquiry learning, project-based learning or problem-based learning.

⁸ I suggest that, on the whole, even the teaching activities that most resemble research, that is the practical or experimental laboratory sessions in the natural sciences, have often more affinity with an apprenticeship session for a technician than the critical reflections of a researcher.

⁹ Perhaps this term is too weak, but so is *initiate*; and *introduce* and *immerse* are too strong.

tion of research into the curriculum of all disciplines, be they professional or academic, is important, even though the express educational aim of such a development is not achieving research expertise or research skills. We call this the *research initiation* level or the *research participation* level.¹⁰

3. The research training level

Research is also conducted at a university for the express purpose of *training* researchers, indeed, but not necessarily to perform at a high level of academic research. Some universities stress such a special role as their own, using the fact that they have an express task, advancing knowledge. The research trainee, normally a doctoral student, is placed in a setting where she is among expert researchers, is initiated into a culture of ambitious and fertile scholarship and is taken through the drills of the investigative techniques of her field. We call this the *research training level*. It subsumes the technical know-how in the area, and thus has an explicit training component. The most appropriate training institutes are perhaps those which are entrusted with substantial advanced research activities and that have an ambitious level of scholarship; in each case, however, it must be determined what kind of research and training environment is deemed to be necessary and sufficient to allow for such a training function to develop. For instance, there is no clear relationship between the prestige of academic research within an institution and the quality of its research training!

¹⁰ There are a number of open questions here, for instance whether this level is required for educating what is sometimes called 'reflective practitioners', or if the previous level suffices for that purpose?

4. The knowledge production level

Research can also be undertaken for the advancement of knowledge. Modern society, since it is obsessed by economic returns, requires a high level of research activity leading to concrete results; therefore, research promotion (for material development) is high on the agenda of most governments. Traditionally, this research function has been entrusted either to specialised research institutions, within industry and government, or to the universities. This activity is carried out by specialists of the discipline, people who know their field and are well versed in the special techniques such research requires, people who also benefit from an environment that is sufficiently endowed to undertake this specialised task. May I call this the *knowledge production level*? This is now sometimes divided into sub-levels, e.g. the Mode 1 and Mode 2 levels.¹¹ The reasons why this task has often been placed in universities are manifold, but it has been repeatedly argued (by both Humboldt and Whitehead, as we said) that this function is university congruent because of the dynamic interaction that often exists between the teaching researcher and the researching student. Hence, combining research training and knowledge production within a particular institution can make special sense^{12,13} – even if much of this type of research

¹¹ Gibbons, M., *The new production of knowledge: the dynamics of science and research in contemporary societies*, London, 1994, SAGE Publications

¹² This is of course often done, and such universities are normally called research universities. It might be noted that Humboldt's analysis applied primarily to the stage of study which we now term post-graduate and the Americans, who were perhaps the first to adopt the Humboldt model explicitly and extensive-

can be conducted outside the university; therefore, it should be spelt out clearly, in each case, why the university is a valuable arena for conducting important parts of such research projects.

5. The interpretative level¹⁴

In a recent study of innovation in the US, Lester and Piore¹⁵ argue that some crucial types of research activities can only thrive in the public spaces provided by the university environment, even though a lot of both pure and applied research (of the analytic type) can also grow outside the walls of academia, in particular within the private industrial sector. In fact, they suggest that an advanced economy cannot thrive for long without the interpretative research environment provided by the universities. This fits well with Whitehead's notion of *imaginative transformation*, that he sees as the crucial ingredient of a university environment.

ly, adapted it primarily to their graduate schools. But it is probably fair to say that my own university, the *University of Iceland*, which for a very long time was primarily a professional school with a number of undergraduate fields of academic subjects, nevertheless felt from its very beginning in 1911 that it was operating on the basis of the Humboldtian ideology, claiming that the institution was clearly a *university* in that sense.

¹³ But there are also other important reasons for combining research and teaching within an institution. Among those are the opportunities to connect academia and industry and to relate theory to real problems and most important the venue the teaching function provides to communicate ongoing research to newcomers to a specialized field.

¹⁴ This is not strictly an argument for the close relationship between teaching and research, but nevertheless an argument for conducting research within the purview of the universities.

¹⁵ Lester, R.K., & Piore, *Innovation, the missing dimension*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004

Assuming this classification to be generally acceptable (at least for the time being) we come to the crucial question: what levels of research activity and consequently what relationship between teaching and research must be present for an institution to be received as a *bona fide* university? Does the institution need to be involved at the *knowledge production level* and if so, why? Or, to ask the question in a different way: why is it not sufficient for an institution to be characterised by the first two or three levels in order to be classified as a proper university? To use modern parlance: is a university that is not a 'research university', not a real university? And why not - considering that the modern university may not be as homogeneous as is sometimes assumed in present discussions?

The unitary character of the university

How do we harmonise our discussion about a multitude of functions, a variety of universities or even multiversities, with an apparently unitary idea of a university?

The volume of university operations has grown exponentially in most western countries during the 20th century¹⁶. This growth is still going on at a considerable speed and has been documented from a number of very different perspectives¹⁷. Such an obvious, dramatic and

¹⁶ Cf. Jonasson, J.T., 'The Predictability of Educational Expansion' in I. Fagerlind, I. Holmesland & G. Stromqvist (Eds), *Higher Education at the Crossroads. Tradition or transformation?* Stockholm, 1999, Institute of International Education, Stockholm University, pp. 113-131

¹⁷ Cf. Jonasson, J.T., 'What determines the expansion of higher education?' in I. Hannibalsson (Ed.), *Rannsóknir I félagsvísindum V*, Reykjavik, 2004, University of Iceland, pp. 275-290; Kerr, C., *The uses of the University* (4th ed). Cambridge, Mass,

pervasive change has now been acknowledged by nearly everybody, often in a very explicit way. Nevertheless, despite this enormous growth and resulting heavy load of work, there is a strong tendency to talk about **'the university'** as a unitary or a homogenous entity based on a number of all-encompassing functions and modalities. And even though we know that this binding of various operations is not really relevant, we still indulge in a global perception of our multi-sided institution – perhaps for two reasons. First, because we want this to be true: indeed, we would like all the institutions we call 'universities' to share the same basic values which they can manifest as common fundamental characteristics – so that we can cherish and defend them forcefully. The other reason is a corollary of the first: we do not quite know how to talk about higher education otherwise; we are not yet accustomed to distinguish between different types of institutions, while taking account of their variety or of the classifications indicated above. If our incapacity to change discourse is true, our problem becomes that, although a wide spectrum of institutions offer many types of higher education, we still consider them as facets of a single phenomenon. It is not clear that they are. In fact, how specific can we be, both about the nature and the extent to which autonomy, academic freedom, excellence, research and the teaching-research nexus is an obliged part of that institution we call a university? Do these many qualities apply equally to all institutions or do they represent generic terms only – with very little

1994, Harvard University Press; Trow, M., 'Problems in the transition from Elite to Mass Higher Education', in *Policies for Higher Education*, Paris, 1974, OECD, and idem, 'From Mass Higher Education to Universal Access: the American advantage', *Minerva*, 37, pp. 303-328

in common – which implies very little thrust and no political bite? I suggest that our hesitations are partly due to the fact that we have not really thought through the link between academic essence and institutional existence in the shaping of universities.¹⁸

Earlier, I have put forward different arguments concerning the teaching-research nexus at universities by introducing several levels or layers of investigative activities. Using the idea of inquiry, research or scholarship as a point of departure it is very easy to argue, and consequently to accept, that serious inquiry (level *one* in the analysis above, i.e., a fundamental attitude of curiosity) is an integral part of every institution of higher education - not to speak of other educational levels as well. Therefore, in addition to teaching, a modern university should nurture ‘enquiry’ as an integral component of its identity. But it is also obvious that each line of reasoning invites a different type of investigative minds, all these approaches being woven into a tapestry of research and teaching that differs from one institution to the next.

Hence, what research rationale, what research involvement are to be considered sufficient to make an institution a university? Would any one of these levels be enough? To the extent that these are hierarchical levels of research involvement, I suggest that, apart from inquiry, *research participation* is necessary, and

¹⁸ It is very difficult to leave this statement without substantial elaboration which I will, however, not undertake. Some people define the university very narrowly and appear not to be burdened with the problems discussed here. Different legislatures also define the tertiary stage in various ways, such as framing their systems as unitary (all institutions defined as universities) or binary (dividing the tertiary sector into universities – still with widely differing characteristics – and polytechnics).

perhaps sufficient, for an educational institution to be classified as a university. Some institutions, however, are aiming higher in the research hierarchy, research participation for some, research training for others, if not knowledge production and advanced scholarship for others still; with their specialised purposes, they would all be correctly classified as universities. In other words, we can have more than one type of modern universities when we accept that there can be qualitative differences in the nature of the research activity undertaken at university and thus differences in the relationship between teaching and research.

But what of the 'research university's' claim (as an institution characterised by knowledge production) to have the exclusive right of the name 'university'? Is it not simply wrong even if institutions emphasising their own research, doctoral training and teaching at all levels are more likely to foster the symbiosis of teaching and research that satisfies the Humboldt-Whitehead criteria taken to be the fundamental characteristics of the university? But these activities should not simply coexist within the same institution. Or, if they did, they could easily pull university institutions below the research training level. In fact, research participation may suffice to satisfy the Humboldt-Whitehead criteria. Conversely it may also be the case that an institution runs ambitious research training programmes in certain departments only, but claims full university status, even if several parts of the institution do not aim so high.¹⁹

¹⁹ The last three sentences are meant to convey the idea that I do not want to treat this issue as a matter of simplistic classification. It is much more complex than that. I am rather suggesting a way to address the problem of defining the university as a family of institutions with reference to a complex notion of the relationship between teaching and research.

The functional rationale for the university

Is the post-Humboldtian notion of universities essentially national or universal (global)?

At a very preliminary level the response to the question is both simple and paradoxical. The fundamental values of the university which are moral, cultural and scientific essentially refer to a paradigm of universality.²⁰ But the pragmatic rhetoric on which state support is based is essentially national (if not regional or local). This discrepancy presents problems and has done so for a long time.

When I follow the history of ‘the idea of the university’, in particular the Humboldtian one, I have the vision of an institution impregnated with learning and wisdom. It is essentially a cultural institution, which has the task of engaging in, cultivating, fostering and transmitting a patrimony that is continuously renewed and updated.²¹ In such a context, research is emphasised as an essential component of the institution’s operation. The university is also an educational institution, and thus has characteristics that distinguish it clearly both from the academies of sciences, and from schools. This notion seems to have considerable affinity with the idea developed by

²⁰ See a discussion of this issue in Páll Skúlason’s ms on *Ethics of Universities*, a paper presented at Bemidji University on 10 August 2005.

²¹ A number of authors have concerned themselves with this and attempted to trace the idea of the university, (see e.g. Kerr, 1987, 1994a, 1994b; Nybom, 2003; Readings, 1996; Ridder-Symoens, 1996; Rothblatt, 1997, 1999; Rothblatt & Wittrock, 1993). Nevertheless, I experience the modern general discussion about the mission of the university as strangely ahistorical and unproblematic.

Newman in his 1852 lectures on ‘The idea of the University’.

But this cultural argument was from the very beginning understood in a nationalistic form – Berlin University in 1810 was to be a counter-model to the Imperial University set up by Napoleon; later, with industrialisation, it acquired also an economic dimension in order to foster national welfare. Thus, instead of ‘knowledge for the sake of cultural development’ (i.e. an argument for science and education) we have ‘science for the sake of national and technological progress’ (an argument combining political and economic purposes). The form of the argument is still the same but there has been a subtle, and as it turns out, a fundamental change in its content.

This change has induced confusion in all the debates about the universities as far as both their goals and the motivation to support them are concerned. The problem is twofold. On one side, the emphasis is on the economic function versus the ethical or cultural (scientific) role but we still talk about the institution as if it were essentially an educational institution cultivating ethical or cultural values; indeed, the university may have become, according to the dominant rhetoric, a training institution, thus restricting education to its technocratic and economic expression. On the other side, the problem is that we tend to cling to the universal reference (ethics, culture and, in particular, science) but that, at the same time, we feel committed to the university as a public institution, obliged by the local or national needs of society rather than by those of mankind in general. In other terms, we are torn between various areas and paths of intellectual involvement.

We should be attentive, anyway, to the clear nationalistic role which the ‘Humboldt university’ was given

by its creators in the early nineteenth century.²² The university was clearly established as a national instrument; it was seen as a prime tool for nation-building, for preserving, enhancing and promoting the national culture of Prussia and then, later in the 19th century, the economic strength of Germany. And similar aims still prevail in many situations of today, in particular under the guise of the university's role as a public service, a function that is constantly being reiterated.²³ The argumentation for state support and, even more, the demand for the empowerment of the universities, is essentially nationalistic still. It was argued, and it still is, that universities are the most important tool for underpinning and building first the basic institutions of the nation-state and then the national economy.²⁴ This would perhaps not cause serious problems if it were not for the fact that prominent ingredients in contemporary proposals for the financial support of universities are the declared needs of important, and relatively expensive, natural and technical sciences.²⁵ These sciences are claimed to be of universal (or at least supra-national) value, but the fact is that in many (and very important) cases, they are perceived of direct (although

²² This was very clear in the German states, but was even more obviously the case with the Napoleonic universities in France.

²³ There is a host of texts that bear witness to this (see as examples Neave, 2000; Weber & Bergan, 2005) or the April 2005 EU recommendation on 'Mobilising European brainpower to achieve the Lisbon objectives'.

²⁴ This argument was very clearly stated by Nybom in 2003 when he noted that von Humboldt may have intended to build essentially an educational or an academic institution, but that he also realised that such an establishment would need pragmatic grounding in order to ensure the support of the State.

²⁵ Here I refer to the establishment of adequate research facilities and not to the teaching part.

non-specific) relevance for the development of the national economy.²⁶ Thus, the proponents of universities, even at regional level, are suffering a kind of schizophrenia characterised by strong national or regional arguments clothed in universal dresses supposed to give an extra glow to the limited specific value universities can draw from the immediate society to which they belong.

To sum up

I have argued that there are important flaws or weaknesses in the contemporary discourse on universities which need to be dealt with. Firstly, I suggested that there is a general consensus that the relationship between teaching and research is fundamental to the university but I also claimed that the reasons for this are lacking and these reasons need to be brought forward, perhaps along the lines given in this paper. Secondly, I maintained that it is unclear whether there is one or many types of universities; I concluded that there are many types of institutions that could rightly be called universities and

²⁶ It must be spelt out that I am here very explicitly distinguishing between the local (national) and the global economy. As this is such a contentious stance to take, it needs to be explained carefully. I accept that the progress of science carries with it a variety of benefits, in particular economic ones, on a global scale and also for each individual society or nation as it is a member of a community of nations. We should all contribute and thus we should all gain. But this rhetoric is certainly not sufficient in the tough arena of local politics. A small community is not going to pour money into ambitious and enormously expensive projects on the grounds that the group will reap the benefits eventually, as the world will gain important understanding of its reality and thus become a better place to live in. It might however finance projects for specific local reasons.

that the so-called 'research university' is just one of them. Thirdly I suggested that the proponents of the universities tend to confound global and local argumentation and that the discrepancy between the somewhat localised national rhetoric of the politicians and the global flavour of the arguments forwarded by academics tends to weaken the case for the universities.

I believe that the university sector and the idea of the university could be better served if we succeed to deal with the weaknesses which I have focused on and if this effort can help the universities to overcome the flaws they suffer from in their daily struggle for life.

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