

DRAFT

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Theme IV : Improving Institutional Governance and Management

Introduction of the theme by Marcel Crochet, Rector Université catholique de Louvain Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium

Introduction

While preparing this introduction, I returned to one of my favorite readings : a small book entitled, in French, “Conceptions de l’université” (University concepts), authored by Jacques Drèze, Professor of economy, and Jean Debelle¹. It was published in Belgium, in 1967, being financed by a group of business leaders who, at the time, were debating about the role of higher education in our country. The book described utilitarian and idealistic concepts of the university : among the latter, a comparison was made between Newman’s idea of a liberal and universal education, which should be intellectual rather than professional, and Jaspers’ concept of a university where research and teaching should be intimately associated. A significant space was devoted to Whitehead who, in his 1929 book entitled “The aims of education”², proposed ideas which today constitute the backbone of our university system. For Whitehead, the future of a nation lies in the narrow bond between its progressive elements of all kinds, in such a way that education influences the public place and vice versa. Universities are the major agents of the fusion of progressive activities into an efficient instrument of progress. Imagination is at the core of Whitehead’s vision of the university. “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”.

The modern university

It is evident that most universities have chosen Whitehead’s thoughts as a vision for today’s higher education. Our universities have little in common with those of the fifties ; they are concerned with their social impact, originating from their students qualifications as well as their own role as an agent of influence and progress. Let me point out some major transformations, which are well documented in Frank Rhodes’ paper on “The university at the millenium”, published in Hirsch and Weber’s book devoted to “Governance in higher education”³.

¹ J. Drèze et J. Debelle, “Conceptions de l’université”, Institut Administration-Université, Fondation Industrie-Université, Bruxelles, 1967

² A.N. Whitehead, “The aims of education”, Williams and Norgate, London, 1929

³ F.H.T Rhodes, “The University at the Millenium”, in W.Z. Hirsch and L. Weber (eds), “Governance in higher education. The university in a state of flux”, Economica, London, 2001

- Quite fortunately, the number of students has known a considerable increase over the last fifty years. The level of education is definitely recognized as a key to personal development and to qualified employment. It is a major victory, but we have only won part of the battle. Investigations indeed show that student population in universities does not reflect social composition ; sons and daughters of poorly educated people tend to reproduce the same family pattern. Innovative strategies will be needed for solving such a crucial problem and for confirming the role of the university as a fantastic instrument of social mobility.
- “Universities have become the essential gateway to and foundation of every major profession.”⁴ Universities must be attentive to new needs of commercial, non-commercial and social enterprises, offer new programs, promote adult education and reorientation. They should, in that respect, avoid Peter Drucker’s reflection that, “when a subject becomes totally obsolete, we make it a required course.”
- In Europe, universities are the major providers of basic research while modern technology and applied science rely on its discoveries. European programs, research contracts with enterprises, spin-off incubators are efficient actors of economic recovery. Regional applied research centers are also financed by European programs.
- “The university and its stakeholders” has become a most appropriate expression for representing the university which opens the doors of its ivory tower and defines a new association with its environment.
- Universities are also concerned with social services. Health networks associated with university hospitals, continuing education for school teachers, orientation centers for secondary schools are typical examples.

Initiative, analysis, imagination : such are the keywords for the moving university today. Over the last five years, our task has gained in intensity due to our own collective momentum : the Bologna process requires a major commitment in untraditional matters. The emerging student and academic mobility, systematic evaluations, accreditation procedures will reveal our quality. While competing for the best students and the best professors, universities will need to cooperate and make difficult choices, convinced as we are that we cannot be good in everything. Simultaneously, research trends proper to the 6th European Framework program will require new associations.

How are we going to cope on the long run with such transformations ? Frank Rhodes rightly observes that “in spite of these major changes in responsibility, membership and complexity, the university has shown almost no change in its organization, management and governance, and only modest change in its teaching style”. The matter is complicated, because we should simultaneously remember Whitehead’s warning that “the combination of imagination and learning normally requires some leisure, freedom from restraint, freedom from harassing worry, some variety of experiences, and the stimulation of other minds diverse in opinion and diverse in equipment”.

Major challenges

Quite clearly, we know where to go, but we don’t really know how. The university is a world of increasing complexity ; this is confirmed by a number of qualified staff who have served the university for several decades. A faster race is imposed year after year in order to

⁴ F.H.T Rhodes, op. cit.

meet new requirements. The Bologna process does not render the task easier : deans and department heads are presently coping with the elaboration of new programs, promoting mobility, preparing joint degrees. Enterprises under such pressure would undoubtedly request the help of business consultants, but we know the distance between their culture and that of the university. We need to face ourselves a number of challenges proper to higher education.

- Sun Tzu said that victory will be given to the one whose troops are gathered around a common objective. Our troops contain a fairly large number of officers of all ages who are very much concerned about their own career. It is recognized that faculty adhesion to our objectives is indispensable, but, according to James Duderstadt, “faculty loyalties are generally first to their scholarly discipline, then to their academic unit, and only last to their institution.”⁵ He correctly observes that “while faculty members are –and should always remain- the cornerstone of the university’s academic activities, they rarely have deep understanding or will accept the accountability necessary for the many other missions of the university in modern society”.
- Departments constitute essential circles where action takes place. Their efficiency increases with their feeling of association with the project they execute. Communication of a strategic vision must come with a capacity of local autonomy while, at the same time, traditional departments are little receptive to change such as interdisciplinary work. An ideal balance must obviously be found between centralization and decentralization.
- The vision of a university must center on the student. I hate to call them clients, customers or consumers of our educational services. They are partners in education and, as such, have the right to be involved in university decisions. How far ? For what type of decisions ? The risk is obvious that they become some sort of union facing the management or that a dominant ideology change the course of the university while we endeavor to establish a true partnership. We must choose between a collegial vs. an adversarial process.
- The administrative staff is the keystone of university management. Do they receive appropriate recognition ? Should university government be dominated by the sole academics ?
- In European universities, where tuition is generally low, governments constitute the major funding body. Universities depend upon their good will and their financial health ; additionally, governments enact laws on degrees, habilitations and related matters. Imagine that, in Belgium, our government is forced, as a consequence of the Bologna process, to modify a law of 1835, slightly amended in 1929 ! What should be our freedom with respect to public power ? Typically, we are the first to perceive the need for new degrees, for interdisciplinary domains, for new forms of habilitations while our projects relate to a distant future which exceeds by far the duration of a government.
- An active exchange is needed with our stakeholders : local authorities, business leaders, social partners. Their horizon however does not necessarily coincide with ours while we expect from them as much as they do from us.
- Last but not least, are we prepared, as rectors and university presidents, to cope with such a high degree of complexity ? Selected from the academic seraglio for our institutional loyalty, well qualified for research and teaching, are we trained to manage educational enterprises confronted with growth and strategic choices ?

⁵ J.J. Duderstadt, “Fire, ready, aim !”, in W.Z. Hirsch and L. Weber (eds), op. cit.

Conclusion

Quite clearly, we are all facing the same problems. We are also aware that some universities have found appropriate strategies for dealing with some of the challenges which I have listed above. Typically, I have met Scandinavian colleagues who are quite satisfied with their way of coping with student participation. Time has come to exchange our best practices while preserving our diversity. Time has come also to define a common attitude with respect to our governments, as far as our freedom of initiative and our independence with respect to a changing world is concerned. Time has come to preserve autonomy but to simultaneously accept accountability with respect to our funding bodies and our stakeholders.

Above all, we should preserve our values which, for me, were so well described by Professor George Steiner in his book entitled "Errata : an examined life"⁶. "A university or college worth that name is simply an institution in which the student rubs shoulders with the aura and the menace of excellence and feels vulnerable to these. It is a matter of proximity, of vision, of audition."

I hope that our discussions will confirm such a generous vision for the future of our European universities.

⁶ G. Steiner, "Errata, Récit d'une pensée", Gallimard, Paris, 1997