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**Higher education for a democratic  
culture – the public responsibility**

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# Multiple role of higher education (HE)

*Higher education has had a multiple role in a society; it has been*

- an agent of scientific, technological, economic etc. development;
- a place of individual shaping and cultural development in broadest sense;
- a site of citizenship and democratic culture...

It is impossible to separate these dimensions one from another. What constitutes higher education it is precisely the totality of its proved multiple role.

# HE, responsibility and democracy (I.)

The field of *democratic culture* could be the place where public responsibility *for* HE and public responsibility *of* HE meet one another in the most appropriate way.

Institutional contributions based upon:

- *epistemological grounds* (e.g. criticism and rational reasoning, etc.);
- *specific fields of studies* (not only social studies, history or education – but any field of study);
- their “*inner*” *practice of democratic culture* (e.g. in terms of institutional governance, student involvement, relations to the environment, etc.).

# HE, responsibility and democracy (II.)

Public authorities contribution:

- providing *best conditions* to enable institutions to cope successfully with challenges (e.g. legislation, financing, etc.) ;
- enabling not only the transfer and dissemination of *technologically and economically* important results but also the transfer and dissemination of results which could contribute to *strengthening democratic culture* in modern societies at large.

Now, is the idea of a democratic culture and its relation to (higher) education a (post)modern one, divorced from any tradition and heritage?

## Historical roots

“Just as there must also be preparatory training for all skills and capacities, and a process of preliminary habituation to the work of each profession, it is obvious that there must also be training for the activities of virtue”.

“But since there is but one aim for the entire state, it follows that education must be one and the same for all, and that the responsibility for it must be a public one, not the private affair which it now is”.

Aristotle (*The Politics*).

# Past and present

This discussion is, after two millenniums and a half, only more complex, intensive and important:

- on one hand, HE today is the most reliable tool for *promotion of an individual* (“private affaire”);
- on the other hand, HE has been always providing also “training for the *activities of virtue*” in broadest sense: economic wealth *and* cultural development, better technological support *and* better health care, etc.;
- last but not least, *critical thinking* and *democratic awareness* have always been more or less directly connected with (higher) education.

# Critical thinking – an exercise

*Do (post)modern times split off circumstances which had been interlacing academia and science into ‘external’ power structures, Ideology and Myth?*

We may cheer up today to split off inhumanities, stamping down human dignity etc. of the past but *we should not forget the past* – for the sake of our present and future.

Profound political (e.g. processes of 1990) or technological (e.g. communication technologies) changes and ‘the progress’ achieved have made only a step towards encountering new problems.

# Democracy and culture

Since 1990, many HE institutions have been profoundly reformed on basis of new legislation but a longer period has been needed for ‘the reconciliation’.

Even more, new issues have grown up during this period, often overgrowing the initial problem.

*What have we learned?* Not only that enrooting new legal norms in the everyday functioning of institutions is *a process* but also that legal norms and institutions depend on everyday people’s practice, *their culture*.



# Democracy, culture and indifference

Today, we encounter a particular paradox – not only in higher education: *as formal possibilities for people (students) to engage and participate in society and (HE) institutions are broader as less people are practising them.*

Can we discuss culture in this context also as *culture of democratic indifference*, perhaps as *culture of indifference for democracy*?

Is there any particular role of higher education in disputing this paradox/problem?

# Democracy: formal structures vs. culture

*The Plantan Report* (2002): “Formal institutional structures and arrangements are a *necessary*, but *not sufficient* condition for greater democratic participation.”

The Report demonstrates that participation in governance of our universities is not what might be hoped for and expected, that students mostly do not know enough about their rights and that faculty often do not find reasons and do not know arguments to connect higher education and democracy.

# Democratic society, communicative society

We are at one of central points in discussing relationship between HE and democracy today.

It is clear that democracy at university could not be an 'imposed' or 'imparted' value: it would be against epistemological grounds and scientific discourse as well as against the norms of modern democratic societies.

Not only the *norms* of modern *democratic* societies but also the *epistemology* of the age of modern *communicative* society argue: *democracy could not be an extrinsic supplement to (higher) education but it is its complex inner value.*

# Opening 'social dimension' in HE policy

Today, the role which HE can play in developing and maintaining a democratic culture is connected to the *issues of higher education policy*.

European countries have become aware that the potential of their universities depends more and more on their increased *co-operation* as well as on *transparency* and *compatibility* of national HE systems.

A reform of higher education structures is an obvious result of this awareness; however, *it shouldn't be observed instrumentally only but in relation to shared basic values as well*.