

# **SOCIALLY RELEVANT AND SOCIALLY RESPONSIBLE HIGHER EDUCATION: A DISPUTED GOAL**

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## **Abstract**

Higher education is expected to be socially relevant. However, there is a controversial discourse in both higher education policy and in higher education research, how striving for 'quality' according to theoretical and methodological criteria can co-exist with efforts of ensuring the relevance of academic work. Academics are frequently accused of harbouring 'ivory tower' objectives without sufficiently paying attention to social expectations. In reverse, many academics view public calls for relevance as aimed at subordinating higher education under presumed needs of society instead of encouraging innovative contributions to society. In recent years, terms such as the 'service function' or 'third function' are employed on an increasing basis. They suggest that higher education should serve society not only through its core functions of teaching and research but also through various kinds of direct involvement in societal actions. This requires universities to clarify their understanding of 'social responsibility': They have to examine how direct involvement in social action can be justified as being based on academic expertise.

**Keywords:** Social relevance of higher education, social responsibility, service function of higher education, academic freedom, employability

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Terms such as 'social relevance' and 'social responsibility' of higher education have a positive normative undercurrent in the public discourse. We note three different arenas of public discussion in this framework.

- First, institutions of higher education and scholars are often encouraged to shape their core activities, i.e. teaching and research, more strongly than in the past in such a way that they visibly serve technological innovation, economic growth, societal wellbeing, and cultural enhancement (cf. Cummings 2006; Brennan 2007; Cummings & Teichler 2015).
- Second, higher education is encouraged to take note of its implicit social consequences. For example, higher education provides financial boosts for the locality of a university, transforms the values of youth, is part of a social selection system and, thus, might also encourage learners to become a 'homo economicus' or a 'status seeker', and contribute – as a 'producer' of knowledge, which is the basis of technology – to sustainability or destruction of nature.

- Therefore, higher education is often encouraged to reflect and possibly underscore or try to redress the prevailing social consequences.
- Third, the call for 'social responsibility' is increasingly specified in recent years as a suggestion to supplement the two core functions of higher education – teaching and research – with a 'third function'. Different objectives are named in this framework, e.g. targeted technology transfer, civic education and practical engagement of scholars and students, active contribution to development in disadvantaged regions of the world and an overall broad range of 'services' of higher education to society (cf. Culum, Roncevic & Ledic 2013).

However, two accusations are frequent in this discourse. First, universities are characterised as 'ivory tower' – thereby referring to the plants covering the walls of some traditional university buildings in the United Kingdom and in the East of the United States – and blamed for primarily being interested in the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake. Interest in 'quality' and academic reputation is criticised as being stronger than care about 'relevance' and 'efficiency' of academic work. Second, teaching and learning is accused of emphasising intellectual competences rather than those needed to cope with the future professional tasks and varied life spheres. In those cases, not necessarily a neglect of issues of relevance is claimed, but rather 'wrongly relevant university' in the view of the critics. Accordingly, higher education is expected to make ethical choices on how to serve society.

Calls for socially relevant and socially responsible higher education have intensified worldwide over the last two decades. Terms such as 'knowledge society' and 'knowledge economy' for characterising overall trends or 'employability' for suggesting reforms in teaching and learning has to be mentioned in this context. Furthermore, calls that higher education should help to counteract environmental destruction, reduce global inequality and increase intercultural understanding in a world characterised both by increasing international communication and by intercultural mistrust should also be mentioned. However, risks are also pointed out, which higher education faces in putting social relevance and responsibility on the agenda. Possible losses regarding open searches for the truth and in the generation of knowledge, which is not anticipated in targeted research strategies and a subordination of knowledge generation as well as dissemination to 'mainstreams', i.e. to those in power, to the most vocal political voices or to the fashions of the 'Zeitgeist'.

The aim of this article is to discuss necessities and dangers implied in issues of social relevance and social responsibility of higher education. The following considerations are taken for granted from the outset, that higher education is bound to be 'relevant' to society, but that no agreement can be reached among the actors as how it should serve society. However, they are based on the



hope that the discourse in this domain might eventually become more rational: the mutual accusations of 'ivory tower' approaches versus blind subordination to external demands might give way to viable ways of reflection.

## **2. 'ACADEMIC FREEDOM' AND THE HISTORY OF HIGHER EDUCATION**

It is generally assumed that higher education today is shaped strongly by previous efforts of moulding the character of universities. Some experts point to the fact that there have been institutions of higher learning in various parts of the world for more than a thousand years. Others consider the establishment of medieval universities in Europe, in Bologna, Paris or other places as the real historical starting point, whereby a conflict between 'truth' and 'power' has been in the cradle of the university. Finally, many experts point at the widely used term 'modern university' thereby suggesting that characteristic profiles, which have emerged about two centuries ago, notably in England, France and Germany as still important today for higher education all over the world (see Rüegg 2000-2011). Looking back at least two centuries seems to be appropriate in this framework, because many key words of today's discourse on the function of higher education reflects the concepts of modernisation of that time, e.g. 'unity of teaching and research', 'autonomy of university', and 'academic freedom'.

Occasionally, however, such historical retrospect turns out to be an idealisation of the past with either positive or negative undercurrents. For example, the "unity of research and teaching" and the "academic freedom" advocated for at the foundation of the University of Berlin in 1810 are often depicted as indicating a 'golden age' for the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake. One is inclined to overlook that the concepts of higher education at that time developed under conditions of major hegemonic wars, during a period when many established universities were closed and major societal transformations occurred. Transformations such as a decline of feudal and religious powers, the first steps towards meritocracy, initial moves towards democracy and the start of industrialisation – all elements of 'modernisation'.

The person who had the strongest impact on the 'idea' of the modern university, i.e. Wilhelm von Humboldt, was not an academic, but rather an enlightened person who happened to be a high-level governmental administrator. He promulgated four principles of the new university: 'unity of research and teaching', 'solitude and freedom', 'community of scholars and students', and 'Bildung durch Wissenschaft' (possibly translated as enlightening personality through research-based intellectual discourse). The principle of 'unity of research and teaching' is most often named as shaping the modern university. Accordingly, teaching and learning is most creative, if the teachers are concurrently involved in the generation of new knowledge and research is stimulated by a discourse between teachers and learners. Additionally, the Humboldtian concept had a pervasive influence on claiming

that progress in generating, preserving and disseminating systematic knowledge cannot be expected without assurance of 'academic freedom' – often characterised as absence of intrusive pressures into academic work (Shils 1991). Such pressures might be described in terms of actors, e.g. political, religious, managerial or collegial powers; in terms of principles, e.g. consensual and conformist, ideological and efficiency pressures as well as pressures to follow academic 'mainstreams' or to be visibly useful. Von Humboldt was not a 'hero' of 'ivory tower' beliefs. Universities were not expected to serve only academia but also the 'state', as one termed it two centuries ago. However, government should not push for visible relevance, but rather serve as a 'guardian angel' of academic freedom. As we might say today, academic activities might be most meaningful for society if academics do not strive intentionally for relevance but rather engage freely for academic enhancement. Thus, 'relevance' was not drummed up but was implicitly already a key issue at the time.

### **3. MAJOR 'RELEVANCE' ISSUES OF TEACHING AND LEARNING**

In spite of the constant claims of the virtue of a close link between research and teaching, we note that the discourses related to 'relevance' and 'social responsibility' had their own dynamics with respect to teaching and with respect to research. Regarding curricula, teaching and learning, the university cannot strive for quality of educational provisions and enhancement of students' competences without having their prospective professional work in mind. Most former students are employed after graduation in occupations requiring competences beyond mere academic knowledge (only a few graduates become junior academics). All over the world, some fields of study are closely linked to certain professions (e.g. medicine, law and engineering) and others are less closely linked. This notwithstanding, relationships between study and the world of work are similar in some respects across disciplines (see Teichler 2009):

- Intellectual enhancement and research-based academic reasoning is generally a valuable basis for professional performance in high-level positions in modern societies.
- Study programmes foster competences valuable both for professional work outside the domain of higher education and for research forming the basis for future academic work.
- Graduates must be able to understand the links and the tensions between academic problem solving and professional problem solving – irrespective of whether the institutions of higher education explicitly address professional problem solving in the course of study or leave this to the students, the graduates and the employers.
- Preparation for high-level occupations substantially differs from other vocational training. Graduates from institutions of higher education cannot be trained only to master the conventional rules and tools of professional practice but also have to learn to call into question the



- traditional practice. They are trained to be both conventional professionals as well as sceptics, critics and innovators.
- Professional preparation in the course of study is viewed as being closely intertwined with learning value for personality development and cultural enhancement, for coping with the daily requirements of civilisation and for acting responsibly in a variety of roles (e.g. citizens or family members).

Yet, we note substantial differences across countries, within countries across institutions of higher education and within institutions across individual fields of study. For example, direct experiences in the world of work during the course of study are viewed in some countries as valuable across disciplines to understand relationships between academic approaches and practical problem-solving, while in other countries they are considered to be meaningful only in a few fields and is mostly left to learning after graduation. Similarly, in spite of worldwide similar rhetoric about internationalisation and globalisation, we observe substantial differences to the extent to which temporary student mobility during the course of study is encouraged, intercultural understanding is striven for and 'internationalisation at home' takes roots (see Teichler 2004; Knight 2008).

The discussion on the relevance of teaching and learning got an enormous drive in the 1960s. The view spread that higher education expansion – in terms of entry and graduation rates – would stimulate economic growth, but concerns remained that expansion would lead to 'over-education'. Both views are quite utilitarian, expansion as a motor of economic growth and as endangering are a close 'match' between demands for highly educated labour and the respective supply. However, views changed when it became visible that a balance between demand and supply did not work out well – because the demand of the employment system could not be predicted well and because the pressures of 'social demand' grew, i.e. the increasing wishes of the people to enrol in higher education. Finally, one could note that the expansion seemingly enhancing students' competences beyond the immediate needs of the employment system opened up opportunities for universities to serve society in a broader way (cf. Wolf 2002; Teichler 2009).

After some years of discussion about the pros and cons of expansion, attention shifted towards the issue of diversity. A widespread consensus emerged that higher education has to diversify in order to serve the talents, motives and job prospects that seemed to become more varied in the process of expansion. However, views and policies remained different across countries, as far as diversification is concerned:

The 'vertical' diversity of quality and reputation between higher education institutions and study programmes remained extremely steep in some countries or became steeper, while it was 'flat' and remained so in other countries. 'Horizontal' diversity in terms of different substantive thrusts of

study programmes was encouraged in some countries and discouraged in others. Some countries opted for formal diversity by creating or reinforcing different institutional types, while others primarily emphasised diversity according to the levels of study programmes and degrees (Teichler 2007).

The calls for increased diversification, as a rule, started off from the assumption that the traditional university sector – often called 'elite higher education' – was characterised in most advanced countries by a close link between teaching and research and by a strong 'academic' emphasis on study programmes. Diversification, in turn, was assumed to lead to greater provision of short and/or more applied study programmes expected to prepare directly for professional tasks.

Actually, however, no clear divide developed between university programmes under moderate pressures to be socially relevant and 'short-cycle' or 'non-university' programmes being strongly geared to be directly useful. On the one hand, many observers, however, pointed out that 'mass higher education' tends to suffer from an inferiority complex vis-à-vis the 'elite' sector and that 'academic drift' was a widespread phenomenon, i.e. the tendency of 'non-university higher education' to imitate the thrust of the institutions at the apex of the prestige ladder. On the other hand, a 'vocational drift' was by no means infrequent at universities, i.e. efforts to adapt study programmes more directly to presumed demands of the world of work in order to improve their students' employment prospects.

Over time, efforts intensified to strengthen both the quality and relevance of study conditions and provisions across disciplines. Steps were taken to increase the academics' teaching competences. Higher education became more strongly involved in continuing professional education. Teaching and learning was increasingly supported by professional services, e.g. guidance, counselling and 'career services'. Conditions were improved for students intending to temporarily study abroad. We noted a gradual move from 'teaching' to 'learning' and from 'knowledge' towards 'competences'. Practice-orientation spread in study programmes that explicitly addressed links and tensions between academic knowledge and practical problem solving.

Since the late 1990s, calls are widespread to change curricula, teaching and learning in order to enhance the students' 'employability' (Knight & Yorke 2003). This term is often used as a call for subordinating higher education under the currently dominant expectations of the employment system and for doing whatever might maximise employment rewards (e.g. income, status and fringe benefits), rather than work rewards (e.g. interesting and 'meaningful' work as well as work linked to one's own competences). However, there are voices and interpreting 'employability' as a call to reflect what curricula, teaching and learning mean for the students' future in general and to opt for varied solutions. These solutions range from putting less emphasis on professional preparation and underlining more strongly the



critical function of the university to strengthening entrepreneurial reasoning and the establishment of new areas of specialisation in tune with the emergence of new professions.

#### **4. MAJOR 'RELEVANCE' ISSUES OF RESEARCH**

Views on the research function of the university are quite controversial. While teaching and learning always requires some compromise between being inwards and outwards looking as well as between the views of individual academics and the need to offer study programmes collaboratively, research is the arena for which some academics claim the highest degree of academic freedom. It is also where a more direct clash occurs between the imperatives of the knowledge system and expected utility of research. This holds true for higher education in general, irrespective of the variety of thrusts and the cultures across the disciplines.

After World War II, major debates spread across this domain. The atrocities of the Nazi regime reinforced the view that academic freedom has to be strengthened to avoid a subordination of academics under political leadership. For example, the constitution of the Federal Republic of Germany provided an exceptional legal guarantee of academic freedom. In contrast, views spread that scholars should be socially engaged in order to avoid social misuse of knowledge. For example, the threats of the nuclear bomb and other military devices became a major issue for scholars in the 1950s and the dangers of environmental destruction since the 1970s.

The debates on the dynamics of the knowledge systems and the expectations of relevance have always been linked to that on academic power. The professoriate tends to believe that quality and creativity of research are most likely to be enhanced, if academics – notably senior academics – coordinate and control the inner affairs of the universities themselves. Obviously, however, the power of the academic profession eroded over time and other key actors tend to call more strongly for a visible social relevance of higher education.

A balance between the demands of the logic of the knowledge system and of societal expectations seemed to be striven for with the help of a relatively clear divide between 'basic' and 'applied' research. Accordingly, the university was primarily in charge of 'basic' research – driven predominantly by logics of knowledge systems. In contrast, higher education institutions pursued research close to practical utilisation, for which the term 'universities of applied sciences' spread across various European countries, by other publicly supported research institutes and by the 'research and development' (R&D) sector in industry. Accordingly, universities should only play an indirect role and other institutions a direct role vis-à-vis the demands of economy and society.

The widespread student protests in the late 1960s blamed professors for being too inwards looking and overlooking the role research that they were and were not conducting, played in shaping the world. Though the protests did not succeed in reaching directly what they had called for, they had an influence insofar as they contributed to a loss of trust in a self-regulatory professorial regime. Since the 1980s, various modes of evaluation in higher education were established in many countries, which can be described as a deliberate mix of self-reflection and control devices (Cavalli 2007). Concurrently, the power of management was strengthened in many countries, and both, supra institutional and intra-institutional steering became dominated by mechanisms of incentives and sanctions. For example, decreasing basic funding of universities and individual scholars increased the needs to raise funds from outside sources and from competitive research promotion systems, as well as through performance-based pay of academics and the reduction of long-term job security. In addition, the view lost momentum that the world of research and scholarship could be divided relatively clearly into 'basic' and 'applied' research. According to a publication by Gibbons et al. (1994), which gained enormous popularity, two 'worlds' persisted ('mode 1' and 'mode 2'), but less contrastingly (see also Nowotny, Scott & Gibbons 2001).

The growing role of evaluation and of competitive funding as such does not determine the extent to which research is driven by the logics of the knowledge system or by external demands. The rhetoric aimed at explaining the rationales of evaluation and incentive steering suggests that 'quality' of research, i.e. an academic criterion, is the highest criterion. Similarly, the emphasis placed on 'peer reviewed' publications and other mechanisms of assessment suggests at first glance that the 'academic' values are at the forefront. However, many observers believe, first, that the new steering mechanisms push scholars to be concerned about 'performance' according to whatever criterion. Second, the political paradigms of 'knowledge society' and 'knowledge economy' gained momentum. As technological and economic success becomes increasingly dependent on 'knowledge', institutions of higher education are expected to serve these demands more directly than ever before (Etzkowitz & Leydesdorff 1997; Sörlin & Vessuri 2007).

Since the beginning of the 21st century, a new issue attracts enormous attention in the public discussion. 'Rankings' of 'world-class universities' moved into the limelight, whereby the research function – however to a varying extent – dominates the scene (Shin, Toukoushian & Teichler 2011). Irrespective of the diversity of conceptual, methodological and political arguments, experts tend to underscore three features.

First, the popularity of the 'rankings' suggests that the quality and relevance of higher education is primarily an issue of the top, while mass higher education seems to be more or less irrelevant. Second, the 'rankings' have fuelled a competition among institutions to raise their position on the ranking list,



whereby efforts prevail to imitate those in the limelight. Third, 'rankings' of universities – rather than of departments, research units or individual scholars – suggest that quality within higher education depends very much on local institutional aggregate. There is less of a consensus, though, among experts regarding the rationales and the impact of 'rankings' of 'world-class universities'. While some observers see more attention being paid to academic quality as such, others view today's debate on quality as strongly driven by 'utilitarian' notions. We might conclude that the diversity indicates ambivalence: Neither 'quality' nor 'relevance' dominates clearly, thus leaving room for varying options. Furthermore, in those respects national policies differ substantially from country to country (Meek, Teichler & Kearney 2009). Moreover, individual scholars, units and institutions of higher education are often vocal and successful in pursuing other rationales.

## 5. THE 'THIRD MISSION' OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Terms such as 'third function', 'third role', 'service function', etc., have gained enormous popularity in recent years. They all indicate that institutions of higher education are or should be engaged in something beyond the first two functions, i.e. generating, preserving and disseminating knowledge through teaching and research. As a rule, these terms refer to the direct interaction between higher education and society or the direct involvement of higher education in social actions beyond the arena of teaching and research (Boyer 1990; Barnett 2005; Culum et al. 2013), and they advocate a substantial social responsibility of higher education. Three major directions tend to be named.

- In many instances, links to the world of industry and business are underscored, whereby 'technology transfer' and interactions between 'higher education and the region' (OECD 2007) are often named as core activities.
- Others recommend 'civic links' with the community – often engagement in practical community work during the course of study – that might help educate students to be constructive citizens in the democratic society (cf. Teichler 2008).
- Finally, emphasis is often placed in this context on university involvement in the solution of salient problems of society – e.g. poverty reduction, aid to developing countries, measures against environmental destruction or care for 'sustainable development' (cf. Gough & Scott 2007).

Obviously, some of such activities are strongly rewarded by the outside world and have intruded upon the inner normative world of academia easily at a time when success in fundraising has become one of the most important criteria in higher education in assessing its own 'quality' and 'relevance'. The term 'third mission', in contrast, is often employed in calls for the active involvement of higher education in social issues, the stakeholders of which are not those in power in society and are not able to fund the university. Higher education is expected to do something in areas in which no conventional rewards are

assured. The scholars themselves should not merely listen to what stakeholders in society expect but rather should play a pro-active role in defining its social responsibility and in taking action respectively.

The calls for a 'third function' have remained controversial. According to some critics, activities in this domain could undermine the credibility of higher education because they would be based only to a limited extent on the theoretical and methodological authority of academia. Moreover, involvement in such activities could imply an expertocratic claim that academics and students are the avant-garde of a good society. While teaching and research aiming to be relevant might be too strongly steered by external expectations, the 'third functions' might be shaped too strongly by the wishes of the academic world to shape society according to their convictions.

## 6. CONCLUSION

The discourse on the 'social relevance' and 'social responsibility' suggests that higher education can only function properly if a balance of inwards looking and outwards looking is intended. If inwards looking dominates, as the term 'ivory tower university' suggests, the world does not benefit substantially from the inner enhancement of knowledge. If, in contrast, universities are driven completely by expectations to 'deliver' to society, their actual contributions to society may lack creativity, innovation and constructive critique.

This balance – between enhancing the inner logic of the knowledge systems with respect to theories, methods and disciplinary as well as interdisciplinary knowledge and preparing students for future work and conducting research that is ultimately useful for technological progress, economic growth, societal well-being and cultural enhancement – is vulnerable. A creative mix of distance to society – von Humboldt's 'solitude and freedom' – and interaction with society is needed.

The balance is endangered by the attitudes and behaviour of the academic system. Scholars often pay so much attention to 'academic freedom', 'pursuit of knowledge for its own sake' and 'quality' according to 'academic' criteria that they are bound to be accused of neglecting the needs of society. In reverse, it is endangered by dogmatic and ideological external expectation. Universities are more or less prescribed what they ought to 'deliver' and what they should not be critical of. Alternatively, 'utilitarian' pressures with clearly set expected results are so strong that genuine potentials of a creative knowledge system are bound to fade away.

Three dangers regarding a proper and creative balance are often voiced today. First, pressures to 'deliver' to society are often viewed as too strong, thereby undermining creativity, innovation and critical thinking. Second, the external pressures are often characterised as lopsided – mostly in favour of traditional views of technological progress and economic growth in



economically advanced countries, thereby contributing to military threats, environmental destruction, disregard of sustainable development, neglect of knowledge in areas not closely linked to economic and political power and harm for poorer countries of the world. Third, so much attention has recently been paid to 'excellence' and 'world-class universities' that the needs of a mass knowledge society are not taken care of and that diversity is under constant threat of being undermined by the imitation of the top.

'Responsibility' under these conditions means that somebody observes how higher education fares in its vulnerable state of balance and that somebody points out dangers and calls for measures to counteract these dangers. In employing the term 'responsibility', we indicate that we do not trust just in 'invisible hands' taking care of such a balance. Intensive reflection, careful analysis and creative ideas are needed for re-establishing the necessary balance under changing conditions. 'Social responsibility' means that external expectations have to be taken seriously, even though one knows that simple subordination under the dominant views of the needs of society are likely to destroy creativity, innovative ideas and constructive critical thought. As only some important external expectations are taken care of by power and money, higher education institutions themselves have to strive for a better balance of the external expectations they respond to. The term 'third mission' gained popularity not the least, because it calls upon the universities themselves to explore the multitude of manifested and latent external expectations they ought to respond to.

A recent survey of the academic profession in almost twenty countries shows that relatively large numbers of academics believe that they can serve both the internal demands of academic quality and the need to be socially relevant in teaching and research (see Teichler, Arimoto & Cummings 2013). They note divergent pressures, but many of them believe that striving for academic rationales and serving external demands in a responsible way is not mutually exclusive.

Higher education in middle-income and low-income countries has an advantage vis-à-vis higher education in advanced countries. It can learn from the mistakes of the predecessors. Nevertheless, we often observe 'over-expectations', enormous pressure to 'deliver' and eventually disappointment. Frequently, higher education becomes an "endangered species" (Vessuri & Teichler 2008) by losing the necessary support because it does not prove as useful as expected.

One might argue that higher education in these countries is even more in need of freedom from pressures to be visibly relevant in order to be eventually creative and imaginative in ways, which those calling for visible relevance never could have anticipated.

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