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# The Challenges of the University Concerning the Health and Geopolitical Crises

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**Abstract:** *This article is not a purely theoretical approach. Instead, it results from observations and reflections based on fifty years of teaching in French and foreign universities. I am fortunate to continue this activity as an emeritus professor and through several expert reports on the governance of certain higher education institutions and the current challenges facing our universities.*

*After recalling the three fundamental objectives of any university, this article evokes recurring problems. Then it sets out the main avenues for the necessary pedagogical and organisational adaptation. This necessity has been rekindled by the recent health crisis and the geopolitical conflict resulting from Russia's intervention in Ukraine.*

**Keywords:** *university education, knowledge industry, investment or human capital, university governance, professional integration*

## Introduction

### The Three Objectives of a University

The birth of the first university in Constantinople (Pandidakterion) in 425 A.D. – though closer to an old school than to a university in the medieval sense – was followed, during the 11<sup>th</sup> century, by the creation in Europe by the first great university: Alma mater studiorum in 1088, which became the University of Bologna; the University of Oxford from 1098; the University of Modena in 1175; Universitas magistrorum et scholarium Parisiensis, which in 1200 became the University of Paris (the Collège de Sorbonne, one of the components of the original university, was founded in 1257); the University of Cambridge in 1209; the University of

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Salamanca in 1218; Medical School of Montpellier in 1220 (then the university in 1289; the University of Coimbra in 1290; University of Rome (La Sapienza) in 1303...

Between the 15<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, the universities multiplied and diversified their teaching, which until then had focused on theology and canon law. At the same time, they moved from the control of the Christian Churches to that of the States. Initially a source of knowledge for a few initiates, our universities became a vector of social promotion for the benefit of an elite [of a particular social class] before being conceived today as a knowledge industry that must produce more and more capital or human investment.

As such, the university mission requires the achievement of three objectives: a cognitive objective – the production of knowledge; a pedagogical objective – the transmission of this knowledge; and finally, a democratic objective – the dissemination of its action to the most significant number of people, regardless of their social background.

However, many universities have long been suffering from a malaise arising from an offer that could be better adapted to less and less trained and motivated students. The accentuation of this malaise, under the effects of the recent health crisis and the current geopolitical tension, requires a rapid pedagogical and institutional response.

## **I. Problems That Have Long Been Specific to Universities**

### **A • University training is often unsuitable**

In charge of producing knowledge, some training courses and their teaching may not transmit it operationally. This transmission is inseparable from the subject's assimilation. Following the Socratic method, the excellent teacher differs from the one who knows but helps the other to know. It is only possible to transmit knowledge if it is received and understood, i.e. assimilated by its recipient. Only the assimilation of the knowledge provided generates the investment or human capital essential for growth.

The transmission of knowledge must be a combinatorial and not an additive process. It is not only a question of accumulating knowledge but also of linking it together, combining it to respond to a given theoretical or practical problem. Kant defined intelligence as the ability to make detours, i.e., an aptitude to create relations between various elements of the same discipline or between more or less related disciplines.

Some university courses limit themselves to giving students additional and more in-depth knowledge than that transmitted by secondary education. In contrast, they should also give an analytical capacity and method in research and professional functions. Although this [what are we talking about?] often requires a certain degree of abstraction, it must always be adapted to concrete cases to sustain the audience's attention by showing them its use of it.

Some courses also seem too closed, not arousing the audience's curiosity about other disciplines more or less related to the original one chosen by the student. It is not a question of knowing everything but of communicating with those who know something else or who know differently.

### **B • A less and less motivated student body**

An individual's motivation is the natural force that triggers his or her determined commitment to a particular action or activity. It is the natural force that drives him/her to act not only for him/herself but also for others for reproduction or social motivation. However, the image of the motivated and studious student pursuing university studies to obtain the desired education has deteriorated over time. Indeed, the evolution of the socio-economic and family context, the recent health crisis and the current geopolitical conflict have weakened and demotivated him.

It is increasingly difficult for them to find their way, training and a job that suits them, given a potentially unfavourable economic climate and a frequent mismatch between the qualifications offered and those required. In addition, since they often have to work to meet their needs and finance their studies, they need more time to pursue them. So, in many cases, they try to learn for the sake of learning rather than for understanding.

In social and family terms, today's students often suffer from a less secure and more exclusive framework, which is a source of a lack of serenity, autonomy and personality that is detrimental to their necessary social integration. Such difficulties explain many drop-outs in the first year and too many marks below 5 out of 20! (1)

### **C • Insufficiently efficient knowledge production**

The unsuitability of specific university courses, coupled with lower student motivation, hinders knowledge production and broadens the knowledge field incumbent on the university.

It should be remembered that the Lisbon Strategy (2000) expressly enjoins the European Union to become a global leader in knowledge and innovation. This objective was confirmed by the 2020 strategy, which focuses on increasing its productivity, competitiveness, and growth.

The theory of endogenous growth reveals the beneficial impact of knowledge on growth, which depends on the combination of labour and capital factors and their efficiency. However, if in 1970, Robert Solow's work (2) showed that technical progress explains the efficiency of capital, it does not inform us about the origin of this technical progress.

We had to wait for Paul Romer's research (3) in 1986 to see that technical progress originated in the stock of knowledge, which was linked to investment development. A stock of knowledge that Robert Lucas (4), in 1988, assimilated to the whole of individuals' physical, intellectual and technical capacities. He describes this as human capital or human investment.

## II. The Necessary Pedagogical and Organisational Adaptation

### A • A need accentuated by the recent health crisis and the current geopolitical crisis

The recent health crisis and conflict with Russia have accentuated university vulnerability. The containment practices put in place to prevent the spread of Covid have increased the isolation of each individual. The use of distance learning has only partially reduced it, as it does not allow full interactivity between people while encouraging some to disperse. The current geopolitical context induces additional insecurity and anxiety in generations which, unlike the older ones, have not been hardened by the conflicts they have experienced.

In such a context, it is urgent that the pedagogy and the organisation of teaching comfort the student by allowing him to acquire the analysis, which will enable him to take a step back and reduce his dependence on an environment which can disturb him. At the same time, the motivation essential to his academic progress requires that his analytical training, as previously mentioned, be closely linked to reality and the concrete problems he will be called upon to solve. From this point of view, the opposition between theory and practice, between academic and professional training, seems to us to have little foundation. On the contrary, referring to the intervention of Professor Dani Rodrik (Harvard University) on 21 May 2019 at the Mexico Conference, this opposition can only encourage precariousness and the disappearance of skilled jobs, the breakdown of the social lift and, as a result, the current economic and democratic malaise.

Let us observe that the professionalisation of specific training courses requires the use of an increased number of experienced and qualified people from [exercising?] a commercial, industrial, financial or scientific activity... It is also necessary that these people, recruited as temporary workers, have the availability and the pedagogy required to communicate with their audiences and to convince them to enter the world of work rather than desert it.

In addition, teachers who dominate the audience with their knowledge and experience should not dominate the student as a person. Their possible need to dominate must be replaced by their ability to integrate. Students' motivation should also be stimulated by the achievement of qualifying degrees that give them credit in the labour market. Finally, it should be remembered that when students – or their families – are responsible for financing their studies, they should be remunerated for the training they have received and not for obtaining a more or less disqualified diploma almost automatically.

### B • Adaptations favourable to better professional integration

In many countries, particularly France, greater professional integration is necessary to increase the activity rate, reduce unemployment and facilitate, thanks to more contributors, the financing of the redistributive pension system in countries where the active population must finance the pensions of those who are no longer active

(5). The need for professional integration is not only imposed on graduates looking for their first job but also on those who have yet to graduate within the framework of a sandwich course which should allow them to combine, in parallel, time spent in apprenticeship and university studies.

It should be remembered that work-linked training, which is more common in master's programmes than in bachelor's programmes, has several advantages. It allows for earlier immersion in the business world. Second, it develops professional skills – taking the initiative and personal responsibility – which can only make it easier to find a first job on a fixed-term or permanent contract. Third, by offering the status of an employee, an apprenticeship gives the right to remuneration, possible bonuses and paid leave – material benefits to help the candidate cover his or her expenses while studying.

It should be noted. However, combining academic and professional activity, an apprenticeship linked to continuing education imposes a very intensive work rhythm with fewer weeks of leave in an academic year (rather five than twelve!). It should also be noted that while apprenticeships are much more professionally inclusive than work placements, the latter – which should continue to exist when possible, mainly when carried out in another country – provides an opening onto another socio-cultural context and an ability to manage a certain uprootedness which gives the capacities for adaptation that are increasingly in demand in our societies. (6)

Improving professional integration, or reintegration, is now imperative for young "seniors" who find themselves out of work after 50 years of age and/or early retirement. Therefore, university structures must revitalise their continuing education system in order to enable these "unwillingly inactive" to reform and reinvent themselves and thus continue their activity or change it so that their professional reintegration is also a social reintegration and so that they can once again contribute to the financing of the pension system before benefiting from it themselves when the time comes.

### **C • Specific adaptations in the so-called "Eastern" countries: the case of Romania**

In the European countries that belonged to the Soviet bloc, the transition from a centralised, dirigiste system to a liberal, decentralised one has given rise to behaviours that are eager for private initiative and a higher standard of living than had been experienced in these countries before. Four other specific difficulties arise from this development, which we observed in Romania during our expert reports commissioned by the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education – ARACIS (7). It should be pointed out that other countries with a centralised, dirigiste system, in which we have had the opportunity to teach, suffer from them to varying degrees. However, our work is limited to Romania, a country whose university structures we have studied on several occasions and whose geographical extent explains the creation of numerous higher education entities since its opening – the result is a significant disparity in the university fabric, hence the amplification of a need for adaptation that is already well underway.

The first is the growing heterogeneity of university provision following the emergence of numerous private institutions, whether or not they are recognised as being of public utility. They complement, and more often than not compete with, existing institutions, although often with more significant difficulties in terms of the quality of teaching and accommodation facilities, teaching staff and skills, and the credibility of the diplomas awarded.

The second difficulty is the existence of several more or less phantom entities, given the absenteeism of teachers and students. This absenteeism is explained, for the former, by the need to have a job and an income, but also, for the latter, by the need to have a complementary activity to increase their income, which is considered insufficient. It should be noted that the absence of the former is the consequence of the latter and vice versa.

The third challenge is the need for more transparency in the system of governance of specific institutions, whose executive remains under the exclusive control of their founders or the influence of a few networks maintaining equivocal links between academic, commercial, financial and other activities.

The fourth difficulty is the dogmatism of the transmission of knowledge, specific to the old authoritarian regime, which tends to stifle any analytical and critical spirit. This spirit should nevertheless be instilled in higher education. Hence submissive behaviour is expected in examination papers, where the candidate is expected to memorise the lectures he has received faithfully. The transition from a centralised organisation resulting from the authoritarian regime to a decentralised organisation aiming to be more liberal requires another societal culture substituting personal responsibility for state coercion.

Faced with the problems posed by certain Romanian higher education institutions, problems that are skilfully masked by the image they give themselves, the numerous contributions and independent expert opinions of the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ARACIS) seem to us to be all the more indispensable as they have contributed to the improvement of the situation for several years.

## **Conclusion**

### **Higher Education and Societal Change**

In our constantly changing societies, where education plays a significant role, the problem of our universities is not only to reduce the failure rate of its students or to be at the top of an international ranking list necessarily influenced by the importance and the political, economic and financial credibility of the country in which they are located.

The problem is also and above all, to manage the social demand for access to higher education, and more precisely, to manage accessibility and outlets, to regulate entry flows and to control the level of both entrants and exits so that the latter can participate in a productive and dignified way in the life and constant changes of society.

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