EEIA-2017
2017 International conference
"Education Environment for the Information Age"

THE UNIVERSITY IDENTITY: WILL UNIVERSITIES SURVIVE IN THE INFORMATION AGE?

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Abstract

The article considers the problems of the university identity, which became the focus of research interest in the period of the transition to the knowledge society, through the prism of the university idea. Modern society can be seen as knowledge and digital in the information epoch, however, as a market-oriented society ruled and controlled by national and international corporations. Therefore, education can be regarded as product, and university as a commercial enterprise. Nevertheless, understanding the university as a civilizational project helps to distinguish multiple interpretations of the main value orientations – education, research and upbringing, which are preserved there. The development of the university idea has undergone several stages, passing from the research-centred or teaching-centred university model to the multifunctional university complex. The crisis of the university identity manifests itself as an imbalance of the three core values and is analysed within the theoretical framework of contemporary social scientists, including Bauman, Boltanski, Chiapello, Liessmann, Luhmann, Ritzier, Teveno.

Keywords: the University Identity, the University Idea, Research, Culture, the Information Age, the Third Wave Society.

1. Introduction

Examining the university as a centuries-long civilizational project, it becomes evident that its perception, evaluation and assumptions about scenarios of its future development are rather ambivalent. The multiplicity of interpretations can be well explained from the perspective of Bauman's "liquid modernity" (Bauman, 2000), according to which, flexibility and openness to different reflection outcomes shape new frames for the idea of a university.

The discussion of university role and mission through more than two centuries has not only been discursive but also presented in specialised analytical multidisciplinary texts. The modern global economy and politics, characterised by the turbulence of all processes, decision-making included, increasingly frequently lead to the questions of whether universities are needed and whether they will be able to retain their identity and survive in a changing world.

The interrogation of this kind is frequently translated into the emotional level. However, the issue of the university identity can be looked at from the objectified viewpoint. Etymologically (identitas – Lat., identity – Eng.), the concept of "identity" in its general scientific meaning is construed as sameness. The foundational pillars of institutional identity have been shaped by the university idea represented by the unity of three value orientations: education, research and upbringing. The latter in some cases is also viewed as integration into the culture.

It was these three values that determined the university as a specific centre for education, scholarship and culture. Although the relative balance between the three components was achieved no sooner than in the early 19th century, they existed in different forms of action in earlier centuries too, in accordance with the level of knowledge of their times.

The development of the university idea has undergone several stages. The two archetypal models for a university system were Bologna and Paris universities, which enjoyed the status of "studium generale" with the focus on the two-fold pattern of teaching the 7 liberal arts. The former emerged on the initiative of student guilds seeking to study Roman law; the latter was initiated by a group of masters teaching theology and Canon law.

The shaping of national university systems throughout centuries was determined by the traditions of legacy and development based on practice. The classical theories of university education derived from a research-led university model by von Humboldt and a teaching intellectual university model by Newman (2015). An academic university culture as the intellectual domain had become the subject-matter for many authors, however, during the turbulent times for social development it was treated as the means of retaining the level of civilisation and humanism, and escape from chaos (Jaspers, 2013; Ortega-y-Gasset, 1944).

Kerr's (2001) brand new vision of a university as a multiversity brought it into a focus of public interest: government, business and different social groups showed their concern for a university. The cutting-edge knowledge industry, having surmounted one-focus character of preceding university models, balanced out the three core university values and became a tool for the accomplishment of national and individual goals.

2. Research Questions

In this regard, the research question is about the role of the university in the information age.

3. Purpose of the Study

The authors intend to consider the university identity as a civilizational project in its maintaining the main humanistic values.

4. Research Methods

The authors used the following research methods: analysis, generalisation, comparison, interpretation.

5. Findings

Global transformations, which generated assumptions about the crisis of university identity, if not its death, appear to be connected with the development of information technologies and network society organising its activities and structure around electronic communication network. Castells, one of the authors of the new theory which rapidly gained ground, argues that the intensification of globalisation processes, deconstruction, and mobility affects all areas of an open and dynamic society while maintaining their balance (Castells, 1989).

The information age, or the age of "the third wave society", possesses a number of distinguishing features: change in energy sources, the reshaping of fundamental manufacturing principles, forms of business organisation, communication, and information exchange, etc. (Toffler, 1984). The modern society is characterised by such growing trends as a shift from manufacturing to services and implementation of science-based technologies (Bell, 1973). The transformations in economy and society lead to the rise of educational needs and the centrality of science and research meeting the growing demand for intellectual technologies.

Under these circumstances, the identity crisis of the university shows itself in the fact that its existence in the classical paradigm is becoming less and less accomplishable. The major resources for society development today are knowledge and information, rapidly growing in volume. The university instruction is characterised by the increase of autonomous study with the use of information technologies versus traditional classroom teaching. Virtual learning is becoming a viable means of education.

There is an opinion that MOOCs have become a real revolution for education (Friedman, 2012). First, these courses provide unlimited participation through access to the Internet. Second, there are no limitations on the basis of SES background. Third, learning is not confined to the classroom: a hundred thousand people can take the same course at a time; it would take 250 years to teach such a number within a classical university paradigm. Fourth, these courses promote rapid dissemination of knowledge: a high-quality education is not widely accessible whereas many problems result from the lack of even elementary education. Fifth, MOOCs are more objective due to automated assessments. Sixth, they are more flexible: participants self-regulate their schedule, including the completion date. Finally, these

courses bring users together – they provide interactive user forums to cooperate in self-study and support each other.

On the other side, there are experts who argue that MOOCs cannot replace established institutions as to the percentage ratio of digital and classroom-based teaching – they are a kind of "a new toy" (Pope, 2014), a beautifully made presentation (Basu, 2012), interest in which will soon decline. More arduous debates concern the questions of how to use on-line courses in individual and group university instruction and what the teacher's role should be. An answer to these two questions is flipped education, which allows a learner to interact with the teacher both distantly as with an online tutor and face-to-face in the classroom setting.

It appears even more difficult to defend another key function of the university – generation of scientific knowledge and organisation of research-based learning and teaching process. The tendency to exclude research, traced in Newman's theory of the university education (Newman, 2015), was followed by Flexner (2011), Ortega y Gasset (1944), and Hutchins (1953), who admitted research pursuits on the part of professors solely as aidant and within pure theoretical knowledge. Today's sceptics argue that there are not any reasons why every student should become a scientist. Accordingly, universities must be open and accessible to everyone. The reform of Bologna process, in fact, did not only exclude research from basic university functions but confirmed the incompleteness of university education by making widely accessible only the first, shortened professional degree – baccalaureate.

At the same time, obvious is the fact that it is the research universities that become winners in world university rankings. According to The Times Higher Education World University Rankings 2016-2017 (2016), among the 980 top universities, the five leaders are institutions with robust multifaceted research programmes: University of Oxford, California Institute of Technology, Stanford University, University of Cambridge, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, where, in particular, students are taught the principles of creating innovative technologies.

The third university function, and the related component of the university idea, which shapes the identity of this kind of higher learning institutions, is upbringing or introduction to culture. This function is widely perceived as being of secondary importance and not requiring modern management techniques. The Bologna process clearly demonstrates displacement of university academic culture by student-faculty transfer mobility, which is idealised as a prerequisite for success and relevance. However, the new university culture appears to be at risk as well. According to Liessmann's theory of illiteracy (Lenartowicz, 2015), highly standardised university degree programmes and curricula make the student mobility and exchange senseless.

6.   Discussion

First of all, modern society might be worth considering not only as knowledge and digital but also as a market-oriented society ruled and controlled by corporations nationally and internationally. Education has become a product, universities have turned into commercial enterprises, and since the year 2002 higher education has been included into General Agreement on Trade in Services of WTO (Kerr, 2001).

Contemporary social scientists, dealing with different aspects of the network society, theorise its McDonaldisation which has invaded the domain of higher education. According to Ritzier (2000; Pope, 2014), the McDonald's business model has permeated various aspects of life and society, higher learning included. The strategy based on efficiency, calculability, predictability and control can lead either to rational or irrational outcomes. The McDonaldization is a global phenomenon describing the transition to formalised, routine, and dehumanised activities of the most of the population. Boltanski and Teveno (1991; Boltanski, Chiapello, 1999) theorise society from the perspective of the moral justifications which seek to explain behaviour in everyday situations.

In another work, Boltanski and Chiapello (Bell, 1973) substantiate the claim about the crisis of anticapitalist critique and, practically, provide an algorithm for retaining identities of various social structures and institutions. Their recommendations come from the specific character of the third generation of capitalism ideology – the projects-oriented activity directed at the development of network models, search for promising trends and connections. For this, team-player qualities are required: confidence, adaptability, ability to collaborate, autonomy, passion for acquiring highly specialised knowledge.

In relation to the classical pillars of the university idea, this can be regarded as a call for non-radical changes which cannot be resisted without losing. Universities must remain diverse – mainstream and elite, and continue performing the functions of a social and professional lift and culture integration. In any case, the contemporary agenda must be aimed at increasing competitiveness, quality of research and teaching, and personal development.

In accordance with the theory of social systems autopoiesis (gr. self-production) (Luhmann, 1986; Liessmann, 2006), they are open and interact with the environment, but are also operationally closed and self-produce their identity. This means that the system–environment interaction takes place in a way that allows the system's recursive reproduction of its core pattern under ever-changing conditions (Knight, 2015).

7. Conclusion

To sum up, it should be said that there are two possible futures scenarios for the university and university systems development – optimistic and pessimistic, with multiple intermediate variants.

In the optimistic scenario, the university will continue its existence as a complex institution, an organisational hub, partially transforming forms and methods within the academic research field.

The pessimistic scenario is based upon the claim that the university is losing its status and disappearing. Accredited cloud centres offering short-term certificate programmes will replace universities. These centres are supposed to provide lifelong learning in an accessible form, at a suitable time. According to this strategy, the increasing fragmentation of reality will involve the university too. Only a small number of the biggest universities will preserve themselves as a kind of scientific and educational museum and a place, where people united by a common idea will meet on particular occasions.

The median scenario will probably centre on the further development of the international network of research and teaching universities with a greater focus on knowledge production, diversification, individualization of the learning process, and broadening the cultural memory.

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