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New Frontiers of Higher Education in Europe

Thomas Jefferson believed that ‘every generation needs a new revolution’. It applies to higher education as well. Is it facing right now the next wave of turbulence? As soon as the COVID 19 crisis began to evaporate (October 2020) New York Times editorial announced that: ‘after the Pandemic, a revolution in education and work awaits’. In the years that followed, academia is subject to new powerful change drivers: dramatic massification and diversification of higher education worldwide due to a series of disruptive technological changes. Job markets analysis indicates that in the near future some form of higher education might become a precondition of every full-time employment contract. The percentage of the global inflow of students accommodated by European universities will be one of the key indicators of the relative ‘weight’ of Europe in the world. Of course, meeting this challenge would require abandoning the old dogma of ‘free higher education’ considered a part of the outdated 20th-century welfare state. Europeans will have to recognise that higher education is one of the fastest growing key industries of the future. A privileged position on this market is not given for granted, provided cut-throat global competition. One has to take under consideration that attractiveness of diplomas and 3–5 years of full-time studies is decreasing: skills are higher valued by leading employers than diplomas. From the perspective of the brightest of the students, technology and markets change too fast to wait for 3–5 years, learning too many things they consider useless. That is why we meet so many college dropouts in the big tech sector. European universities have to stand up and compete for the *crème de la crème* of the global young generation.

The emerging environment of higher education calls for adjustment, which might transform itself into a ‘revolution of agility’, breaking traditional stiff structures and formalized procedures. These are new frontiers of higher education in Europe confronted with today’s US dominance and breathtaking development of

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Asian universities, Chinese ones in particular. Universities were born in Europe, and made Europe global centre of science and culture for centuries. In 1929, when my father got his PhD degree from the Sorbonne in Paris, this was the top of the academic world. Now it should be Harvard. The massive inflow of European academics and intellectuals to the US during the WWII was the game changer. Is Europe able to regain its competitive edge it enjoyed not so long ago? In my opinion, it depends upon the success of the Agility Revolution.

New providers of the content reserved up to now for universities are on the rise. First, big tech companies are involved in training and development, and high-quality corporate universities are being created. Second, consulting and development companies offer on line wide range of carefully profiled, targeted and crafted courses. Universities are forced to respond by offering similar programmes in the form of modules enabling students to build up their own curricula and set up themselves timing, composition and cost. No university is capable to instantly address market needs using exclusively own resources, without reaching out. Alliances with business and other universities are needed. Building and managing such alliances is difficult for many reasons, mainly because of huge culture gaps. Bridging them is necessary and universities which are successful in this kind of game will find themselves on the winning side, particularly if they choose global leaders as partners. In academia, globalisation always was and still is inevitable and irreversible even if in other fields it is on reverse gear. Temporary hurdles and even regional wars cannot stop it worldwide, simply because science is global.

The network model of higher education is becoming prevalent. The scope of the network is global. Science develops through international platforms, alliances, partnerships and joint ventures. Dozens of thousands of universities are interlinked within this magnificent global machine producing science, knowledge, skills, competencies as well as human minds and souls. Universities worldwide compete for better places in the networks. To describe a modern university, one can use a metaphor of an airline hub with incoming and outgoing flights, symbolising constant exchange of students, faculty, research projects, activities etc. on the common platform of a Global English academic culture and state of the art science. Partnerships enable learning experiences to be as immersive and interactive as students want them. It is important because no matter whether we like it or not, even students of tuition-free state universities are not grateful recipients of social assistance anymore, but they become demanding clients. The same 'network effect' applies to research projects. International cooperation requires to design them as modules connectable with other modules in other universities and businesses in other countries. Such an arrangement puts the best of global resources at disposal of project leadership and accelerates knowledge creation and cumulation. Fortunately, when physical

mobility is temporarily limited by such factors as pandemics, political and military conflicts, the recent leapfrog in IT technology helps enormously.

The art of building and managing networks calls for elimination of some of the 'academic red tape' and endless collective decision-making processes. Response time plays a key role. Attractive partners have no time to wait and to waste. This might require some adjustments of traditional academic governance systems with full respect of autonomy and democratic soul of the European universities. An open-minded debate about academic governance is needed. It should touch upon such delicate issues such as: universities' autonomy vs state bureaucracy, democratic procedures, collegiality and traditional, ceremonial side of academic life.

The imperative of the Agility Revolution concerns both 'mass retailers' and elite universities, but in somewhat different ways. Even if they are located under one roof and one academic brand name, they represent different units and types of activities. Mass retailers educate young people in accordance with internationally recognised professional profiles. They should be able to adjust their portfolio of programs to changing markets and enrol large numbers of preferably international paying students. International alliances should enable them to use other institutions' resources (faculty, program modules, facilities) either directly or on line in exchange for making available their own. Agility is a precondition of such activities. Benevolent international accreditations and rankings provide sufficient degree of quality assurance for participating institutions.

Elite universities are predominantly research-driven. They are a source of new ideas, new science and provide unique platforms for academic debate. They educate small groups of elite students and through doctoral programme faculties for the whole global system of higher education and the knowledge industry. In Europe, the role of elite HEIs remains more or less the same since centuries. What has to change is more open access, providing opportunity to all talented young people regardless their social profile and economic status. Nevertheless, highly selective recruitment processes have to be maintained. These are universities for the most gifted few – the future elites. Such elite institutions are often under attacks pointing out at 'inequality effect', in spite of the fact that European top universities are much more open and have more diverse student populations than American Ivy league. I happen to agree with such authors as FT's Jemina Kelly, who has recently published a piece entitled *In Defense of Oxbridge*, which ends as follows: 'Not everyone, even those who work incredibly hard at it – can get into Oxford or Cambridge, but these institutions nevertheless benefit us all.' As a very long-time insider of higher education in different places on both sides of the 'big pond', I am scandalised by the French government's decision to close down the best public administration school in the world: the ENA, in response to yellow vests' demands.

Both research universities and 'mass retailers' have to cope with the same sets of problems:

- ❑ Skyrocketing costs of higher education
- ❑ Quality and strength of scientific input
- ❑ Intellectual and moral profile of students worth striving for

Mass retailers are typical market players. Their products: skills, competencies and more or less prestigious diplomas are offered on the markets (local, regional, global) for a price (tuition fees). Provided globally rising demand for that kind of education, such players should be in black and turning profits if they are properly managed. Governments are able to secure additional financing aimed at faculty development through research. Government or industry sponsored scholarships, student vouchers and loans etc. should and could open the gates of universities to the entire populations of willing high school graduates.

The quality of research output by faculty members is measured by publications in peer-reviewed academic journals. Such a system is focused on methodological correctness and entrenchment in relevant literature. Some of its negative aspects have to be taken into consideration as well. First, peer reviewers rarely support original ideas and innovative methodologies, they request manuscripts based directly on recognised well established science. Innovative ideas seldom get published. Second, the whole plethora of 'fake science' emerged around this assessment methodology in order to 'beat the system' (including predatory journals and 'cooperatives' of scholars quoting each other). Third, measuring scientific work by journals articles only is against the European academic tradition that highly values monograph books and academic textbooks. The best universities develop their own systems of contribution valuation and academic success measures. Leaving it in the hands of bureaucracy jeopardises 'big science creation'. Agility is needed.

To what extent can universities can and should shape hearts and mindsets of their students? The imposition of any kind of ideology or value system is hopeless. Sermons will not be heard, restrictions will not be observed. The only realistic way to influence young people's souls and mindsets is indirect: through the way university operates and role models it creates. Agility is needed here again, because the young generation of Europeans values freedom of choice above all. That is why the coexistence of a wide range of different ideas, schools of thought and ideologies is so important, provided that meritocratic academic debate takes place without any limits of academic freedom. Otherwise, the forbidden fruit tastes the sweetest. That is why, in the 'spirit of contradiction', under communism Polish universities graduated generations of devoted anti-communists.

Pluralistic education based on free debate and confrontation of different opinions leads to highly heterogeneous cohorts of graduates. Most of them, however, will to different degrees share some common characteristics such as: openness and respect of other people's opinions, acceptance of the use of scientific arguments in disputes and conflicts solving, proneness to compromise and cooperation. This is in my opinion what civilised European society is all about and what universities should nurture and disseminate.