

Changing Priorities - Constant Values

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Outlines the universities role in today's world. From antiquity to modernity knowledge has been a constant value. However, the definition of 'knowledge' is disputed. Argues against an overly utilitarian view of knowledge. Looks to the university to be a humanizing force transcending the current preoccupation with specialization, academic chauvinism, careerism, privilege, and technocracy.

"All the countries are changing their aspect, the Universe is undergoing a complete upheaval...Its nature is going to change so as to enable its creation anew."

Ibn Khaldun,
Arab historian (1332-1406)

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The speakers of this afternoon at this conference of the International Association of Universities both come from countries which host the two oldest universities in the world. (1)The "Al Karawiyyine" (Fez, Morocco), built in 859 as a mosque, it became a few decades later a center of higher learning which was formally institutionalized in the mid-eleventh century¹ and (2) the University of Bologna which is about to celebrate its Ninth Century. Rector Roversi-Monacos, with whom I have the honor to share the podium today writes on the web page of this University, "we can indeed say, without fear of contradiction, that the concept of university first came into being in Bologna."²

This is neither the place nor the time to contradict nor to enter into a debate as to which institution is the oldest university in the world but let us simply note that while the International Association of Universities celebrates its Jubilee, institutions of higher learning are not far from completing their first millennium. But what has been accomplished in the area of knowledge and its transmission in the last fifty years is probably tenfold what was achieved during the last one thousand years. If this is the case then the relative age of the IAU on the time-knowledge scale may have to be measured in centuries. This acceleration of knowledge acquisition and propagation is an important determinant affecting the future of universities today. Richard Knight estimates that the total knowledge of mankind doubles every seven years and adds,

"90% of the present knowledge of mankind has been produced in the course of the last thirty years. But if we define knowledge as the capacity to survive on earth in a sustainable manner then 90% of human knowledge has been lost during the last 30 years."

The gap between the quantitative development of knowledge and the manner in which it is applied to improve the quality of life is a most pressing contemporary issue. It runs right through the basic questions highlighted in this Conference: "What values?", "what knowledge?" and "what leadership?". The first two appear to be very pertinent to the topic before us today, "Changing priorities - Constant values."

The "Values-Knowledge" Interface

The university has survived as an educational institution probably because it has been able, more or less successfully, to adjust its priorities,

over time, to the needs of society and to update its values. Where this has not been done, the survival may be considered as non-autonomous and fictitious where priorities are blurred and the values alienated by blind imitation. Such is the situation in a number of higher learning institutions in the "developing" countries - many more than we are ready to admit. We come across them where academic freedom is strangled, and where administrative and financial autonomy are very much limited due to local political intervention and foreign financial pressures.

In this context, the Preamble of the IAU's constitution which embodies a set of universal principles of constant value in time and space offers a most judicious guidance. Thence we have the first elements for answering the question - What values? The most fundamental principle being, in my mind the following one: "the right to pursue knowledge for its own sake and to follow wherever the search may lead" as well as "the tolerance of divergent opinion and freedom from political interference."

If I were to identify the biggest threat to the university today, more particularly in the third world, I would say that it is the non-respect of "the right to pursue knowledge for its own sake and to follow wherever the search may lead." This threat is already a reality in many developing countries where our ears are being hammered by expressions such as "useful" and "useless" knowledge; practical, pragmatic and employment-oriented training; specific economic needs of the private sector and foreign investment and so forth.

Such orientations are a serious impediments to the fundamental objectives of higher education which will affect the scientific advancement of the countries and aggravate the problem of brain drain to which we shall return. Knowledge is feared because it liberates and questions the existing order of things. It disturbs. It encourages dissent.

For all of these reasons and many more the International Association of Universities would render a great service to higher education and its own membership if it could re-iterate, on the occasion of its Jubilee its constitutional principle regarding the "pursuit of knowledge" emphasizing that it is a "constant value" and a "constant priority".

Values are a basic ingredient for the engendering of knowledge and their evolution is conditioned by that knowledge. Seeing that no knowledge is absolutely neutral values are the keys which to comprehend its sources, its context and especially its purpose. In his book "The New Alliance" Ilya Prigogine, chemistry Nobel Prize winner, insists on the fact that "science urgently needs to recognize itself as an integral part of the culture within which it develops" and questions its universality and

neutrality.³

Values condition cultural communication and international relations which still suffer from immoderate ethnocentrism. Over twenty years ago, at a conference of the Society for International Development conference (SID) dealing with the "North-South Dialogue", I stressed the key role of value systems,

*"The emphasis on value systems is needed to bring out the fact that the present North-South crisis is not merely one which will be overcome with partial adjustments here and there. It is a crisis of the present system as a whole. Any solution must envisage a redefinition of objectives, functions and structures, and a redistribution of power and resources according to values other than those which are the cause of the crisis and the breakdown of the existing system."*⁴

This observation still applies today not only to the North-South relations but also to the new "north-south" problematique within the developing countries where the gap between the rich and the poor has been growing faster than the one between the industrialized countries and those of the third world. What has been the responsibility of the university in this process? Is the democratization which a growing enrolment has brought about an element of substantive political, socio-economic and cultural changes or simply a statistical mirage?

I do not have the pretension to answer such a complex question but I believe that it contains relevant elements which could shed light on "changing priorities" and "constant values". To change priorities you must first of all have some. Priorities, especially in the instance of higher education can not be elaborated in a vacuum - they require a vision and a model of development with clear objectives resulting from democratic choices of the population and free choices of the institutions and communities concerned. These conditions are probably partially present in the "North" - even if sources of financing there play a more and more determining role in the selection or priorities. As to the South, it would be difficult to find a single country that can claim to have been able to meet them all.

We thus have a "north" within the "south" but one which operates without the checks and controls nor the redistributive functions which apply in the "North". The "North" of the "South" is a "wild North". A preliminary conclusion regarding the South is that the existing priorities, in so far as one can identify them (I am not including those suggested,

recommended or dictated by external financial sources) have not proven to be viable for the economic and social welfare of the vast majority of the people concerned and require radical change. The situation is even more complex with respect to "values" where we find a growing gap, if not a fracture, between social groups and cultural communication difficulties to a degree unknown before. The "constant values" have not been sufficiently taken into account nor has the university contributed convincingly to their constant evolution and constant innovation - it has even failed in a fundamental role of any learning system which is the transmission of values.

The Reduction of Disparities: A "Constant Priority" Requiring "Changing Values"

The growth of disparities is to be observed everywhere and its rate is probably close to the rate of increase of knowledge. The reduction of disparities and the fight against poverty and social injustice, gender and urban-rural inequalities ought to be a constant priority for the university - they affect directly its environment, its objectives and programs. A very brief and extremely selective quantitative survey of the disparities may tell more than words.

Figures taken from UNDP reports⁵ confirm eloquently this point. Twenty percent of the richest people of the world consume 85% of the total goods and services of the planet while the poorest twenty percent attains a little more than 1%. The total GNP of the 48 least developed countries is inferior to the assets of the three richest persons in the world. The total amount required to provide basic education for everyone in the world is \$ 6 billion dollars - it represents 75% of what the Americans spend on cosmetics and 50% of what Europeans spend on ice cream.

When we turn to higher education, the 1999 UNESCO Statistical Yearbook contains data for the year 1997 enlightens us on the disparities within the university world between geographical regions.⁶ We note that 18% of the population of the planet accounts for almost half of the total number of students (88 millions) enrolled in universities throughout the world. Only one out of ten persons of university age in the South manages to attend an institution of higher learning whereas one out two manage to do so in the North.

We see that the picture is a rather somber one regardless of whether we place ourselves at the level of the "haves" and the "have-nots" or that

of the "know" and the "know-nots".⁷ The great myth of "development" of the last 40 years has turned out to be an illusion if not a nightmare. The university was supposed to play a role in the achievement of the objectives of development - the spine of peace. Practically all of the theories and activities relating to the national and international preaches in this domain have lost much of their credibility. Let us not lie to ourselves.

This affects the university and its approach to the improvement of human well-being. It ought to take stock of how "development has enabled a small fringe of privileged persons to enrich themselves indelicately and unscrupulously while the standards of living of the great majority of the population plunged down year after year. The major part of the onus is on those concerned in the South but never could they have committed so many of the abuses without the support, backing and complicity of their counterparts of the North."⁸ Welfare may very well be a constant value but the present priorities devoted to its attainment need a strong re-examination.

Brain Drain: An Incapacity to Produce Knowledge nor to Absorb Competence

The first study of the phenomenon of "brain drain", as far as I know, is the one carried out by UNITAR and UNESCO in 1968. Its conclusions were clear. The main causes of the immigration of highly trained national developed countries are (a) the inadequate research infrastructures and resources and (b) the limits imposed on academic freedom. Material gain is not the main motivation.

This end result comes out in practically all of the studies made ever since about the hemorrhage of talent from the South to the North which is no longer counted in thousands or ten of thousands but in hundred of thousands. A net loss not only of the billions of dollars which their training has cost to their countries but for the economic and social development of their people - a most relevant indicator as to the state of health of universities in the third world and of the failure of its models of development and educational systems.

Precise figures are not available. If one were to make an approximate evaluation of the losses inflicted upon the economies of the developing world through brain drain and compare them with the amount of "aid" they receive from the latter, we might have a clearer picture of who aids whom. Jan Tinbergen estimated, back in 1976, that the brain drain cost

the developing countries \$ 4.6 billion dollars per year.⁹

Development, in the final analysis, is maybe just the capacity to create a suitable environment for the advancement of knowledge and the blooming of competence which can be absorbed in a creative and innovative manner so as to improve the quality of life. In a society of knowledge it is normal that the facilities of scientific research available should determine the movement of skills across the world. A phenomenon which is no longer limited to third world countries. Research is a "constant value" and a "unchanging priority" in the South because it is practically non-existent.

Eighty percent of the world R&D expenditures are spent in the developed world which represents less than 20% of humanity. If we take the research in the advanced fields of science and technology then the figure goes up to 95%, four fifth of which are unfortunately spent on military research destined to refine the capacity to kill and to destroy - a perennial ethical problem for researchers in the university world.

Curiously enough a last factor affecting brain drain is endogenous in nature. It concerns the cultural alienation which imported systems of education, blindly applied, without sufficient concern for the socio-cultural environment within which they operate push people to go elsewhere where they can clearly distinguish between what is not theirs and what is. The alienation is not only at the level of the system and the programs, it is in the reading materials and even in part of the teaching staff. Brain drain is also the product of a "cultural decolonization" which is still to come.¹⁰

How can one be in South Africa and not quote the Mahatma Gandhi who said, "I want the cultures of all Lands to blow about my house, as freely as possible. But I refuse to be blown off my feet, by anyone of them."

In conclusion, I would like to recall a statement and raise a related question. Here are words published 22 years ago in a report to the Club of Rome entitled: *No Limits to Learning, Bridging the Human Gap,*

"University and Society,

Universities, the pinnacle of the formal education systems, should be leading a campaign toward improving human capacities instead ... they are either held or holding back from playing a leading role for which they should be destined. Problems of selective participation, narrow specialization, chauvinism of academic disciplines, neglect of vital issues,

*'citadel mentality' of many administrators, and preoccupation with selfish social advancement all limit the relevance of one of humanity's major learning resources.*¹¹

To what extent is this critique less valid, as valid or more valid today than it was almost a quarter of a century ago? Of course, the above was written after the youth's expressions of dissent and displeasure which erupted throughout the university campuses of the world in 1968 which has shaken the universities of the developed world but left "stability" in those of the South thanks to the imperatives of "national security". Such preoccupations do not leave room for vision and much less dreams - "the person who dreams is a god, the one who reasons is a beggar" said Holderlin. There are still too many "beggars" so I beg of you to tolerate my frankness which is essentially a mark of respect to the people present, to the learning institutions which they represent and to intellectual probity.

I have difficulties hiding a certain degree of deception with regard to a non-negligible portion of the academic "elite" in the developing countries which has not known how to resist the temptations of political and material gains to the detriment of their academic tasks. Perhaps is it just a transitional phase to be soon forgotten. Let hope that universities as a "business" will not overtake the business of universities.

Let me conclude by saying that my pessimism over the short term is the basis of an optimism over the long term which I am not likely to see but in which I firmly believe. Can knowledge save the world? Can the university save knowledge? Can knowledge save values? Can values save the value of knowledge? I am convinced they can if we believe like Dostoevski that "beauty will save the world".

Table ANNEX: Higher Education Enrolment (1997)

REGION	Enrollment (number)	Gross ratio %
Africa	4780000	6.9%
America	25486000	37.1%
Asia	34844000	11.1%
Europe	21794000	42.8%
Oceania	1251000	57.7%
WORLD Total	88156000	17.4%
Developed	43357000 (49.2 %)	10.3%
Developing	44798000 (49.8 %)	51.8%

Source : UNESCO, 1999 Statistical Yearbook

Notes

1. The "Al Karawiyyine" See, Encyclopedie de l'Islam, volume IV, p. 657, Leiden. Al Karawiyyine is the university of the world which has the longest uninterrupted activity. The formal institutionalization of its teaching cursus goes back to the period of the Almoravides (mid-11th Century). In fact, the University of Al Zaitouna (Tunis) is older but its activities were interrupted during the Ottoman Empire as well as for some period during the French colonization. Another very old universities in the Islamic world are the Al Azhar (Cairo) and Al Mostansiriah (Bagdad) . See Abd El Hadi Tazi, Al Qaraouiyyine, 2 volutmes, Dar Al-Kittabl Allubnani, Beirut (1973).
2. "A word from the Rector" in <<http://unibo.it/avl/english/story/story>>.
3. Quoted in "From Social Exclusion to Social Cohesion", Colloquium of Roksilde, UNESCO, 1995.
4. Mahdi Elmandjra, "Political Facets of the North-South Dialogue", Working Paper No. 4, North-South Round Table, First Session, SID, Rome, 18-20 May 1978.
5. Reproduced in the New York Times dated 27 September 1998.
6. See Table annexed to the present text.
7. The expression was first used by the President of Iran in his speech at the UN General Assembly, in 1998, where he said "Today we can no longer speak of the have and the have-nots, we have to speak of the know and the know-nots".
8. Mahdi Elmandjra, "Dialogue, Not Clash of Civilizations", International Peace Research Conference, Tampere, 9Jan Tinbergen, Restructuring the International Order, a report to the Club of Rome, E. P. Dutton, 1976.
9. In 1979, UNCTAD presented a report on "The Reverse Transfer of Technology - the 'Brain Drain'",
10. See, Mahdi Elmandjra, Decolonisation Culturelle,, Defi Majeur du 21e Siecle", Ed. Walitli, Marrakech,1996.<http://www.elmandjra.org/indexfr.html>
11. James Botkin, Mahdi Elmandjra, Mircea Malitza, No Limits to Learning, Bridging the Human Gap, A Report to the Club of Rome, Pergamon Press, pp. 94-95, London, 1979.

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