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Higher education for modern societies: competences and values

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Translating converging competences into the reality of teaching, learning, research and life at higher education institutions

Ligia Deca

Introduction

In a time when cultures are becoming increasingly international, voting turnout rates are declining, religious and political fundamentalism is increasing and youth continue to give vent to their alienation from politics, higher education remains of key importance to stimulate democracy and active citizenship. Education is the most important factor in allowing citizens to be more sensitive to the democratic spirit and in enabling them to be better skilled for participation in democratic processes in institutions.

The role that higher education, and in particular students, have played in “new democracies” in central and eastern Europe is one good example of the positive role of a responsible higher education community. So, however, are political debates in higher education institutions, lecturers who are active in public debates and democratic participation within the governance of higher education institutions themselves. A Europe based on knowledge can also effectively promote these values to other regions of the world in a more constructive way than the democracy-building that we have witnessed in recent years.

In the coming years, demographic changes will force Europe to confront a decreasing workforce, which will undoubtedly lead to new discussions about migration from different parts of the world. The current discussions about immigration in many European countries are worrying in this respect. As extremist parties acquire more influence, we see increased xenophobia, Islamophobia and intolerance. The rise of these political parties across western Europe, as well as the anti-gay movement in significant parts of central and eastern Europe, are real threats to European social and cultural values and show the importance of continuing to allow new immigrants to work and live in Europe. Higher education should serve to bring another perspective on nationalism and the backlash against globalisation.

Historically, universities, scholarship and knowledge have been international, and they have been effective tools to promote multicultural values. In order to make this vision a reality, the European Higher Education Area should be open to students of all regions in the world and should maintain its aim of increasing student mobility. Higher education institutions are shaping our future leaders and Europe should play a role in making sure that they acquire the values that create open and

tolerant societies. This contribution of higher education to civic responsibility and democracy is, however, not self-evident and should never be taken for granted.

The European Students' Union (ESU) argues that higher education should set the example for society – a European Higher Education Area free from discrimination and corruption. Furthermore ESU emphasises that an important role of higher education institutions should be to uphold the values of democracy, human rights and the rule of law in an increasingly volatile and globalised world. The present article will touch on the following topics: inclusive and student-centred learning, student participation and the contribution of the student movement to debates about a sustainable society free of discrimination.

Converging competences and the basic values of the Council of Europe: democracy, human rights and the rule of law

In these times, one can only say that taking a step back and pondering one's role in society or the direction of one's personal development often appears to be a luxury, instead of being acknowledged as a true need. The enormous amount of information storming its way through all our senses each morning leaves little room for much self-reflection unless we make a determined effort to make room for it. Stress seems to be a common social disease and the chronic lack of time is a curse felt by everyone. In this environment, where rationalising and taking the time to analyse before taking day-to-day decisions has become scarcer than ever, we need to have an almost instinctive capacity to take decisions as active and responsible global citizens. For this to happen, one's personality has to be based on a strong mix of values; principles, beliefs, traditions, attitudes, skills and competences that enable us to cope with the increasing challenges coming our way. But where does this transformation take place?

It starts earlier than ever, but at the same time it seems to require constant attention and maybe a specific point in time where one can redefine oneself, regardless of one's family origins, social status or other preconditions in one's background and experience. I think that this place that acts as a milestone in the development of one's personality could easily be identified as higher education institutions. Here one should be able to find the space and the temporal bubble to explore ethical, religious, scientific, political, economic and social beliefs until you find the unique combination that will define one as an individual. This is not to say that preparing future graduates for a successful professional career is outdated, but it is at least beneficial, I would even say essential, to have a well-defined personality in order to be a truly successful professional.

If we consider higher education institutions as both melting pots and shaping vessels of individual characteristics and personalities, we need to see what their responsibilities are as well. Looking at history, it seems that the biggest challenge we have faced was to learn from past errors and educate new generations as well as ourselves so as not to repeat previous mistakes made in the societal evolution process.

This rationale stood as the basis for the build-up of the Council of Europe as an inter-governmental institution founded on the values of democracy, human rights and the rule of law. If higher education institutions are to foster overall societal progress through individual development, the values on which the Council of Europe was built have to be passed on and absorbed at the individual level. This is where the challenge begins – how do you make this a reality in the everyday life of the academic community? What are the obstacles and the possible solutions to translating converging competences into the reality of teaching, learning and research and life at higher education institutions?

In its essence, the traditional academic relationship between the professor and the student is hierarchical rather than democratic. The obvious difference in subject-specific competences between academic staff and students is often confused with the overall right of students to be seen as equal partners in the academic world. Already in Prague in 2001, European ministers clearly stated that they see students as members of the academic community, and it is only sensible that there should be no hierarchy in the role and status of professors and students as human beings, citizens and members of the community. The academia in itself was built on a hierarchical relationship between, for example, older and younger professors, university and faculty leadership, academic staff and students. So how can we hope that higher education institutions will be ready to educate for democracy when they are sometimes hardly democratic themselves? And yet, relatively recent socio-political developments in Europe have shown that in fact the academia is a trend setter in the fight for democracy and social justice. So, in fact, how can higher education institutions mainstream democracy at both levels – for every individual and for themselves, as microcosms of modern societies?

In the attempt to answer this challenging question, I went back to my own life as a student and tried to identify those moments in which I could say that I experienced democracy. Being a student in maritime engineering, the curricula as such did not encompass subjects related to political science, philosophy or sociology. If one only looked at the subjects included in my programme, it could be argued that teaching democratic competence was completely out of the focus. Indeed, I think that the university leadership showed no concern for the competences their students would need to become active citizens at a later stage. But beyond this limitation, I experienced democracy in a different manner.

Some of the professors chose to move away from the classical lecture aimed at transmitting information and opted for debating the righteousness of their own beliefs. In my own experience as a maritime transport engineering student, I was a part of interesting debates on the strengths and weaknesses of the American and Russian styles of conducting astronomical navigation. These were the arena in which students learned how to listen to their peers, although they had very strong convictions of their own. We learned that in the end we will have to choose as teams (ship crews) one system in a democratic manner and that even if there is a majority opting for one solution, if the minority is uncomfortable using it, the voyage might

end up tragically. The different national regulations imposing one style or another in specific procedures were often taken into account in heated debates. Critical thinking was at the basis of these arguments and it empirically demonstrates that any scientific or technical subject can foster the development of competences related to democracy, human rights and the rule of law.

I have always argued that student-centred learning is, in fact, bringing democracy to the core of the academia. The end aim of student-centred learning is to enable all individuals to reach their own full potential, by tailoring the learning experience to the needs of each specific individual. All human beings are active in a societal context and as such, their full potential is only achieved when they become an active citizen in this society. If the aims of student-centred learning are fulfilled, there should be a natural focus on democratic competences that will enable individuals to reach their full potential as members and builders of democratic societies (ESU 2008a).

A student-centred higher education institution is more expensive (and effective) than a traditional university and requires a huge shift in all dimensions of the university community. Professors must be given more recognition and time for teaching and learning activities and engage their students more actively in research. With these descriptions, it should be easy to find examples of good practice in institutions which describe themselves as being student centred. Indeed, institutions like the University of Maastricht, Roskilde University and many universities in the United Kingdom fit these criteria. To take it one step further, university leaders must start to understand students' minds and to enable the students to be a full part of the university community. This requires a fundamental shift in the governance of higher education. Students must be stimulated and recognised to do more than vote in general elections. They should be seen as full partners, for instance in quality evaluations, social activities, university referenda and teaching. The student-centred higher education institution yet again pays attention to the social conditions of its student, while challenging their talents to the maximum level (ESU 2008b).

Student participation and the contribution of the student movement to the role of higher education in democratic societies

A perfect way to experience democracy within academia is to be a part of the associative student movement. The direct participative democratic skills you acquire when representing your colleagues are essential to foster an understanding of democracy and the fight for human rights and the rule of law from an early stage.

Having both the authority and the responsibility of contributing to the progress of the academic community can only increase the conscious realisation that one's own well-being is strongly linked to respecting others' rights and beliefs. Only through real ownership of the decisions taken at the highest level and the strategies in place to attain institutional goals can there be real student involvement in academia, as

It is interesting to look at the understanding of the role of the student movement on different continents. In my dealings with student representatives from the United States, I could see that European and American student movements are complementary. The European student movement is highly involved in the governance of higher education institutions and in the policy-making processes at the institutional, national and European levels. Historically, there is a lot of ideological involvement in the fight for human rights and democracy.

The American student movement has an increased awareness of its societal role -- focusing its activity on the link with the surrounding communities, trying to play an active role in humanitarian actions and having a strong link with other civil society organisations. Their focus on practical rather than policy or political actions is recognised in the mission statements of many student organisations. What unites the two continental student movements is the fight for human rights and the call for democracy. Almost all student organisations have in common the demand that higher education should be more than professional training and that it should fulfil its essential societal role in fostering the personal development of students.

In many of the relatively "new democracies" in central and eastern Europe, students have been on the front line in the battle against dictatorships and oppression. The European Students' Union determinedly believes that it is important to maintain the political and social benefits of education in the future in order to promote the democratic spirit and to spread the influence of democracy in all levels of society.

An important threat to education acting as a force for democracy and active citizenship is the neglect of this function. The current political discourse in Europe has radically changed public thinking on higher education, with people increasingly seeing higher education less and less as a human right and more as an expensive, but essential commodity.

In my view, this way of thinking threatens the status of education as a cornerstone of democracy for future generations. If you consider that higher education programmes can and should be simply bought as products, then you cannot expect them to contribute to anything more than a professional upgrading. There is no time for developing the ability to engage in critical thinking, teaching tolerance and multicultural understanding in a time when short and intense programmes have to be developed and delivered to satisfy the immediate need for super-specialised professionals.

There is also no time for creating personal identities or for considering yourself as part of a community. This is the unfortunate attitude we see in the day-to-day reality that surrounds us. Voting turnouts are dropping with each election cycle, extremism, xenophobia and nationalism are returning to the political mainstream, while human rights seem to be respected only when politically convenient and not economically disruptive.

Students from all continents strive for quality higher education for all. Why is access to higher education and support for progression and successful completion so important? Because diversity should not mean inequality. Diversity in socio-economic background should not mean that some are denied the chance to achieve their full potential. Education is empowering, but at the same time it is the base for tolerance and cultural understanding. How will a young person feel that a specific societal group is equal in rights and deserves the same rights in society when (s)he does not have the chance to equally acquire the most important personal good: knowledge? Migrant children are often discriminated against in primary and secondary schools. Some even learn to hate their host country, never manage to access higher education – or even complete secondary education – and then come to be seen as a societal problem. Some minorities use their traditions as an excuse to segregate their children in the educational process and that leads to problems of insertion in the society.

Democratic Europe was shaken by the social movements in 1968, a strong reaction to “old society”, seen as the replacement of traditionalist morality (religion, patriotism and respect for authority) by the liberal morality (equality, sexual liberation and human rights) that dominates European societies today. New political streams increased their visibility, such as environmentalism and women’s emancipation. Students were at the forefront of the protests in Spain, Italy, West Germany, Great Britain, Belgium and especially France, where UNEF⁴⁷ led the “French May” with approximately 500 000 protesters forcing President de Gaulle’s government to near collapse. The year 1968 echoed through the Iron Curtain. Chronologically, the 1968 protest followed Polish student protests for student rights and against communism, to which the regime responded with counter-protests under the form of “worker squads” and police interventions. The movement had a liberal background and was centred on freedom of speech for intellectuals and artists. Noteworthy is the fact that Hungarian university students in Szeged snubbed the official communist student union, the DISZ, by re-establishing the MEFESZ (Union of Hungarian University and Academy Students), a democratic student organisation, previously banned under the dictatorship. Romanian students, mainly in Timișoara, protested as a sign of solidarity with their neighbours. It was the first phenomenon of students standing up to the imposed communist student organisations, used as a tool of propaganda and repression by the regime.

Such a system has survived until today in Belarus. Our member union from Belarus is functioning in a clandestine manner, as it is deemed illegal by the government authorities and thus every meeting of its members could result in expulsion from university and imprisonment. A number of students were arrested in December 2005 for standing up for democratic elections in Belarus and students’ rights within the Belarusian Student Association. This was one of the moments when I realised how lucky I was being a Romanian student after 1989 (Proteasa 2009).

⁴⁷ *Union Nationale des Étudiants de France*

The role of academic communities in converging competences into the reality of teaching, learning and research

Our democratic societies base their evolution on the understanding that each individual has to be an active citizen so that the system is socially just. But when the individuals are incapable of rising to the challenges that active citizenship poses, do we really think that democracy will continue to bring respect for cultural diversity, critical thinking, freedom of speech or equal respect for human rights? Diplomatic ballets when ambassadors speak about "culturally sensitive" issues such as "honour" killings, forced and child marriages, domestic violence, child abuse, war crimes and ethnic cleansing will not help us in the fight for human rights; nor will increasing the numbers of police or investing in military defence capacity. Countries will see that they are just patching up the effects but not addressing the cause. But so is passing laws without changing the societal mentalities and set of values, which can only be achieved through education. And perhaps this message has not quite yet come across to our political decision makers, although the 1968 generation has perhaps not quite lived up to the expectation it created in this regard.

Academia has an essential role in stepping up to the challenge. Fighting demagogical, extremist and populist statements about the dangers that come with migration or raising the public's attention to the unacceptable developments in areas such as the economy or medicine, should be the norm for the involvement of academia in society. Academic freedom will be difficult to preserve when political or economic pressures limit the freedom of research or of expression and this is why they must embrace the responsibility of speaking up against obvious misuse of public authority.

At the same time, academic freedom should not provide an excuse for conveniently avoiding the rule of law. Respect for laws should be developed in all students, regardless of the field of study they are pursuing. Even if critical thinking says that laws could be improved, the intellectual advantage that higher education brings should be combined with a strong conscience that includes respect for the rule of law. It is the duty of active citizens to continuously work towards improving existing laws, but using their knowledge to avoid respecting them only leads to an unfair societal stratification and to lack of motivation for societal progress.

It is indeed noteworthy that some of the biggest achievements of the academia as societal actors were linked to challenging the legal status quo in the areas of civil liberties, human rights and the fight for democracy. What is the balance between healthy academic protest and teaching respect for the regulatory frameworks of the societies we live in? Higher education has also undoubtedly been used throughout history for propaganda, ideological manipulation or regime consolidation. In order to restore the public trust in higher education, we would need to take a close look at the inseparable pair of concepts constituted by authority and responsibility, step up to the challenge and understand the modern role of education.

Higher education institutions have a duty to equip future generations with appropriate tools in support of societal progress and personal development. This debate

should be started by the academic communities themselves according to a long-term development strategy and with full awareness of their role. This long-term vision is not necessarily the attribute of public authorities, as they are usually pressed to give immediate answers to financial pressures and public opinion that is to be ultimately transformed into votes.

In the debate on how to translate converging competencies into the reality of teaching, learning and research, we sometimes have a tendency to start all over again. “Reinventing the wheel” can bring a lot of ownership, but it can also slow down overall progress. As such, there needs to be a permanent and supported dialogue between institutions, at all their levels – leadership, students, teaching and administrative staff, researchers – on how to better fulfil all four of the main missions of higher education established by the Council of Europe (Council of Europe 2007): the promotion of active citizenship and democracy; developing the labour market; knowledge development; and personal development. Higher education institutions have a lot to gain from supporting increased dialogue, whether it is established through mobility of students and staff, attending conferences and seminars, research and teaching networks, student and staff representation activities or in other areas.

On a final note, I believe that it is relevant for all societal actors that higher education assists in the personal and social development of every individual. As such, real support and constructive debate will be essential in the public sphere. Some might argue that public responsibility and support for higher education is a thing of the past, but can we really afford to allow future citizens not to have the competences to act as expected in our fast advancing democracies? We would say not. In October 2008, the Council of Europe and the US Steering Committee of the International Consortium for Higher Education, Civic Responsibility and Democracy organised a global forum to address the issue of converging competences for diversity and sustainable democracy and the role of higher education in developing these competences. This forum can be considered as a stepping stone in the work ahead. Every stakeholder has its work cut out and the European Students’ Union will continue to honour our share of the responsibilities on behalf of our 11 million student members fighting for democracy, human rights and the rule of law.

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