Traditional University Responds to Society?

Should the rigid, cumbersome, academic structures of our traditional universities be replaced with infra-structures characterised by flexibility, diversity, innovation and short, practical degrees or courses, sensitive to a rapidly changing and competitive society? Is it sufficient for a developed society to have only one type of institution at the tertiary level, namely the traditional university, to cope with all the tasks higher education is supposed to encompass or would we be better served by many different types of institutions?

Jón Torfi Jónasson

Consider two examples of the changes in our societies and the world of work from the vantage-point of higher education. The first is the globalisation of the economy, which is having considerable, often dramatic, effects on the landscape of the work place. The second is the mechanisation or automation and consequently changing job profiles, which in many ways require fundamentally different preparation of the workforce from what was thought sensible only a few decades ago. The key terms describing the transformations we are witnessing are change and speed. Even though I think that the rapidity of this change is generally overestimated because people tend to concentrate on particular, somewhat spectacular developments - which by themselves often manifest revolutionary changes, I simply accept that all areas for which higher education is relevant are changing in important ways, probably quite rapidly.

Against this background a division of labour within higher education might be expected. It is well known that the demands made are steadily becoming more diverse, and Kerr (1994) in the early nineties chose to talk about a multiversity rather than a university. Universities are meant to excel in teaching both undergraduates and postgraduates, in academic and professional fields, to excel in pure basic research and perhaps also applied research or development. It is both pressing and sensible that higher education offers diploma courses of various sorts (normal or with practical or professional bias) partly as short pre-degree courses but also as various additions to traditional degrees. University staff
should also be of assistance in their national or local environments as consultants.

Universities are increasingly assumed to participate in providing the much demanded continuous education of the professions for which they were characterized decades ago. Furthermore, universities are meant to adopt new ways of operating, in research (e.g., distance education), administration (e.g., new budgeting methods), and teaching (both in terms of increasingly competitive grants and contracts and in pursuing private enterprise for research funds).

Needs or potential?

What does a society in a rapid transmation need? In particular, what should higher education provide to satisfy these needs? A tentative answer will be dominated by the investment or capital-value view of education.

The answer is simple: it needs a societal labour force, but how should the higher education establishment respond? In particular, which form of operation is most appropriate, the one offered by the traditional university model or the form provided by the more recent institutions of continuous education?

In recent decades it has often been stated that the traditional view of education is the classical Aristotelian view which was replaced by the neo-humanism in the early 1960s. According to this view, education needs no justification external to itself, because of its inherent value to the person engaged in it. It is also said that in the 1960s, economists, politicians and educators alike started to question the capital value of a skilled workforce, and thus the potential capital or investment value of education insofar as it enhanced economically valuable skills. But none of this is by any means correct. The utilitarian argument for education has for many centuries been dominant, most notably concerning elementary and secondary education, but also as far as vocational and professional studies at the tertiary level are concerned.

This point becomes crucial when trying to understand the future development of higher education. If we thought that the modern utilitarian, human capital view of education was relatively new, we could assume that in the next decades higher education might develop differently from the past. The driving forces would be different. Perhaps the modern universities will be more responsive to the peaking needs of their immediate environment? But the rationale has in fact not altered in this respect and therefore no radical change is to be expected.

The human capital argument for education has at least two different strands. According to one which I like to call the Minimalist view, there is an easily definable, necessary but also sufficient level of education (within a certain field) needed for a society or a company to prosper. This entails the notion of need determination (i.e., what education is needed). From this follows that it can be determined what skills a certain practitioner needs. Thus at any one time it can be reasonably well specified what skills or knowledge should be added to a particular employee's repertoire in order to maintain or enhance his or her productivity. Thus, aimed for this purpose is an infra-structure offering a very wide range of "short" courses from which to pick the exactly right one. The Minimalist view is also the basis of the idea that it can be determined what specializations are needed in a given society, i.e., it can be determined how many doctors, teachers or engineers are needed, to take typical examples. This view also carries with it the notion of over-education. This is certainly the view quite often challenged by governments and industry alike (but is perhaps changing). This is a pragmatist, rational and in many ways a sensible view, even if it carries with it the dangers of being pedestrian, constraining or in
some cases plainly narrow minded. It certainly does not encourage the visio-
ner.

The other strand within the human capital rationale is somewhat less prag-
matic, it has noble or visionary overtones and fits within what I call the Maximalist view, i.e. that the more education one receives (within limits), the better. Basically, the idea is that new skills, new points of view and thorough understanding is potentially of great value, although it may often not be clear how these may be relevant in a particular situation. This view could also be classified as the Potential view. It carries with it the notion of both breadth and depth in education. The rationale is that one is well served by having a broad background as well as having a thorough knowledge of one's particular field. The implicit assumption is that a good understanding of a field is a necessary, but probably not sufficient, prerequisite for progress. This seems to be the stance taken by many students who are keen to obtain a solid education and this of course is the rationale behind the educational programmes at most universities today.

When education is a luxury or a rapid transition should then provide? It should almost certainly be well served by programmes that satisfy both views presented above, i.e. a wide range of educational programmes to satisfy the immediate needs, as well as programmes that will find useful, critical, provoking, stimulating or inspiring programmes that will contribute to innovation, creativity and productivity in the widest sense of the word.

In any obviously assuming that skilled manpower is among the principal fac-
tors that stimulate growth, not only economic but also cultural, but that it is irrelevant unless someone wants the education offered, the students seeking education, the employers hiring the graduates, and the government providing these (the institutions and governments). Let us investigate the evidence for the interest of these parties by looking at some examples.

The students?

The students seem to be very keen. According to a study presented in a recent conference in Bolonia, it is clear that in many European countries a number of courses are applied in higher education and there are also German curricular requirements (see e.g. Kirstein, J. 1999). In most of these countries the number of applicants for a great number of courses far exceeds the number of places available. On the whole the demand for a good university education, a traditional university education, is greater than the supply. But, what about continuing education? In a comprehensive study of continuing education in Schmid's a fairly clear picture of its various aspects was obtained. Some pertinent findings of this study will be described here, not in too much detail, largely as important impressions related to students towards continuing education.

The study comprised 1,350 respondents, age 16-75, from a sample of 1,800. The study was carried out in May 1998. The questionnaire was relatively extensive with a lot of questions about respondents' general and educational background and attitudes towards school and learning and courses in continuing education in particular. See Jonassen & Amundset (1999). Respondents were asked to indicate whether they were interested in taking part in future courses of some sort if the opportunity presented itself. The response pattern was very positive. Even in the group with the least background education, only 27% expressed no interest, (table 1).

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Table 1.
Percentage of an educational group showing interest in taking courses. Everybody asked.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interest in Taking a Course</th>
<th>Level of Education</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Primary school or less</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Substantial interest</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No interest</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Part of sample in each group: 37, 47, 16 = 100
Those who had taken a course related to their job in the past year were asked how they assessed the course by hindsight. The positive attitude that emerges is noteworthy (table 2). One may have all kinds of cynical reservations about the criteria used by the respondents for this evaluation, but there is no doubt that this spontaneous reaction to the usefulness or relevance of the courses is very positive indeed.

A more general evaluation turns out to be even more appreciative, with about 80% judging it to have been a valuable experience and hardly any respondent being neutral or negative (table 3). There cannot be any doubt about the general appreciation of the value of continuing education courses.

About 30% of the sample had not also any courses of whatever kind lasting the past three years. It might be assumed that this group had little interest in continuing education. But this was not the case. About 60% expressed positive interest in taking courses but gave several reasons for not having done so. It is of particular interest to see how positive the attitude of the group with the least experience of courses and with the least background education is towards attending courses (table 4).

### Table 2
Assessment of how useful a course, supposed to be job-related, was deemed to be by respondents.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Usefulness of A Course</th>
<th>Level of Education</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Primary school or less</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very useful</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Useful</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not useful</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part of sample in each group</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 3
Assessment of how useful a course was appreciated overall.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>General appreciation of the usefulness</th>
<th>Level of Education</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Primary school or less</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very good</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not good</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part of sample in each group</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 4
Percentage of an educational group showing interest in taking courses. Those who had not taken a course in three years.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interest in Taking a Course</th>
<th>Level of Education</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Primary school or less</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Substantial interest</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive interest</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No interest</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part of sample in each group</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
These findings contradict what is taken to be common knowledge in Ireland that there is a steady consistency of attitude towards education. There is no doubt about the positive attitude of the participants towards continuing education.

Industry

But what about industry? One way to demonstrate its interest would be to present a summary of the contributions of industry to the education of its personnel, but here I will again present parts of our study.

In order to assess the attitude of management to continuing education we asked our respondents if they were part of management in the sense that they supervised or were responsible for the work of nine or more persons, and then what their attitudes were to this personnel taking courses considerably relevant to their jobs.

Again a very positive pattern was obtained. Nearly two-thirds thought it was very important and in fact practically all indicated a positive appreciation of course participation (Table 3).

We also asked them to reflect on the value of courses taken by their staff and once again a very positive response was obtained.

The conclusion from the survey is that the attitudes towards continuing education are very favorable and I conclude that there is a tremendous positive appreciation of education by the general population.

I suggest that access to education is so extensive that the problem is of supply rather than demand for places. The result is that the number of participants is much greater than could be expected in an open and student friendly system. This I think holds both for traditional education, notably higher education and for continuing education. That some of the deficiencies might perhaps make sense for the miniscule, but not for the majority.

The apparently positive attitude on behalf of industry has been indicated, administratively only with one example, but we will now turn our attention to the institutional response; i.e. the principal institutions of higher education, universities, are adapting to a changing world and contributing to the establishment of a higher calibre, flexible and creative skilled work force.

The universities

There has been a steady and steady growth in university attendance in most developed countries for the whole of the 20th century and there is no sign that this growth will subside in the first decades of the 21st century. Because of different educational systems and different definitions of university education cross-national comparisons are somewhat difficult. But in Fig. 1 we see...

![Graph showing university attendance](image-url)
the development of university education during the 20th century where the emphasis is on changes within countries. Thus we see the level of university attendance measured as a proportion of the 20-24 year-olds as equal to 1 during the years 1900 1910 for all the countries shown. Then the figure shows the relative changes. Two things are of particular interest. First is how similar the growth is in different countries, even showing the growth in the USA similar to the European countries even though the absolute participation rates in the States are much higher. Secondly how the growth seems to have an exponential form indicating continued fast growth (Ferrazano, 1999).

But despite this enormous growth, the character of the majority of higher educational institutions has remained incredibly stable. In fact, the most notable structural development has been to turn a variety of different educational institutions into fairly homogeneous traditional universities, the changes have sometimes only taken a few decades. This drift towards the academic "Humboldtian standard" is interesting because of the internal conflicts and problems that traditional universities have to tackle in their development. And it does not seem to be the intentions of governments that all institutions of higher education adopt the "Humboldtian" model of traditional universities.

I suggest that the influence the traditional universities have to deal with are certainly signs of their strength and they arising the reasons why institutions of continuing education should remain a very special status within their national universities, indeed why continuing education ought not thrive as an integral part of university faculties. The most typical characteristics of universities is their emphasis on rigorous academic (theoretical) knowledge and the ties between research and teaching. This body of academic knowledge, hopefully in the possession of at least appreciated by, every learning student, is taken to be the basis for later substantive work in the areas of specialization, for the appreciation of new trends, and for being receptive to subsequent training and of practical value in the long run.

But the acquisition of this type of knowledge is in conflict with the immediacy and relevance in the short-term, for which there is great pressure from some students, from industry and from governments which favor higher education but prefer it to be of shorter duration. We have similar conflicts between well-established traditional disciplines and claims from several sources for a variety of modern interdisciplinary programmes. We have emphasis on stability, mostly in academic staffing, which conflicts with flexibility in teaching and variety of service functions. Similarly the emphasis on qualifications and degrees conflicts with the idea of competencies which might be obtained outside the universities, or perhaps after studies of varying length. And finally the conflicts between homogeneity of degree structures and their diversity.

Probably the most important conclusion of the Ithaca (1998) and Bologna (1999) conferences on higher education was the understanding that university degrees should be harmonised with the five-year master programme as standard, but leading up to it in two cycles of ± 3 to 4 years. At the same moment as the European system is trying homogeneity to heterogeneity and flexibility it is asking for streamlining or rather administrative simplicity, justified by its intention to facilitate student movement between universities and countries.

People have been trying to grapple these conflicts by touting around the different conceptions of a university, an example of which is Clark Kerr's (1954) term multiplicity to emphasize the multitude of functions attributed to universities in addition to the research-teaching nexus. Interweaving research and teaching, an important characteristic the Humboldtian university, still nearly 200 years after its clarification (or concealment) seems to be the basic idea of a university. It was emphasized in the Bologna Magistra Charta, signed in 1998, when the 800-year anniversary of the university was celebrated. In this con-
text it will be somewhat difficult to sustain the idea of a purely teaching university (such as the existing education institutions) or the interesting idea of a service university which is currently being explored in Europe by, among others, Arild Tiede (1994) at the University of Oslo. Here we have a new type of university, which repeats some of the characteristics of the Humboldt university, but places also emphasis on short courses, consulting, local contracts, continuing education — on activities that would normally be financed by the contractors or the students directly.

For whatever attempt has been made to establish different types of institutions that carry the name university — they have in the long run an enormously strong tendency to drift towards the mainstream set by the Humboldt idea.

Against the background of the two strands of human capital theory, very appreciative views of students and the labour market towards open and more education, but also against the background of the rather rigid, high status and income framework of the research university, I will now consider what should or might be the institutional response consisting of at least four categories of teaching tasks. See Figure 2.

Category I.
All the traditional students, undergraduate and postgraduate and the corresponding degree courses.

Category II.
In recent times, "new" students (i.e., older students who study on a part-time basis, often alongside a job) have sought traditional degree courses. This trend has been especially prevalent when special programmes have been instituted, such as "Open University" courses or adult education programmes. The traditional university has often had difficulties adapting these students and thus alternative or extension programmes have been instituted. Categories III and IV, which are in fact very different, are normally within the purview of continuing education institutions and they must certainly be actively sought for within some systems (see Figure 2 for the groups of students in the corresponding categories).

Category III.
This is a fairly small group with a first or advanced degree, seeking very specialized professional development at an advanced level. The courses in this category would be very specialized, geared towards a very small number of people in each case. This is a group shown by the smaller and higher point in Figure 3.

Figure 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Traditional university education</th>
<th>Traditional students</th>
<th>Traditional courses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adult education</td>
<td>&quot;new&quot; students</td>
<td>&quot;new&quot; courses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>&quot;university&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;university&quot; courses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>&quot;university&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;university&quot; courses</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 3

[Graph showing percentage of students]
Category IV.

The number of students in this category is much bigger, seeking professional diversification, e.g., computer or management courses often in order to move to somewhat new fields. The courses are often fairly general, designed for a fairly large number of students. This is a group shown by the larger and lower square in Figure 3.

The principal question is this: To what extent do we expect a single unified system to cope with all the groups of students in the different categories? We have cases of tradition to cope with group I. We can cope with group II in the same system but only with some difficulty. But what would be the more appropriate environment for groups III and IV? Should we envisage that all these groups should be catered for within the same system, or should we have a multitude of systems for them? Probably specialisation is essential for these different groups would be very sensible.

I will present two classes of reasons for nurturing the more loosely organised continuing education set-up and thereby espouse why it may be of enormous interest to the traditional university to contain it within its field of influence. But it should at the same time become very clear why we need both systems or even more than two. I assume that the courses in continuing education are on the whole organised in much smaller units than normal degrees, normally not concluded with formal evaluation and are professionally (vocationally) oriented.

1. The inherent conflicts within a traditional university related to its academic emphasis, traditional discipline structure, inflexibility in staffing, emphasis on qualifications and the traditional degree structure makes the organisation of typical continuing education within this framework problematic. To say the least. In particular the dominance of the Humboldt model as the only acceptable one in strong university departments means that activities that do not fit into that mould are not likely to be an acceptable part of the official programme in the long run.

II.

Organisational considerations often prevail when planning courses in continuing education. The courses are short and free standing, with a flexible part-time set-up; courses are often adopted in people with greatly varying backgrounds. People who are already working are more likely to select those specific individual courses (rather than whole degree programmes) because they find them relevant and are thus highly motivated to benefit from them. People who come with a background from work in which to build their academic discussions are more receptive and therefore they are an invaluable asset to their educational environments. The mutual benefit of these courses to both teachers and students alike is likely to be maximal. Furthermore, research has shown that learning that takes place within or near the context of application is by far more useful than learning outside of this context.

Thus the loose organisation of the course structure in continuing education can be seen to be of enormous value to all parties concerned and we might even ask why those in charge of the organisations should not build the close relationship with universities carrying all these problems. But even though one might be wary of institutions like universities, with their rigidity, apparent lack of flexibility, apparent lack of innovation, with all their rules and regulations, with their concern for academic standards, one shouldn't forget their strengths. Despite claims to the contrary, the universities show impressive signs of being very competitive from several points of view. They are able to stay at the forefront in the scientific fields and they are the only institutions in a pluralistic society that have demonstrated their ability to move ahead of the tide, integrating moral ideas, rather than being controlled by the pragmatics of the market or the whims of the "fads business". Universities have within their boundaries the very highly motivated but some-
Thus it is possible to come to the conclusion that a high-caliber continuing education programme should be firmly entrenched within universities, but should at the same time be divorced from the day-to-day influence of the academic faculties. This can reap all the benefits of the alliance with academics and, at the same time, provide all the excite and responsive service to a looser, somewhat anarchic or diffuse continuing education institution should.

And it is clear that our universities are rapidly increasing their importance and certainly their output. But it would be very unfortunate if we would try to force our higher education systems into one uniform model.

Is traditional university education charging fast enough? I don't know. But I think that on the whole it is on the right track and is changing, probably fast enough, for its traditional task. But is university education changing fast enough? Here we have a different story. From one point of view it may be changing too fast and perhaps in the wrong direction. I don't want to sound prescriptive, but I have repeatedly emphasized that the only model we have for a higher educational establishment is the Humboldt model. So that is, perhaps, where all our higher education is heading. This, I think, would be very unfortunate, as I am convinced that diversity of function and structure is of paramount importance. I have tried to have, perhaps rather than argue, that a purposeful containing educational establishment is not only evidently sensible for a society that wants to be in a continuous transition, but is dearly valued for and appreciated to an extraordinary degree by most parties concerned. Its main problem and concern should be not to return but also to enhance those of its characteristics that make it distinctly different from traditional universities.

References


