

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?

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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 modern workplace. The second is the mechanisation or automatisisation and consequently changing job profiles, which in many ways require fundamentally different preparation of the work force 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 sixties 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 (normally with practical or professional bias), partly as short pre-degree courses but mainly 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 arrange the first degrees, both for professional development in their own fields and also on developments in other fields such as management or information technology (professional diversification). Furthermore, universities are meant to adopt new ways of operating, in teaching (e.g. distance education), administration (e.g. new budgeting methods) and research (both in terms of increasingly competitive grant applications and courting private enterprise for research funds).

Needs or potential?

What does a society in a rapid transition need? In particular, what should higher education provide it with? A tentative answer will be dominated by the investment or capital value view of education.

The answer is simple; it needs a competent labour force, but how should the higher education establishment respond? In particular, which form of operation is more appropriate, the one offered by the traditional university model or the form provided by the more recent institutes of continuing education.

In recent decades it has often been stated that the traditional view of education is the classical Aristotelian view which was expounded by the neo-humanists in the early 19th century. 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 educationists alike started to comprehend 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 pressing 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 know-how should be added to a particular employee's repertoire in order to maintain or enhance his or her productivity. Best suited 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 specialists 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 cherished by governments and industry alike (but is perhaps changing). This is a pragmatic, rational and in many ways a sensible view, even if it carries with it the danger of being pedestrian, constraining or in

some cases plainly narrow-minded. It certainly does not encourage the visionary.

The other strand within the human capital rationale is somewhat less pragmatic, it has idealist 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 of most universities today.

What education a society in 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 it will find useful, critical, provoking, stimulating or inspiring; programmes that will contribute to innovation, creativity and profitability in the widest sense of the word.

I am obviously assuming that skilled manpower is among the principal factors that stimulate growth, not only economic but also cultural. But that is irrelevant unless someone wants the education offered (the students seeking education, the employers hiring the graduates), and somebody provides it (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 Bologna, it is clear that in many European countries a numerus clausus is applied in higher education and there are also general entry 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 basic university education, a traditional university education, is greater than the supply. But what about continuing education? In a comprehensive study of continuing education in Iceland a fairly clear picture of its various aspects was obtained. Some pertinent findings of this study will be described here, not in any detail, largely as important impressions related to attitudes towards continuing education.

The study comprised 1350 respondents, age 18-75, from a sample of 1800. This was a telephone survey carried out in May 1998. The questionnaire was rather massive with a lot of questions about respondent's general and educational background and attitudes towards school and learning and courses in continuing education in particular. See Jónasson & Arnardóttir (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).

Table1.
Percentage of an educational group showing interest in taking courses. Everybody asked.

INTEREST IN TAKING A COURSE		LEVEL OF EDUCATION		
	%	Primary school or less	Secondary education	Tertiary education
Substantial interest		29	39	37
Positive interest		44	41	47
No interest		27	20	15
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 insight. 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 here 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 taken any courses of whatever kind during 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).

Table2.
Assessment of how useful a course, supposed to be job-related, was deemed to be

USEFULNESS OF A COURSE	LEVEL OF EDUCATION			
	%	Primary school or less	Secondary education	Tertiary education
Very useful		72	71	75
Useful		22	23	22
Not useful		6	6	3
Part of sample in each group		26	49	25 = 100

Table3.
Assessment of how well a course was appreciated overall

GENERAL APPRECIATION OF THE COURSE	LEVEL OF EDUCATION			
	%	Primary school or less	Secondary education	Tertiary education
Very good		81	80	77
Good		18	19	22
Not good		1	1	1
Part of sample in each group		26	49	25 = 100

Table4.
Percentage of an educational group showing interest in taking courses.
Those who had not taken a course in three years.

INTEREST IN TAKING A COURSE	LEVEL OF EDUCATION			
	%	Primary school or less	Secondary education	Tertiary education
Substantial interest		22	21	8
Positive interest		41	40	50
No interest		37	39	42
Part of sample in each group		49	43	8 = 100

These findings contradict what is taken to be common knowledge in Iceland that there is a sizeable constituency of people with a very negative 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 three or more persons, and then what their attitudes were to this personnel taking courses ostensibly relevant to their job.

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 5).

Table 5

Managers	
How important do you feel it is that your personnel take job-related courses?	
	%
Very important	63
Fairly important	33
Neutral	3
Of no value	1
	100

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 conclusions from the survey are that the attitude towards continuing education is very favourable and I conclude that there is a tremendously positive appreciation of education by the general population.

I suggest that access to education is on the whole held in check by the "system", e.g. by lack of funds or appropriate places, showing far less participation than would be visible in an

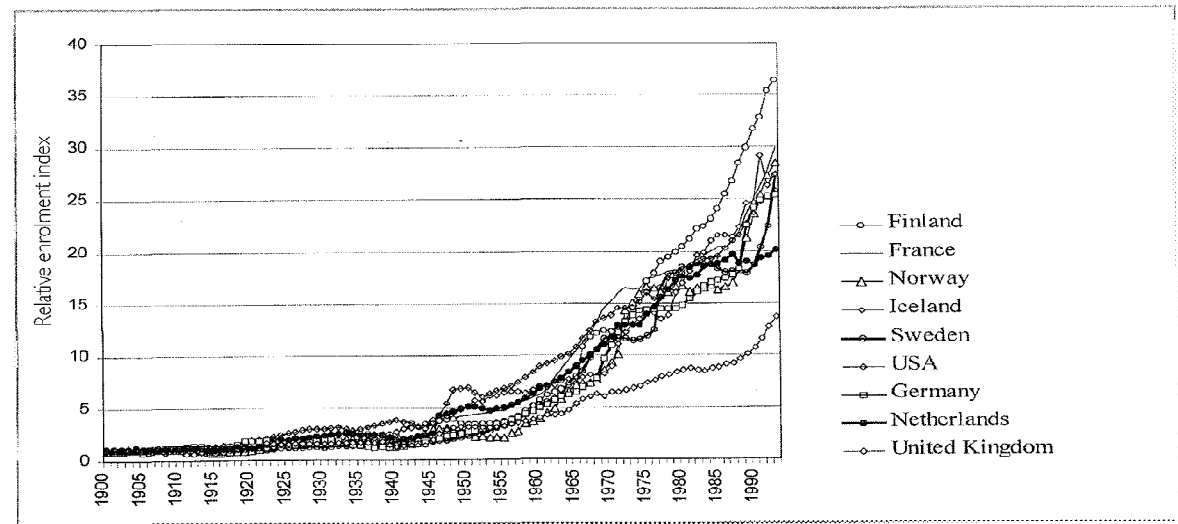
open and student friendly system. This I think holds both for traditional education, notably higher education and for continuous education. That state of affairs would perhaps make sense for the minimalist, but not for the maximalist.

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

The universities

There has been a hefty 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

Figure 1. The attendance of universities expressed in terms of the average size of the cohorts 20-24 (Mitchell, 1998a,b). Furthermore the average for the years 1900-1909 is set = 1. Data for Iceland and United Kingdom is set at the average of the other countries, as data was not available for the base level period. The order of countries in the legend is in the same order as the rightmost point for each line.



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It is quite obvious that the vision behind the recent Sorbonne (1998) and Bologna (1999) declarations draws on the 3-4 year Anglo-American first degrees and thereby attempting to shorten somewhat the duration of the first degree.

text it will be somewhat difficult to sustain the idea of a purely teaching university (such as the continuing education institutions) or the interesting idea of a service university which is currently being explored in Europe by, inter alia, Arild Tjeldvoll (1997) at the University of Oslo. Here we have a new type of a university, which retains 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.

But whatever attempts have 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 norms set by the Humboldt idea.

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

Category I.

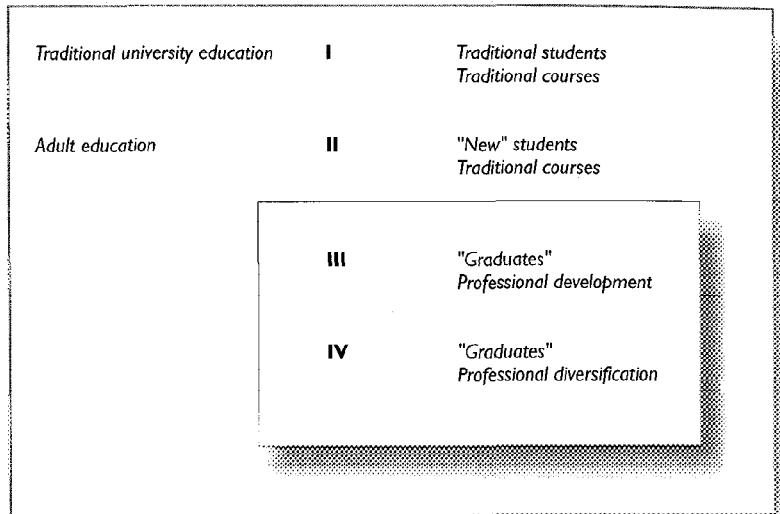
All the traditional students, undergraduates and postgraduates and the corresponding degree courses.

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. Their attendance 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 adopting 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 contin-

Figure 2



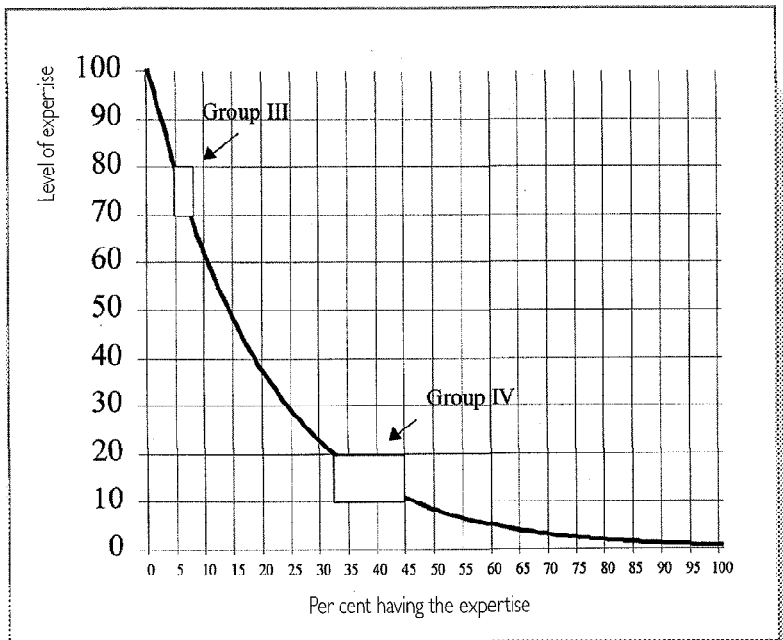
uing education institutions and they must certainly be actively catered for within some system (see Figure 3 for the groups of students in the corresponding categories).

Category III.

This is a fairly small group with a first

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

Figure 3



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 centuries 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 most 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 in catering 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 explain 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.

I.

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 adapted to people with greatly varying backgrounds. People who are already working are more likely to select these specific individual courses (rather than whole degree programmes) because they find them relevant and are thus highly motivated to benefit by them. People who come with a background from work on which to build their academic discussion are more receptive and therefore they are an invaluable asset to their educational environment. 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 bother with the close relationship with universities carrying all those 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 frontier in the scientific fields and they are the only institutions in a modern society that have demonstrated their ability to move abreast of the tide, instigating novel 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-

We must forego thinking about how to define what a university might be, instead simply accepting that there are an enormous number of very different institutions with radically different purposes and practices that might be called universities (for want of a better term).

Webster p. 165

what detached interests, the expertise, the stability, the continuity, the academic and critical anchoring, on which a strong and ambitious continuing education programme must lean.

Thus it is possible to come to the conclusion that a high calibre 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. Thus it can reap all the benefits of the alliance with academia and at the same time provide all the excellent and responsive service that a loosely organised, 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 mould.

Is traditional university education changing 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 pessimistic, but I have repeatedly emphasised 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 hint, perhaps, rather than argue, that a powerful continuing educational establishment is not only eminently sensible for a society that wants to be in a continuous transition, but it is clearly asked for and appreciated to an extraordinary degree by most parties concerned. Its main problem and concern should be not only to retain but also to enhance those of its characteristics that make it distinctly different from traditional universities. ■

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