

## Academic Values and Ethical Considerations as a Basis for Re-Assessment of the Role of the University [and other Higher Education Institutions] in a Contemporary Society

by

Jan Sadlak

UNESCO-European Centre for Higher Education, Bucharest, Romania

Until very recently we thought that only our world and its universities are subjected to change. However apparently, we have just learnt that our solar system needs a re-assessment of its planetary configuration. What is interesting in this story [at least for an outsider to astronomy like myself] is how a certain community of scholars now debates and decides about important issues within their own disciplinary boundaries, which are not without importance from the point of view of academic values.

But coming back to our Earthly problems of higher education, it is evident that in recent years the functioning of higher education - in local, regional and international contexts has been substantially redefined. The combined mega-global forces of scientific and technological progress make our economic, military, cultural and social activities increasingly knowledge-dependent – both with regard to *hard-ware* [in the form of new technologies] and *human-ware* [in terms of highly skilled, competent and knowledgeable citizens]. We can praise or criticize those and other developments, which are usually presented under the generic term “globalization”, and despite some ‘countervailing forces’ that may mitigate or have already mitigated globalization (Douglass, 2005), there is sufficient evidence that more competitive conditions, global context, and foremost societal expectations are making a mounting pressures on higher education. Its strategic direction is clear – there is a need for re-assessment of the role of higher education in contemporary society.

Quite telling argument for such a leap forward thinking is the outcome of the work of the U.S. Secretary of Education’s Commission on the Future of Higher Education, which points out that despite being one of the country’s greatest success stories... **the U.S. higher education needs to improve in dramatic ways**. If this is being said about the U.S. higher education what could be said about the state of higher education in other countries... To a great extent, the Bologna Process and its stipulated system-wide and institution-wide reforms, represent a European response to present-day [and forthcoming] challenges.

There is a long list of challenges facing higher education but the following three seem to be particularly valid also in the context of academic values and ethical considerations at the policy development as well as institutional governance and management:

- - the challenges of universal access;
- - role, organization and cost of research activities;
- - institutional diversity and expansion of higher education providers.

First, let us look at **access to higher education**. In the late 1970s it was considered that in order to grow, a society needed to assure that at least 20 percent of typical college-bound age group [those of 18-23 year olds] should have access to higher education (Perkins, 1977). It is now being argued that those numbers should now be at least double. When looking at those countries which are leading in all kinds of competitiveness tests it is easy to note that they enjoy participation rates not less than 45 – 50 percent of the traditional higher education-bound age-group [and some of lead countries are approaching 70 percent]. To these numbers must be added rapidly growing number of part-time students who are coming to improve their skills and updated their professional competences. So even if we can argue about numerical taxonomy – we are entering into the era of **universal higher education** – which main characteristics is high participation rate and in which there is a combination, or even merger, of traditional forms of study and those provided in response to lifelong learning needs. Without assuming any monopoly, it is nevertheless true that only higher education institutions can produce such varied employees/citizens in large numbers. This rapidly growing demand for higher education is an overall success story.

However it is not without its downside as it; creates enormous pressure on the infrastructure of higher education establishment, brings new dimensions in governance, management and administration of staff and students, requires very different, arrangements with regard to pedagogy and study evaluation, etc. etc. The sheer dimension of these issues does bring about not only changes in the physical and organizational façade of higher education but inadvertently enters into the very nature of the university as a societal institution, including its academic values and practices. **Higher education institutions still are confronted with discrepancies between traditional and other forms of study.** For example, even if there are no differences with regard to content of the given study programme and graduation requirements, there are perceptible difference between awarded diplomas for traditional and part-time or extramural forms of study offered by the same institution. Consequently, potential employers receive confusing signals about the academic standing of various forms of studies. Another and probably even more pertaining problem is whether above mentioned discrepancies are sustainable in the context of demographic trends clearly showing a diminishing of the pool of traditional college-bound age cohort....

The second but not less important challenge relates to changes in **the role and organization of research** in higher education. At least since the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, influenced by the Humboldtian model of the university”, research has been at the heart of the traditional university [or equivalent to it other higher education institutions]. It is in this context that academic community could reinforce its argument for the two pillars of its collective and individual existence – **institutional autonomy** and **academic freedom**. This claim came not from a clear cut monopoly on production of knowledge, but due to the need of confirmation of those freedoms, both for the teacher/researchers and students, in order to assure an organic and mutually reinforcing mechanism of free circulation of knowledge between research and teaching. In such a model it has been relatively easy to formulate shared objectives, to infuse mutual trust and recognize work of the individual researcher.

The Humboldtian model is not an altogether obsolete but it does reflect foremost a certain type of higher education institution often referred to as the “research-intensive” university. This is the model which the majority of academics like most and can provide many arguments for keeping it. Thus it is legitimate to ponder on the following question: **how much use and relevance can it be for new types of establishments which are now part of the higher educations systems**, and where there is more often is a situation of tension between “teaching” and “research” than mutual enriching feedback? There are already initiatives, inspired by public authorities as well as institutions themselves, to separate those activities with employment of “teaching-only” and “research-only” staff as well as universities, predominantly specialist institutions, which categorize nearly all their staff as “teaching

only” (Sanders, 2005). How such “division of labor” can be accommodated into academic values in order to avoid institutional and community divisiveness?

A growing number of present day higher education establishments are **very different organizations that those adhering to “the Humboldtian model”** [e.g. community colleges in the United States]. Such academic institutions are one of a number of institutional providers. In this context, analytical work on “new typology of higher education institutions” is needed, since with increasing diversity, it is more and more difficult to have a good map of the institutional mosaic of the system.

Not less important for this analysis is that **“research” has become a highly competitive activity** which requires enormous investments in personnel, infrastructure and equipment. It is an activity for “the strong and the brave” as the current debates around seeking a status of the “world-class university” [also referred to as “top-tier”, “top-ranked”, “world-acclaimed” universities] (Sadlak and Liu, 2006 forthcoming).

From time to time quite blunt views are expressed about the number of universities within a system that have the required critical mass of talent and resources to aspire to such a “Champions League”. For example, Sir Howard Newby, the former chief executive of the Higher Education Funding Council for England said: “under current levels of investment, there are only five or six world-class research universities [in the United Kingdom – J.S.] with top researchers across the board, and perhaps 25 to 30 institutions with pockets of excellence” (Major, 2006). And David Ward, president of the American Council on Education - ACE, considers that Europe can support only between 30 and 50 top-ranked comprehensive universities. The main reason being the cost of supporting such establishments is around 5 billion US dollars (Bompard, 2004) [per year – J.S.]. Consequently, the rest will have to diversify their missions, which does not mean that should be entirely divorced from any research or scholarship activities even if it is not a cutting-edge comprehensive endeavour for the whole institution.

It is a particularly valid argument because, universities and various other higher education institutions, are not only **producers** but also **disseminators** and **custodians of knowledge**. All these three functions are important but we also know that they do not necessarily enjoy the same status in the academic community with consequences for the preservation of **an all-inclusive coherence in the academic values**.

One of the consequences of development of higher education, particularly in industrialized countries, has been their respective **institutional expansion**. Even if when we take into consideration that the average size of a European higher education institution is around 6,300 students [23,500 students in Italy, 22,400 in Spain, 14,100 in Greece, 8,000 students in the United Kingdom, and 6,600 in Germany, 4,500 in France] (Sadlak and de Miguel, 2005), major actors in the European higher education are big establishments with big number of students and employees. And some institutions probably have passed a manageable size when their number of students is in vicinity of 200,000 students, e.g. the University of Rome, the National University of Mexico.

But whatever the physical size of a particular higher education institution, all of them operate in a complex set of organizational, financial, social and political arrangements. They are also involved in developing new arrangements for teaching and research. Consortia of institutions have been emerging on a regional and international basis to engage in borderless activities. It is not unusual that for such activities traditional universities have been forming alliances with non-traditional providers, public and private, to enter new markets and non-traditional forms of delivery such as the virtual and Internet-based study programmes. You may say, so far so good, but we also need to recognize that

these typical developments have not only pushed universities to assume more direct functions in the economic and social life of society, but have a profound impact on the university as a societal institution. This is why there is a growing attention being accorded to discussions about a conceptual model of the contemporary university – in other words a call for a “re-assessment of the role of the university”. The discussion about values is also important as globalization also implies that countries and their institutions bind themselves into a formal bodies but also into a network of laws and obligations which interact not only on basis of rules and regulations but also within certain set of values (Sadlak, 2001).

The above presented analyses of challenges confronting higher education is sufficient to draw a conclusion that present day higher education [particularly at the system level] looks like a mosaic composed of heterogenic pieces. In this new map of higher education, **discussion about academic values is important in order to establish a “cohesive element” for more and more heterogeneous systems of higher education composed of various types of institutions**. It is thus important that an organization such as the EUA-European University Association promotes such discussion among its constituency. Adopted by its members, the *2003 EUA Graz Declaration* states that; “the development of European universities is based on a set of core values: equity and access; research and scholarship in all disciplines as an integral part of higher education; higher academic quality, cultural and linguistic diversity” (EUA, 2005). The list is not a comprehensive one as such additional aspect as “good governance” and “affirmation to ethical considerations and codes of conducts” must be part of such updated set of academic values – a new academic covenant which would assert that “you can be free, relevant, and open to innovation by being responsible”.

“Good governance” reposes on the two pillars of academic values, that of academic freedom and institutional autonomy in order to exercise democratic governance and to protect students and teachers in their pursuit of truth and knowledge. But as rightly has been observed by Jürgen Kohler, “good governance” of higher education also has to operate within certain ethical framework which should help to steer the whole system and its institutions in the pursuit of excellence in teaching, research, and the services derived from them, and at the same time as much as possible preventing violation of academic equity and impartiality, faking the results of research, malpractices and conflict of interests (Kohler, 2004). Integrating of ethical consideration into governance culture, foremost through adoption of various **ethical codes of good practice** and mechanisms of **ethical audit** related to various aspects of functioning of higher education. For example, with regard to marketing of educational offer such audit should look into the following issues in order to set its own ethical standards (Kościelniak and Sobolewski, 2004):

- - **Coherence of educational offer** [Implemented program of study corresponds to that one presented in promotional and marketing materials], etc.
- - **Transparency of educational offer** [Potential student should have access to all relevant information concerning study program *before* taking a decision to apply to specific program. This includes information concerning cost of study as well as eventual discounts, penalties and financial assistance];
- - **Contribution to personal development** [institution assumes active stand with regard to personal development of its students by supporting sport and cultural activities such as student clubs, discussion groups, artistic ensembles, scientific circles, etc.]
- - **Auto-responsibility criteria** [institution acts in agreement with declared mission statement, which should included above mentioned criteria].

The need to receive skills and qualities that would enable leaders of the academic institutions as well as teachers and researchers, how to deal with ethically difficult situations [both related to personal

and professional relationship] seems quite obvious. A new but understandable development in this regard is that such needs are growingly observable among students (Banks, 2005).

It should be pointed out that adherence to academic values and revamped ethics policies should be part of institutional strategy and as such can actually turn into “competitive advantage”. It is worthy also to keep in mind that however important is infrastructure and financial assets, the academic values and ethical conduct not only contribute to the ability of a given institution to assure the quality of teaching and research but can serve as a “moral capital” which is necessary to deal with unforeseen challenges. It is in the latter context Burton Clark rightly argues that it is a “moral capital” of higher education institutions which determines their ability to weather crises without abandoning basic missions or educational principles (Clark, 1973).

In conclusion, history of universities confirm that while having educational and research responsibilities they were promoters and repositories of the ethical values of the respective society. Consequently, ethical responsibilities of universities should characterize them both as economic actors in society and as communities of academics, researchers, and students committed to ethical and academic values. The risk of erosion in these two areas can lead to **undermining** the status of higher education. While creating its acceptance will **confirm** the role higher education is called upon to play in democratic societies.

What is needed is to use that past experience as a source for its adaptation to an evident **paradigm shift** in the role, organization and functioning of higher education. It requires actions at the institutional, national and international level. There is a need for institutional, national and most of all the international dialogue on those issues and the meeting like this is excellent opportunity. Such dialogue is even more relevant as it is easily noticeable that ethical considerations are not only present when discussing higher education and scientific work, it has entered into politics, sport, media, and corporate world. Recently, I had a meeting with a successful Polish businessman and our conversation veered on issue of “ethics in business”. He has expressed the following view that “business is ethical when as its outcome in addition to profit is also left some new knowledge which is useful for society” which is a valid observation for when discussing ethical considerations and re-assessment of the role of the university [and other higher education institutions].

## References

- Banks, S. (2005), “The Ethical Practitioner in Formation: Issues of Courage, Competence and Commitment”, *Social Work Education*, Vol. 24, No. 7, pp. 737-753.
- Bompard, P. (2004, June 11), “Warning of elite of just 50 for Europe”, *Times Higher Education Supplement*, p.15.
- Clark, B.R. (1973), “The Wesleyan Story: The Importance of Moral Capital” in: D. Riesman and V.A. Stadtman (Eds.), *Academic Transformation: Seventeen Institutions Under Pressure*, New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Douglass, J.A. (2005), “How All Globalization is Local: Countervailing Forces and their Influence on Higher Education Markets”, *Higher Education Policy*, Vol. 18, pp. 445-473.
- EUA-European University Association (2005), “EUA Graz Declaration: The Role of the Universities to 2010 and Beyond”, in: *Reader of the EUA Convention Glasgow 2005*, Brussels: EUA, p.17-19.

- Kohler, J. (2004), "Prevention, Management, and Moderation: Ethical Frameworks of Governance", *Higher Education in Europe*, Vol. 29, No. 4, pp. 481-489.
- Kościelniak, C. and D. Sobolewski (2004), "Etyczne uwarunkowania marketingu szkół wyższych", in: *Marketing szkół wyższych*, Poznań: Wydawnictwo WSB.
- Major, L.M. (2006, February 10), "Newby attacks funding system", *Times Higher Education Supplement*, pp. 2-3.
- Sadlak, J. and J.M. de Miguel (2005), "Regional Perspective: Europe", in: *Higher Education in the World 2006 – The Financing of Universities*, Barcelona/Houndmills: GUNI and Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 198-215.
- Sadlak, J. and H. Ratajczak (2004), "Academic Freedom, Innovation, and Responsibility: Towards and 'Ethical GPS' in Higher Education and Science", *Higher Education in Europe*, Vol. 29, No. 4, pp. 433 – 438.
- Sadlak, J. (2001), "Globalization in Higher Education: Let Us Do It the Smart Way", *International Educator*, Vol. 10, No. 4, pp. 3-6.
- Sadlak, J. and N.C. Liu (Eds.) (2006, forthcoming), *The World-Class University and Ranking: Aiming Beyond Status*, Bucharest/Cluj/Shanghai: UNESCO-CEPES, Shanghai Jiao Tong University, and the Cluj University Press.
- Sanders, C. (2005, June 24), "Onward March of the No-research Regiment", *Times Higher Supplement*, pp. 8-9.