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The University of the 21st Century: Content and Curricula

Higher education in the world, but especially in Europe, is in turmoil - witness the Bologna process, Excellence Centers, the discussion of quality in general, market-orientation, introduction of new IT methods, adult education, continuous education, distance learning and many more new ideas that remain to be explored.

Moreover, the main preoccupation of university administrations and governmental ministries of education is with structures, administrative streamlining and efficiency, accountability, assessment and quality control (whatever this may mean), private versus public funding, and the "if" and the "how much" of student participation in the cost of their own education. And all of this is indeed very important.

However, certainly no less important are questions of content and curricula - questions to which very little attention is paid. What is the social, cultural, and purely intellectual task of the university in the 21st century? Has it changed over the centuries? Which other institutions - if any - serve to create new knowledge? What kind of new knowledge is our age in need of? In what ways can and should the university supply that new knowledge? Through new curricula, new disciplines, or perhaps through restructuring of the university in quite a different, problem-focused way than its traditional division into faculties of natural science, social science and the humanities? This is an intellectual task par excellence, namely to rethink what Francis Bacon called the division of the entire "globus intellectualis" into disciplines.

This agenda then raises the issue as to whether a single ideal curriculum should continue to deal with all these new tasks, or whether Europe has to move in the direction of differentiated curricula - i. e. diverse purposes and diverse student populations demand diverse curricula.

What kind of general education should an undergraduate in the 21st century possess? Should it comprise a new liberal arts concept or a new definition of humanistic education? What does it take for a student, in the course of three or four years of university education, to acquire both the rudiments of a certain discipline and to understand the great problems facing the world today - an understanding at least comparable to what one would expect to be gained from reading a good quality newspaper? And what does it take for that same student to have acquired enough of a scholarly methodology to know how to then continue pursuing their particular interests?

Can and should Europe continue in that certain tradition of the professions (medicine, engineering, law, accountancy, administration, etc.) being studied directly after high school, within the framework of an undergraduate curriculum, and with no initial degree in general education - or does Europe's particular socio-political needs presuppose a general education (e. g. a B. A.) for every student?

At the other end of the educational continuum, precisely what kind of doctorate is needed in both the natural and social sciences as well as in the humanities? The process of how doctoral students choose their topic, the intellectual climate in which they work, and the type of scholarly community in which they are ensconced - in short, the entire academic milieu - must be rethought.

Obviously, these issues are not independent of the strong European desire to compete successfully with research and development and HE in the United States, nor are they independent of considerations regarding the costs incurred to achieve these aims.

My year at Wiko will be dedicated to making a start on the study of this complex of issues.

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