



DISCUSSANT RESPONSE

by

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to Walter H. Rüegg's

**THE INTELLECTUAL, MORAL AND PROFESSIONAL VALUES
IN THE FACE OF THE MODERN UNIVERSITY IN TRANSITION**

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INTRODUCTION

Rüegg's 'Abstract' gives a good synthesis of his paper on 'The Intellectual, Moral and Professional Values in the Face of the Modern University in Transition'. The functions, objectives and values of the modern university are traced back to the main characteristics of the first universities in European history. Rüegg uses these characteristics as the basis for (what I will call) an 'idealistic' description of the fundamental intellectual, moral and professional values of modern universities which ought to provide for a 'humanistic education' in order to develop desirable human values in a pluralistic society.

COMMENTS

Ruegg calls for freedom of communication as an intellectual value which should be developed in universities as well as among scholars. The desirability of such a characteristic gives a lot of comfort to a paper discussant. Implementing this value, I would like to make the following comments.

1. Idealistic description

The description of intellectual, moral and professional values of both ancient and modern universities is 'idealististic'. There are a lot of 'shoulds' in Rüegg's paper, giving it a *prescriptive* character. One has the impression that these values are in line with the purest myths and highest dreams of mankind.

This comment is neither positive nor negative. It only expresses my consentment with the almost exhaustive picture of desirable values which

were proclaimed at the very beginning of European university traditions, and which are still the great 'ideals' to be followed by the modern universities in transition.

However, the concept 'ideal' means also that the reality has never been congruent with those ideals. It is most likely that a critical confrontation between this set of ideal values and the historical reality of both ancient and modern universities would yield a very different picture. My hypothesis would be that also the first universities (Rüegg mentions Bologna and Paris) have never reached these ideals. This comment brings me to a second one.

2. Ideal values in operational terms

The fact that Ruegg's values are idealistic is not contradictory to the expectation that they could be described in more operational terms. If we would be interested in both historical and contemporary research concerning the gap between the real and desirable values of universities, we would be in need of more operationalized concepts. Concrete research questions could be:

- To what extent is the famous ERASMUS programme of the EC promoting or hindering the implementation of the values enumerated by Rüegg?
- Is the changing role of the State (from centralized welfare to liberal remote control) and the consequent dependence of universities on external sponsoring influencing the traditional functions, objectives and values of universities?
- What are and will be the consequences of the increasing mixture between the 'old universities' and the new types of higher education?

This kind of questions supposes some methodologically disciplined models which would be able to meet the historical, sociological, political, economic... reality of universities. The intellectual, moral and professional values of universities are never to be described in isolation; they are always to be connected with strongly influencing time-space (f)actors.

3. Values and functions historically and socially determined

Rüegg's picture of values, exhaustive and inspiring it may be, invites very little to see how values, demands and functions of universities are influenced and shaped by the needs and requirements of time and space (f)actors. The sociology and philosophy of values and knowledge tell us that the production of knowledge, attainments and attitudes depends largely on time and space; they are historically and socially determined. This goes hand in hand with a changing intellectual, moral and professional value hierarchy. Time and space factors are crucial where values and types of knowledge are related to each other in a specific hierarchy subject to social pressures. Theories and research on the 'hierarchy of values and knowledge' reveal that in the social interplay of forces, successful forms of values, knowledge, skills and attitudes can be revalued upwards. Furthermore, it is conceivable that certain kinds of values and knowledge will not have the opportunity to develop independently because they are ruled by the dominant form. The specific (ethical, cognitive, aesthetic, religious...) style of this dominant form can penetrate the domains of other forms of values, knowledge, etc. So, e.g. concerning values, 'conductors' and sponsors, external to the university, have a considerable influence on the (f)actual value hierarchy which is functioning in research units, in the teaching activities

and interactions between professors and students. As far as knowledge is concerned, nowadays the empirical-analytical style of reasoning of physics is strongly dominant and is applied as far as possible to most other forms of knowledge.

But values and forms of knowledge are mutually embodied in groups of human beings and in organizations which set themselves up as the major exponents of these forms. They are the experts, and their institutions are the higher education sector and the universities, but also increasingly the research centres of large firms. Because these latter are the (re)producers of values and knowledge, these subsequent values and forms of knowledge becomes dominant. They also have the capacity to guarantee the greatest success in everyday life. They have in effect the power to provide solutions to those problems of which the outcome is deemed vital for a particular society.

Rüegg's list of values risks to lose analytical power if the suggested confrontation with influencing time-space (f)actors is not met.

Today, we live in a society in which the requirements of the labour market are held to be the most sensitive expressions of dominant needs and priorities. The success and standing of academic values and disciplines (their curriculum and research) is increasingly assessed in terms of the employment chances of their graduates. Study profiles most prized by the market are thus the controlling elements through which knowledge, skills, attitudes and values are ranked at universities. The critical question is then: how far is the academic cultivation of values and the production of knowledge, skills and personality characteristics sufficiently in harmony with consumer demands or with the labour market? If it meets this test, then the evaluation is positive and the normative pattern is successfully satisfied. If not, then a more labour

marked-oriented value hierarchy and knowledge production will be required, failing which these disciplines will find their survival threatened - few students, fall-of in technical, scientific and academic staff, reduction in grants for daily operation and research. The hierarchy of values, knowledge, skills and attitudes, modulated in the labour market by power relations, is thus highly normative for the corresponding academic hierarchy.

4. More than 'two fundamental demands'?

Rüegg mentions 'two fundamental demands' which have confronted universities ever since their very beginnings: on the one side, the advancement of scientific and scholarly knowledge, on the other the training for the professions which require scientific and scholarly knowledge for their practice (p. 2).

It is my opinion that (also on historical grounds) more functions (or demands) could be indicated, at the same time enlarging the capacity to critically describe and analyse the value changes of both ancient and modern universities. It is common knowledge that nowadays there is little unanimity about the overall mission of universities. In times when the established knowledge hierarchy is under threat, the goal orientation of the university is also compromised. Nevertheless a certain unanimity could be found around the following aspects:

- (1) cultivation of scholarship;
- (2) provision of education and training;
- (3) service to society;
- (4) responsibilities as a social critic.

Unanimity on this fourfold task does not prevent there being a ranking of factors related to time and space as well, including among them (nowadays) the requirements of the sponsoring labour market. Hence priorities among the tasks (demands) are established. I hypothesise that there will be a correlation between a certain hierarchy of values and knowledge on the one hand, and the goals set for higher education and universities on the other.

When placed against the current requirements of the labour market, these goals for higher education may give rise to the following theses.

- (1) *Cultivation of scholarship.* Autonomy to cultivate knowledge becomes extremely relative once higher education and university research are dependent on the labour market. When government directives become politically and economically one-sided and when the knowledge market and the knowledge-brokers have to look for money to undertake scientific research, then a critical threshold has been crossed. Universities become obedient, submissive, humiliated and reduced, if not to serfdom at least to beggary.
- (2) *Provision of education and training.* Utilitarianism and instrumental studies are more successful than ever. What is useful can best be interpreted by reference to the requirements of the labour market. This tendency amplifies the process already begun with the so-called vocationalising of higher education. In this situation, the main task of the university is seen as qualitative and quantitative tuning. The concept of learning most in keeping with this scenario is cognitive instrumental learning, which assumes a dominant position; dominant values are pragmatism, opportunism, utilitarianism.

(3) *Service to society.* Education, training and research benefits the whole of society. But here too a limit is reached when the service rendered by higher education to society are regarded as its essence. At present there is a real danger that the 'service university' and 'responsive higher education' are losing their identity by going too far in this direction, and succumbing to the temptations of the labour market uncritically and unconditionally.

(4) *Critical responsibility.* Higher education and the universities have always been identified by their spirit of critical responsibility. History records how the universities in particular have striven hard to free themselves from the dogmatic grip of the churches and their tendency to retain control (as also mentioned by Rüegg, p. 16). Yet it seems as if the economic subsystem in contemporary society has 'overflowed its banks' and became normative in other spheres of life. The careful funding activities of industry and the banks, by exceeding their reasonable limits, have become a new form of tutelage and a source of new dogmas. A new 'Age of Enlightenment' and emancipation seem called for.

By contrasting these tendencies with the traditional goal setting of universities, together with the theses noted above, observers are reaching the conclusion that the 'service university' is the dominant function and ranks highest in the hierarchy. Useful and market-oriented knowledge production, education and training are considered as the norm, while critical responsibility risks being relegated to last place. In line with the priority given to service, the universities attach much greater importance to public relations and lobbying. Thus power is

being gained but at the same time autonomy is being lost.

Fundamental questioning of the goals dictated by external normative frames of reference is not the order of the day. The requirements of the labour market and the economic subsystems, standing as the outer markers of our contemporary advance and social 'progress', are not required to prove their value. Their requirements are accepted as legitimate, since they are certain to 'succeed'. Similarly, little critical attention is paid to quality of knowledge production, to the skills, attitudes and values of their ranking. So it is that the university is lauded for its pragmatic and vocational approach yet at the same time is turning itself into a questionable and one-dimensional utilitarian form of high-class vocational school.

As an ancillary to this conclusion, the question now arises as to the specific place of what Rüegg calls 'humanistic education' as well as the place of humanities learning. Are they subject to the same forces, i.e. the requirements of the sponsoring community and the labour market?

5. The future of 'humanistic education' and the humanities

Rüegg prospects that the demand for 'humanistic education' and 'well-rounded personalities' will undoubtedly become one of the main challenges to the modern university in transition (p. 35).

I would like to support the call for 'humanistic education' on condition that this type of education (see my comments on Rüegg's paper at the occasion of the XVIIIth ICUS Conference) continues to generate enough critical energy to unmask the dominant ideological forces on the relations between higher education and the requiring, normative society (c.q. the labour market).

But to what extent is this hope justified? Given recent developments in both 'humanistic education' and the humanities, it is increasingly clear that a fundamental crisis is now upon us.

Especially concerning the humanities, there is a considerable amount of 'functional' -especially social science- research of a low theoretical standard. Moreover, in some academic circles, the criticisms formulated by Feyerabend, Lyotard, Habermas and others carry substantial weight. There is doubt as to the possibility of acquiring knowledge of the social sciences in a manner that is both rational and legitimate. Does this mean that both 'humanistic education' and the humanities are heading for an uncertain and not very bright future? What sort of identity will they have in a post-industrial society?

One prospect at least is very clearly offered by the present neo-liberal policies, and that is an even more direct adjustment of 'humanistic education' and humanities learning and research to the short-term needs of the economy and the labour market. This development, which in many countries is definitely encouraged by the authorities, means that the fundamental question about the intellectual quality of theories falls by the wayside and is crowded out by the rush of immediate usefulness. 'Humanistic education' as well as the humanities are forced to give up their emancipatory and utopian values; instead they are required to make it their explicit task to contribute as effectively as possible to the maintenance of and innovation in the (post-)industrial means of production.

We agree with Rüeegg that 'humanistic education' is very important to the modern university in transition on condition that this type of education allows and (even more) stimulates to question critically the dominant values and (often hidden or implicit) normative societal patt-

erns as well as their ethical and political implications. In this perspective, 'humanistic education' and humanities learning and research at universities are not to be seen *a priori* as making destructive criticisms of the dominant values and forces of the production in contemporary society. Rather, they may be seen to serve as the critical and vigilant keepers of the rational, ethical, aesthetic and religious foundations of our historical experience of which the university is a very important (or maybe most important) (re)producer.