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The role of universities in society. Is there a true sense of serving?
Voices from a recent Dutch debate.

by Dr Teun Wolters (Wittenborg University of Applied Sciences)

Introduction

Recently, we saw Dutch students protesting universities, alleging they have developed into 'diploma factories' without really involving students and lecturers in the strategic decision-making. It is mostly efficiency and short-term results that have prevailed; other important values have been neglected.

Within this context, I would like to discuss with you several issues that may also be of importance to you.

We must go back to the 1960s and 1970s to see similar actions by students. These actions were successful in realising real democratic influence by students and staff at various organizational levels. Since then, however, the level of influence by students and staff has been reduced step by step for the sake of efficient decision-making

The instruments and techniques currently used to assess the output of research and education appear to be rather neutral and innocent, but in fact they represent a technocratic outlook while. Education is increasingly understood in terms of markets and consumers.

What is wrong with it? Seeing the topics of the presentations of this seminar, managing your university in an efficient way is something that is prominently positioned in your minds. As a economist, I can appreciate that.

In terms of participation, higher education in the Netherlands has become a real success. The number of students have been growing. A system that deals with scores of students requires good management.

According to a Japanese institute, Dutch higher education has been earning a worldwide reputation for its high quality. This status has been achieved through a national system of regulation and quality assurance such as review activities by the higher education institutions themselves and accreditation by an external accreditation agency. The Netherlands also has a broad experience in international promotion and collaboration (1).

Given the seemingly contradictory voices that we can hear, it makes sense to attempt to bring to the surface what is behind all this. I do not claim to have a full explanation, but at least I can mention a few developments that may be informative and relevant.

The topics I would like to discuss with you are as follows:

- Management thinking has gone too far
- Morally responsible students
- Critical thinking
- The Principles for Responsible Management
- Learning from the problems at research universities
- Prospective ethics
- There are doubts whether the streamlined educational programme prepare students for life.
- A lack of critical thinking as part of curriculum
- Research and teaching have grown apart. In research universities teaching is seen a secondary capacity
- Sustainability and responsibility as core competences in a globalised world

Management thinking has gone too far

Discussions in the Netherlands and elsewhere indicate that this 'management thinking' may go too far. There comes the point from where other values are demanding a greater priority. Many feel that such an instrumental approach may have little to do with what it means to be a good teacher or a good researcher or what it implies to provide an outstanding education to students. System values ((such as productivity, output, acquisition, number of students) and norms that managers apply are putting increasing pressure on professional values ((such as originality, innovative thinking, imagination, humility, collegiality and integrity) and norms held by teachers and researchers. This means not choosing for the ivory tower of excellence (benefiting just a few) but to be universities that invest in individuals, in meaningful conversation, in thoughtful expressions, in dignity, humility and delayed spaces of reflection and engagement.

Where such a climate prevails, faculty and students may feel uncomfortable and conclude that their studies lack in depth. Such a criticism can be expected to be uttered by a school's best students. Perhaps, offering special programmes that are exciting and challenging to the more ambitious and talented students could be one way of addressing this issue.

Morally responsible students

As professor Tineke Abma of VU University put it (1): if we want to prepare students and young researchers for life, and if we want to teach them to be good citizens and academics who feel morally responsible, we need to integrate cultural and moral learning processes into the curriculum and research assignments. (2) Fortunately, at Wittenborg University elements of this included in the curriculum. A most visible aspect of this is that many textbooks pay attention to ethical and social aspects of a management subject, such as innovation and marketing. A next step may be a joint discussion on what learning outcomes and competences we have in mind, how we can make sure that the various modules reinforce such ethical competences (rather than contradicting each other).

In the 1980s many business schools have started to introduce business ethics modules, however, in many cases these modules are optional or a matter of choosing between several electives.

Perhaps "the most important way for us to understand ethics in an educational setting is to identify the traps that can lead even the most morally upstanding person to act unethically. How are students with little or no professional experience to know that even the most seemingly innocent decisions could end up ruining far more than a career?"(3)

Especially, in an international context, the traps and temptations may be even greater. "The essential information should focus on the various influences that lead good people to do bad things. For example, a strictly performance-driven company culture can place employees in a situation of anxiety and even desperation, where unethical decisions are made to satisfy demanding managers. The company culture may even ignore or turn a blind eye to unethical behaviour to ensure high margins, making it all the easier for a well-intentioned employee to make a bad decision. New graduates are often so willing to please and impress their superiors that they may not only cut corners to begin climbing the ladder but be open to doing most anything that will advance their career. New graduates are often so sponge-like in absorbing everything around them that they never even consider the implications of what they're being asked to do. As seen in many white-collar crimes, chasing bonuses, stature, and the rewards from unethical activity is what blinds many professionals into rationalizing their poor decisions." (3)

Critical thinking

Frequently, it seems that critical thinking, which requires some doubt of one's own judgment, has been replaced by a reactive attitude. This may be a matter of protecting one's own culture and identity. Fearing change makes it impossible to remain curious about different points of view. The world is changing, and a defensive attitude towards this change is counter-productive.

When students come to the Netherlands to study, they must understand that they are going to live in a pluriform society. Article 1 of the Dutch Constitution is about the principle of equality. That means that discrimination based on religion, convictions about life, political persuasion, ethnicity and gender are not allowed. Democracy is not only a matter on giving way to majorities but equally a matter of respecting the rights of minorities. Therefore, coming to the Netherlands does not imply you should give up your identity. All inhabitants are expected, if not obliged, to respect you, and, by far, most of them will do so. This acceptance is what you will experience at Wittenborg University, that welcomes students from all over the world. Nonetheless, it cannot be denied that all of us are influenced by our surroundings, by the people we meet. If you are afraid of that, rather than being curious, you better stay at home.

A positive and curious attitude, however, does not exclude a critical attitude. Power is in the processes which we take for granted and often reproduce, even when they are not in our favour (4). Therefore, developing a critical perspective of certain developments in society or the world at large is crucial to an academic education. At Wittenborg University this becomes, for instance, explicit in the modules of hospitality management and globalisation, which explicitly take critical perspectives on board.

For some students adopting modes of critical thinking seem to be hard, especially when it focuses on their own country. For instance, as a lecturer of International Labour Relations I discuss in class, among other things, the different positions of labour unions in several countries, including China. It is a known fact that Chinese trade unions operate under the umbrella of the government and therefore can hardly operate as an independent promotor of worker interests.

In a written exam, I asked the following question: "Western observers tend to doubt whether Chinese labour unions can be regarded as independent organisations able to defend the interests of the workers. Explain what argumentation is behind this doubt."

The issue at stake was formulated in a very neutral fashion. The correct answer was explanatory only while the student could reserve his/her opinion about it. However, most Chinese students who

participated in the exam, if not all, avoided to answer the question by circumventing the issue and writing down things that had nothing to do with the question.

The above is just one case in which critical thinking, that begins with factual thinking, emerges in our educational efforts. By avoiding the answer, it becomes very hard to have an open discussion about relevant issues. It is already something if we face the facts, irrespective of the country or region where we live. However, it is also important to accept that others may have a different view on certain matters without condemning them. This kind of openness is, within certain limits of humanity, essential to an academic education and a mature civil and democratic society.

Among all of this, we should ask ourselves: are we serving society?

The Principles for Responsible Management

It is increasingly being recognised that taking responsibility for a sustainable world is the only way forward. Climate change, pollution, degradation and depletion of natural resources etc. threaten our very existence. The essence of sustainable development is that it can be linked to the needs of the present generation without endangering the ability of future generations to meet their needs. The UN report "Our Common Future" (1987), which presented the definition of sustainable development (often called sustainability, as the more practical side of it), assumed that worldwide economic growth was needed to solve the issues relating to poverty and inequality. Meanwhile it has become clear that an increase in production does not lead to a diminished inequality among people.

The issues of poverty, pollution, depletion of natural resources, and climate change are just as urgent as they were in 1987. Today we are confronted with rising sea levels and climatic effects in terms of draughts and erratic rains and thunderstorms. That means that despite the many measures that have been taken over the years, more drastic steps are necessary. Most of all, it is important for companies to integrate sustainability in their entire business activities. We need the transition to a sustainable enterprise.

It is evident that education must play a major role in preparing the younger generations for the future. They will be the managers and workers of tomorrow who must realise a fully sustainable economy. Sustainability must become part and parcel of all modules and loom large in our business research objectives.

People increasingly recognise that taking responsibility for a sustainable world is the only way forward. Climate change, pollution, degradation and depletion of natural resources, etc. threaten our very existence. The essence of sustainable development is that it meets the needs of the present generation without endangering the ability of future generations to respond to their needs. The UN report "Our Common Future" (1987), which gave the definition of sustainable development (often called sustainability, as the more practical side of it), assumed that worldwide economic growth was key to solve the issues relating to poverty and inequality. Meanwhile, it has become evident that an increase in production does not diminish inequality among people.

I am appreciative of Wittenborg University's adoption of sustainability in various modules. For instance, I have the privilege to include sustainability in a module about innovation and to teach the module Corporate Sustainability as part of our MBA programme. Also, in other modules, such as in hospitality, tourism and event management, sustainability issues (issues of social responsibility) are included in the materials. I believe we can come to a more coherent approach to incorporating sustainability in our educational programmes. Part of that, can be implementing a sustainability management system in the university itself as part of its quality management programme.

Today we see a growing number of governance and management concepts that tend to overlap and are subject to various forms of cross-fertilization. Think concepts such as corporate governance, business ethics, corporate responsibility, the triple-bottom-line People, Planet, Project, corporate sustainability and sustainable chain management. The extension of corporate governance towards a broad group of stakeholders has led to an even further broadening of corporate concerns and responsibilities. This has inspired the areas of stakeholder management, business & society relations and, not in the least, the wide area of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). ISO 26000 provides clarity on both the content and the process of CSR. It distinguishes seven general principles of social responsibility which are applied to seven core subjects (which are worked out into CSR issues). The seven general principles are: accountability, transparency, ethical behaviour, and respect for stakeholder interests, respect for the rule of law and respect for international norms of behaviour and respect for human rights. Moreover, ISO 26000 holds more specific principles, such as environmental principles. No need to say that such a systematic overview of CSR activities can serve the purpose of effective and sustainability accounting.

The broadening of frameworks and fields of special attention seems to have culminated in, what is called, Responsible Management. This is a comprehensive concept that brings the various pieces of sustainability together. In Responsible Management, the individual perspective has a prominent place. This concept corresponds with the United Nations' Principles for Responsible Management Education (PRME) network (with 670 universities as signatories) (5).

Laasch & Conaway (6) claim that the logical next evolutionary step is translating the organisational vision into the managerial and operational achievement of this vision by a responsible manager, however, without giving up the merits of the previous organisational emphases. These authors distinguish three domains:

-        Sustainability (aims to create a neutral, or better, a positive triple-bottom line)

-        Responsibility (aims to optimise stakeholder value)

-        Ethics (aims to create moral excellence).

Levels	Domains		
Domain level	Sustainability	Responsibility	Business Ethics
Organizational level	Business sustainability	Business responsibility	Business ethics
Management level	Sustainability management	Responsibility management	Ethics management
Core concept level	Triple bottom line	Stakeholders	Ethical issues

The above is just to give an impression of the Responsible Management approach (for the details, see 6). It is a framework that covers a large variety of topics and issues relating to sustainability and CSR.

Part of the Responsible Management 'programme' is achieving stakeholder accountability by integrating sustainability, responsibility and ethics into the company's accounting and controlling system. Along with this, it is necessary to develop and use indicators for social, environmental and ethical activity and performance as a basis for Responsible Management activity. There is a need for internal and external reporting about Responsible Business and its performance. 'Sustainability accounting and controlling' is defined as a subset of accounting and reporting that deals with activities, methods, and systems to record, analyse and report: 1. Environmentally and socially

induced economic impacts, 2. Ecological and social impacts of a company, production site etc. and 3. (perhaps most importantly) Measurements of the interactions and links between social, environmental and economic issues constituting the three dimensions of sustainability.

The authors indicate that the dominant paradigms of financial management (concerning profit, growth, short-run, money as a measuring rod, shareholders only) stand in the way of creating a responsible business. Solutions to dismantle those paradigms might require dramatic changes and disruptive innovation. Such solutions are not readily available (6, chapter 15).

The role of the CFO in corporate governance was already mentioned before when talking about the important role of FO's and controllers in ensuring management control in support of corporate governance. This shows how the functional and personal value systems relating to finance and financial management is a crucial and at the same time vulnerable aspect of achieving a sustainable enterprise.

In conclusion, it seems worthwhile for universities to link up with this UN network in setting up a systemic responsibility programme involving all basic modules that we see in business education.

Learning from the problems in research universities

From our research universities, we hear about criticism of the relationship between research and teaching. For universities (of applied sciences) that find themselves in a process of building up research capacities, this information could be very useful when designing their own research strategies.

In research universities, research has given a much greater priority than teaching. Those who excel in teaching may experience hardly any recognition for that. A clear split has emerged between research and education, tasks that used to be intimately integrated. The split makes it more complicated to translate research into education, and researchers are becoming increasingly less skilled in supervising young people.

- In building your own research capacities, this should be a warning. Let teaching and researching be integrated. Recognize and reward good teachers and let them work together with researchers. Enrich the text books with fresh information from your institution's own research.

Within the domain of research, a competition model has been introduced in which money must be acquired via a system of proposals and review procedures. This stimulates entrepreneurship, but it has also led to a situation in which researchers spend almost one third of their time writing proposals of which only a small part get funded. The focus on output (such as number of publications and PhDs) puts major pressure on people and creates a climate in which academic integrity is undermined (e.g. by means of data manipulation or salami slicing techniques to produce separate publications that should have submitted as a single manuscript). The quality of researchers is measured in terms of scientific impact by means of quantitative instruments (number of publications in certain academic journals, citations scores in journals with certain impact factors).

- In building up your own research, make sure that research is not for the happy few of so-called excellent researchers. Recognize the value of practical research that help solve problems in your communities, even if it does not always qualify for the highest ranked academic journals.

This system fuels competition focusing on the individual researcher, while research is often enabled by collective endeavours and facilities. The competition is so high that it leads to a situation in which cultural-critical approaches and the societal relevance of research beyond its purely economic value are undervalued (7).

- It would be interesting to see private universities develop such business models that preserve the highest academic standards of scrutiny, social involvement, critical thinking and problem solving. There is room for innovation.

Prospective ethics

In one of the previous section I discussed the topic of responsible management. I would like to add to this. Responsibility is, of course, a critical standard to judge where things went wrong, who is accountable and what has to be done to correct the wrongdoings.

I agree with Wempe (8) when he writes that sustainability as a social task requires an ethics that is prospective. Prospective ethics is about the role that an individual, a company, or any other organisation plays within the bigger picture. This vision is also relevant to universities.

The key question is how education and research may contribute to thinking beyond the boundaries of disciplines, of sectors, supply chains, companies and organisations and how they can identify social issues that can be analysed in cooperation with other sectors, leading to joint efforts to find solutions. Let's work together as universities to accomplish that and light the fire of academic commitment to society.

That means that cooperation with society is very much needed. A great deal of knowledge is already available in the different of organisations, such as business, civil society and public institutions.

Education for the future should be based on a good match between research and teaching, and it should be organised around the major societal questions that are recognised in the real world.

This can also be described as the universities' moral obligation to the present society. Prospective ethics points to the obligation to do the rights things for a sustainable future. It is a demanding task but at the same exciting and leading to the kind of fulfilment that of all of us are longing for.

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