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## **BUILDING AN OPEN, ENGAGING AND INNOVATIVE SOCIETY. THROUGH ACADEMIC EDUCATION AS A PUBLIC GOOD**

### **Abstract**

*The aim of the paper is to discuss the problem of perceiving academic education as a public good that helps to develop an open, engaging and innovative society. Perceiving academic education as a public good should not be limited just to economists. It is also important for political and social scientists interested in the development and efficiency of education systems and management. The expectations concerning the sector often seem to be not only exaggerated, but also unrealistic, the way it is managed controversial, while its effectiveness, both in economic (the rate of return of investment) and social (usefulness for the society as a whole) terms, is repeatedly questioned by the labour market and social development reality. Although the scope of problems involved is beyond the reach of any single paper, it is worth looking more closely at least at three major issues that always come up in discussions concerning the effectiveness and productivity of university education in general. These include: the mass character of education and the individual capability of a student to benefit from it, the concept of public good in the context of university education and the ability of higher education to develop innovations.*

**Keywords: academic education, public good, social equality, innovation**

### **Introduction**

It seems to be natural to base the process of building an open and innovative society on the development of education. The growing level of scholarisation is a popularly accepted political prerequisite for development of reflective citizens, successful economy and advanced technology. This leads to a no less popular assumption that education is a public good, a common investment of a society to achieve a better future.

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And as with every popular assumption, policy prerequisite or general wisdom, it is sometimes worth asking the question: is it always so?

To answer it correctly one has to take a closer look at the education system, as well as at the essence of education as such. Numerous papers and studies confirmed long ago that there is an obvious difference in terms of social and economic development between countries with well-developed primary and secondary level education and those which are unable to provide basic education. The first group enjoys more resourceful, innovative and versatile citizens, while the latter group usually lags behind in economic and social terms. This seems to be strong enough an argument to agree that primary and secondary education is a public good worth protecting and cherishing. However, one category remains outside the scope of reflection – academic education.

The aim of the paper is to discuss the problem of perceiving academic education as a public good that helps to develop an open, engaging and innovative society. The question whether university education is a public good is not just a question for economists, but also for political and social scientists. The expectations concerning the sector often seem to be not only exaggerated, but unrealistic, its management methods controversial while its effectiveness, both in economic and social terms, is repeatedly questioned by the labour market and social development reality. Increasing internationalization, deepening European integration and growing mobility of labour require the policymakers, education professionals and political economists to take a step back and at least to assess the challenges and problems concerning the role of academic education in the development of modern societies. The volume of the paper limits the possibility to address all of them. Nevertheless it is worth looking a bit more closely at the three major issues that always come up in discussions: the mass character of education and the individual capability of a student to benefit from it, the concept of public good in the context of university education, and the ability of higher education to develop innovations.

The paper is not aimed to be a scientific analysis of the problems concerning the academic education standards and methods. Its aim is to form some more general questions concerning university education based on academic practice rather than scientific analysis of academic management. The contemporary evolution of the university institutions does not seem to fully address the challenges they are facing. Maybe it is time to take a step back, forget for a moment about the existing strategies, programmes and plans, and to have a broader look at the nature of university education as such.

## 1. The Student and the Academic Education

The first problem arising in every discussion of academic education concerns nobody else but the students. If one analyses the effectiveness and accountability of the academic education process, sooner or later one ends up talking about students and how well they do in the post-educational life. This aspect of the discussion is most often analyzed from two perspectives. The first one is generated by the students and their families who expect the university to provide opportunities for a better life in the future. The second concerns the society expecting the university to provide intellectual means for development. However, everyone seems to forget that actually, when it comes to the quality of university students' education and performance, the university as an institution may address it to a far smaller extent than many assume.

Based on common academic experience one may easily state that a student's academic performance is a combination of three major elements:

- hard work – the element which may be addressed by both the academic teachers and the students themselves. The teachers and universities may provide opportunities to learn and help students to make use of them. The students may make use of the opportunities provided for them and look for other places to gain new skills and knowledge on their own. Thus, it seems that the issue of opportunities concerning academic performance may be addressed relatively well by all the parties involved;
- intellectual capability – more controversial, nevertheless important. However politically incorrect this may sound, if one takes into consideration that academic education requires the highest level of expertise, it becomes obvious that not every member of society will be able to comprehend it. And regardless of how much one would like to minimize the importance of this feature, one cannot deny that it is the essential reason why university education is actually elitist in nature;
- luck – the most controversial but also, if understood correctly, the most problematic of the above. First and foremost, it means being born in a family that can afford to support the child throughout the whole educational process. If one takes into consideration the fact of financially supporting the offspring for almost 25 years, in many cases this becomes one of the major elements of economic reality for many families all over the world. Eventually, it also becomes one of the most important practical barriers in terms of social equality in the access to university education.

However debatable the issues above may seem, one should not tackle them only from the technical perspective, meaning: how we should address them, what instruments should be used to achieve the highest degree of success, how education process should be reorganized to minimize the impact of negative economic and social

externalities and so on. The most important element is to notice that regardless of how states and societies address them, there will always be two broader questions involved.

The first question concerns social equality. Education, in particular at university, always was and still is a venture for those who are comparatively more affluent in the society. This leads to the question: can something productive be done about it without having to address a broader scope of social policies? The second question concerns intellectual differences between various members of the society. Regardless of the fact that everyone is equal in the court of law, intellectual differences are something that nobody can deny. Thus, is popular university education productive if we take into consideration that in reality only a minority of the society is capable of coping with it in intellectual terms?

Obviously, it is almost impossible to answer these questions without making choices which are political in nature. Nevertheless, in the context of the title of this paper it is far more important to notice that actually these two questions have always accompanied the discussions on university education, accompany it today and probably will do so in the future. Thus, it is worth acknowledging that the very nature of university education will always involve tension between expectations of individuals, the society and the capacity of the institution which deals with students who are already a “product” of primary and secondary education systems. Maybe the first thing that should be done before starting any debates concerning the condition of higher education institutions is for these facts to be realised by all the parties involved?

## 2. Academic Education as a Public Good

The second aspect of any discussion concerning university education as a common achievement of the society involves the concept of public good. One far too often hears calls for more equal access to academic education, particularly in the context of lifetime education or permanent education concepts. Again, the common assumption is that more highly educated professionals the society produces, the better for the society. In consequence, another assumption is made – that university education should be a common endeavour of the entire society. However, the question is whether promoting academic education as a public good is actually the best way to achieve all the goals above?

The concept of public good is central to the economic analysis of the role of government in the allocation of resources. A perfect public good is defined by two characteristics:

- non-excludability: it is not possible to exclude non-payers from consuming the good
- non-rivalry in consumption: additional people consuming the good do not diminish the benefit to others.

Based on intuition and common knowledge, the concept of public good fits well into primary and secondary education. However, the problem concerns the fact that in practice education, especially university education, is not a perfect public good. There are two reasons for that:

- the possibility of exclusion – again, if we take into consideration how much a full educational cycle costs, it becomes a natural source of social diversification. Just like income differences are a part of reality for every society, so does the access to academic education. The problems of exclusion may be addressed by the state, especially on the primary and secondary level. However, if one takes into consideration the processes of globalization and the flexibility of capital, the differences at the academic level are far more difficult to tackle at the level of an individual state;
- is mass university education still really a GOOD – more and more EU countries face the problem of overqualified young people with the education level unparalleled in previous generations with no labour market interested in them. One may even state that policies promoting academic education are partly responsible for overproduction of university degree holders and underproduction of blue collar workers, especially in developed countries. Thus, the question is whether the public intervention was actually effective or maybe counterproductive?

The consequences of the abovementioned conclusions are far from developing an open, engaging and innovative society. The international movement of persons includes students, who will look for the best quality of education available for the price they are able to pay. The natural consequences are threefold. First: the international movement of persons translates into the mass migration of intellectually better-equipped individuals from less to better developed countries. Second: at the same time the less developed societies will not be able to take advantage of the best educated students. Third: addressing these problems by any single state becomes simply impossible. More affluent families will benefit from common social policies, while average taxpayers will share the burden of supporting university education they may not be able to afford to enjoy at its fullest. Thus, social diversification is a natural consequence.

Maybe it is time to ask a very inconvenient question: does the popular public university education actually make society more inclusive and open or maybe strengthens the existing social inequalities under the banner of openness and inclusiveness? In academic practice, academic education becomes more and more

international. Acknowledging that fact may help societies and policymakers understand that maybe it is time to start to think not in terms of international competitiveness, but of international complementarity, for example providing opportunities for students to pursue international education instead of narrowly supporting domestic academies. Maybe riding the wave is a better choice than standing against it?

### 3. Innovations and Academic Education Systems

The third and final aspect provocatively emphasized in the paper concerns innovations and the ability of universities to produce them. Contrary to the common belief, it is hard to always agree that universities are the hubs of innovation. In practice, the contrary is true. To paraphrase T.S. Kuhn, scientists and researchers are more often preoccupied with reproducing the system that breeds them than with developing something new (Kuhn 1962).

From the economic perspective, we can talk about three basic kinds of innovations (Mazzucato 2015):

- simple substitution – developing something new to simply replace something that grows old on the basis of adaptation to new reality. Innovation is described here as an evolution without significant added value;
- quality development – in other words, the development concerns higher effectiveness of the new product compared to the one that is being replaced, however without changing the very nature of the item replaced. To make it simple: it is cheaper, faster, more productive, but still based on the same idea. Thus, while the product is new, the idea behind it remains the same;
- genuinely new idea – which creates a new dimension of reality with new products and forms of activity. In economic terms, this means creation of a new market, in social terms – of a new reality.

The question is can any academic system sustainably produce anything but the first two kinds of innovations? New ideas often require revolutionaries raised outside of the system. It is enough to mention that some of the most successful IT products were developed by people without academic experience. Also, as Peter Drucker has proved, the public sector always develops more slowly than the private one (Drucker 1985). Again, it is enough to mention that private research universities are already turning into international institutions rather than remain domestic academies. So are the expectations concerning universities' innovative character not at least a bit exaggerated?

Of course the statements above are biased, on purpose though. For example, the most developed university system in the world – American one – was the engine of the US development. However, the exaggeration aims to emphasize that nowadays most of high expectations concerning the universities' innovative character are simply unrealistic. Just like the most of the large-scale academic projects stretch across many countries and institutions, the most of contemporary genuinely innovative achievements are hard to attribute to a single institution and even more to a researcher. Globalization, flexibility of labour and capital and accumulation of knowledge on the global level have already crossed the state boundaries. Thus, the question should concern not how to make the university innovative, but how to sustainably connect it to the naturally innovative international environment. Saying this seems easier than embracing the consequences, though.

## Conclusions

To paraphrase T.S. Kuhn again, what we see depends not only on what we are looking at, but also on what we were taught to notice (Kuhn 1962). These words seem to perfectly fit the area of academic education. Does the emphasis on education really produce equal, open, inclusive and innovative societies or maybe is just a smokescreen hiding the development of new elites? Is it worth investing into large populations of students or maybe it is better to switch to more efficient management of education? Is it possible to address the need for innovations via university education? It is surprising how often the stereotypes rather than conscious reflection shape popular picture of this area of social activity.

The major aim of the paper is to suggest that the outcome of every political, popular, expert or other discussions concerning how to deal with specific problems emerging in academic education depends first and foremost on the way the parties involved perceive the university as such. The way contemporary challenges that university education faces are addressed far more often reflects not the reality around it, but how this reality is perceived by the parties involved in the process. And most of the problems that come along are caused by misconceptions and lack of imagination or understanding of the nature of academic education. It is natural that it is elitist. It is natural that social changes introduce instruments aimed to make the access easier. And it is natural that quantity does not always translate into quality. Nobody should be surprised that making academic education popular leads to the decrease of its value. The most important thing is not to change the very nature of university, though.

University is not just a teaching or a research institution. It is an opportunity. Its major aim was never simply to teach. Its aim was to share valuable intellectual experience. The biggest asset of any academic system is the opportunity to share these experiences, to embrace them and to pass them on. Of course these should not be arguments to turn university into an ivory tower beyond reach of outsiders. However, such statements should be taken into consideration when it comes to assessment of university performance. The university enriches the society in intellectual terms. Economic and social gains are positive externalities. And maybe the most important thing is to consider whether this equation should be changed at all.

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