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The role of the university in the 2020s

Moira von Wright

Introduction

The university, as an idea and an institution, has its roots long back in Western history, and it continues to gain respect in society at large. Having a university degree or a university position opens up doors to influence and work-opportunities that might not otherwise be opened. Nevertheless, the university of today is challenged by several rapid and drastic changes in society, for good and for bad, and the expectations on the university as an institution to deliver results for stakeholders and funders is speeded up. Therefore, it is important to discuss and to talk about the role of the universities in the 2020s.

We are facing a time where the pedagogic form and the working methods of the European universities, and indeed the entire idea behind the university, are becoming increasingly important to defend, and in some ways even to preserve. Quality assurance, striving for (often narrow and sector-specific) excellence, mass education, international competition, common values such as sustainability, gender balance and equal access, the corporatisation of higher education, and so forth—all these trends speed up the tempo of the university in relation to the surrounding society, and alter its focus from internal deliberation to accountability, external evaluation, administration and effectiveness. In addition to this, we have witnessed how unforeseeable developments such as the COVID-19 pandemic unexpectedly and quickly has spread over the world and entered the daily life of students, teachers and researchers, and affected their interrelations. The situation pushes both staff and students to carry out their meetings and work on the screen—often in their homes—that for many leads to isolation and a lack of common or broader engagement. It also increases the expectations put on the researchers to come up with supposedly relevant or positive knowledge in real time. On the other hand, the university, as an institution, has a remarkably stable tradition, supported by common scientific methods and an international dialogue, which gives it a potential to survive long periods of economic depression and social instability—much thanks to the inner ethos of academia. However, the consequences of the restrictions that the pandemic sets for the academic practice of face-to face interaction in seminars, lecture halls and labs cannot yet fully be clarified.

Mission

The universities' most important mission is to develop scientific knowledge and to educate the students, and this must, despite trends and changes, be done in a habit of academic autonomy: "Universities generate a wide diversity of outputs. In research, they create new possibilities; in teaching, they shape new people", Bolton and Lucas (2008, p. 4) argue. Education in a university differs from the education and training in other institutions through its unique pedagogic form, a form "that turns matter into public matter"

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(Masschelein & Simons, 2012, p. 166). The pedagogic form of the university implies that it is disconnected from particular usages and interests of certain social groups, professions, markets and the like (*ibid.*). There is a dynamic between the demands of this pedagogic form on the one hand, and the expectations of society on the other: the pace is speeded up by the quick communication where there is hardly any time lag between what is presented for the research community today and what the expected outcome for society tomorrow is. The role of scientific curiosity is downplayed, and even threatened.

Inasmuch as a university can be recognised for its research and specific pedagogic form, it is also part of the very society where it is located. An important task for the university is thus to interact creatively and positively with its surrounding society; on campus and in the cities. Even though the university is global and universal in its form, its location gives it special qualities and characteristics. Åbo Akademi University, the Swedish (language) University in Finland, is a university like other universities in Finland and Europe, but in addition to this, it has the specific task to educate professionals in the Swedish language (a minority in Finland)—thus implying cultural demands that go beyond the regional expectations of the cities of Turku and Vaasa where its campuses are located.

Among all aspects that connect a university to its location, and at the same time keeps it apart from society, the most significant are:

- to have an impact on society and the environment through knowledge and education,
- to undertake free research and not avoid unexpected trajectories and uncomfortable truths,
- to contribute to the urban environment and the regions and cities' opportunities to flourish.

Uncomfortable truths

Universities have a role as producers of knowledge and of—sometimes even uncomfortable—truths, albeit preliminary ones. Autonomy is central, and we need to get the outside world to listen, as much as we need to challenge ourselves to become better at communicating our knowledge. In everyday speech, a distinction is often made between basic and applied research, but in many cases, this is a rather limiting division. At the same time, we see an increase in collaborative efforts where knowledge is developed together: it is relevant, for example, in matters of professions in medicine, health, pedagogy and technology. Knowledge development also takes place in practice and is mutual, so the concept of “co-production” often becomes a more telling concept than “application”. For example, the cross-disciplinary research profile *The Sea* at the two universities in Turku functions as an open meeting place, a Living Lab, for science and society with various actors in research, education, and society (policy) to ensure the long-term well-being of humans and the marine environment—with knowledge based on science.

A university with its critical gaze, critical thinking and innovations and its uncomfortable truths is not always an easy matter for political life: To dare to listen to research and make use of the new knowledge that emerges can sometimes be a major challenge for the political system. Consider, for example, that already in the seventies and eighties, our researchers showed the effects of our food production on the Baltic Sea. They sounded the alarm—but despite some changes, the political system has not been able to take full responsibility. What we call “science-based counselling” needs to be developed and communicated.

The variation in the different types of knowledge that a university can contribute with is great: the division between basic and applied research can in many cases feel old-fashioned as we face major societal challenges that need to be solved and that require interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary solutions. They also require education, and they require innovative, sometimes even radical, thinking.

Culture in the interface between the university and its region

The importance of universities for society is not only instrumental; a welcoming campus, open discussions and ongoing deliberations are part of the intellectual and cultural life of the location. Culture is often thought of as either being about performances in art, or being an ideological battlefield for the contradictions of late modern society, but I suggest that we imagine culture in other terms: partly as context, identity and experience, but mainly as meaning, place and possibility—as part of the campus' space for learning:

A great deal of learning undertaken in the universities is necessarily characterised by uncertainty of outcome and divergence of viewpoints and values. The learning that is associated with the process of deliberation is one such example. In the Nichomacian Ethics, Aristotle (1955:119) defined deliberative reasoning (phronesis) as “that which happens for the most part where the result is obscure, and the right course not clearly defined.” Whatever learning happens as a result of phronesis cannot be pre-specified: if it could, it would not be phronesis. (Nixon, 2012, p. 147)

A campus that embraces open discussions and cultural diversity invites different meanings and experiences for the young people who populate our premises, libraries, cafes, museums and conservatories. Through education and an increase in knowledge among our students, higher education creates meaning and manageability, and through its regional presence the university creates spaces that at best pulsate with life, so that culture flourishes. We can see an increased interest in culture in all sectors and also the acculturation of the economy. We also see how the meeting between different social groups and minorities challenges our fixed notions of culture. Åbo Akademi University's research profile Minority Studies contributes with important knowledge about, among other things, these issues. Building profiles that pick up the questions and grasp the wicked problems of our time is a way for a university, such as Åbo Akademi University, to engage in problem solving and reframing our societal goals and endeavours.

There is a democratic potential in seeing the university campus as a liminal space between the inner life of academia and the ongoing life of society, and it offers an opportunity for increased commitment. Our university education provides a society with professionals, and our research profiles make important contributions to both industry and society. Within Åbo Akademi University the research profiles Technologies for a Sustainable Future and Solutions for Health combine thorough and innovative scientific research with an engagement in the needs of society and nature. Hence, results are quickly communicated and become part of international efforts to come up with solutions to specific and defined problems.

However, a university must not avoid the uncertainties of scientific research or fall for the pressure of short time expectations: scientific results cannot be pre-ordered. The speed of societal change today is a clear countertrend to the long-term, slow and contemplative development of the traditional university with its deliberative practice. Furthermore, unexpected findings may change the course of knowledge development, transform the disciplines, and ultimately even restructure the universities internal organisation.

So, we ought to keep in mind that “whatever policy-driven demands are placed on the universities and whatever the desire to mandate particular outcomes, the space of university endeavour is essentially one where discoveries cannot be determined in advance and where the consequences of the encounter between minds, between a mind, a problem and evidence, and between the minds of successive different generations are profoundly and marvellously unpredictable. They are the very conditions of creativity” (Bolton & Lucas, 2008, p. 4).

Contributions to the urban environment

The universities' educational mission is an important aspect of our society's ability to work for a viable democratic society, to contribute with knowledge for sustainability and a green transition, and to achieve the UN's sustainability goals, and tackle issues of migration. They all require both breadth of education and excellence in research. The university's educational mission is basic, and it is comprehensive—no one should be allowed to take a university degree without having a basic education and ability for critical thinking and general scientific literacy. The core point of the university is educational and formative: the scientific way of working shapes our thinking and can therefore contribute to creating an environment that paves the way for success both within academic research and society at large. Higher education is not a private matter; it is an opportunity for our entire society, our environment, and our well-being. It can contribute with the capability to widen our understandings and seeing things from different perspectives. We already have technical know-how to produce ever more sophisticated systems of communication, but we must also take responsibility for the deliberative capability necessary to achieve shared understandings across deepening ideological and cultural divides (Nixon, 2012, p. 148).

We can see the how the presence of a university contributes to the flourishing of a region, and how the loss of it tends to quickly deteriorate the openness and culture of it, by looking at the history of the city of Turku: The Royal Academy of Åbo was established already in 1640, but it was moved from Turku to Helsinki in the late 1820s, and the consequences for the entire region were devastating. Luckily, there were insightful forces that raised money and resources, and eventually two new universities were established: the Swedish-language Åbo Akademi University in 1918 and the Finnish-language University of Turku in 1920. Today our two universities are collaborating intimately within education and research and contributing to the flourishing of the city, and to the necessary green transitions.

In his book titled *The most prosperous cities in world history, or how tolerating diversity creates wealth and civilisation* (my translation), Ari Turunen (2015) describes how freedom and diversity are the cornerstones of a successful and happy city, and as I see it, the role of universities and education is indispensable:

In the cities of this book, different people and experimentalists looking for something new have been allowed to live in peace without persecution and restrictions. Cities flourished because they encouraged freedom of thought and action and understood foreign languages and cultures. And if influences were not always desired in these places, diversity was tolerated. Of course, you don't have to get excited about everything: it's enough to be able to put up with those who get excited. When the environment allows for freedom and foreign influences, the result is a success story for the economy, science and art. At least for a moment. (Turunen, 2015, p. 13, my translation.)

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Author biography

Moira von Wright is Rector at Åbo Akademi University in Finland (August 2019–). She has a long career as professor and researcher in education and social philosophy, and among many things, she has been Professor of Education at Örebro University, Professor of Humanity and Welfare at Ersta Sköndal Bräcke University College, and the Vice-Chancellor of Södertörn University (2010–2016) in Sweden.