

THE UNIVERSITY AS AN ENVIRONMENT SHAPING SOCIAL ETHOS AND PROMOTING CULTURE IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC

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Abstract

For many centuries, the university as an institution has engendered and interpreted social ethos. At the same time it promotes culture and advocates creation and confrontation of new directions in art and literature in conjunction with the ongoing cultural currents. The ethos of the university is defined by its search for truth and its service; that is a service to society, promotion of culture and the establishment of national elites. The connection between ethos and the intellectual cultural creative potential calls for the academics to continue leadership in promotion of culture in that ethos. Czech higher education faces many unknowns largely dictated by the country's economic situation and consequently the changes in the finances of higher education.

Key words: crises of a University, education in the Czech Republic, ethos of University, promoting culture

Introduction

The existence of European universities over nine centuries has allowed universities to establish ethos which has been handed down as a set of unwritten rules. This ethos is and was a kind of a moral imperative for the entire academic community. Academia has had to protect its core values from this ideology of ethos; has tried to keep the maximum freedom and space that has enabled the development of new ideas in literature and art, even in difficult times, when the lack of freedom was caused by World War II and subsequent communist dictatorship. Paradoxically, in the Czech Republic, the „Velvet Revolution“ of 1989 brought not only freedom of thought, but also serious moral dilemmas that have not been experienced in previous years. The democratic system brought a new political culture to the ruling

elites and influenced the academic environment. A free market has forced universities to adopt unfortunate solutions. The budgets of higher education institutions started to depend on the number of admissions which consequently caused lower teaching standards and reduced the status of higher education. This attitude is the reason the humanities are marginalized and perceived as unprofitable. The pragmatic search for the source of funding of the institutions increasingly causes the promotion of art, literature or philosophy to diffuse. The mission of universities towards society starts to clarify Public universities are forced to be run more like business institutions rather than for public use (Readings 1996). National and community institutions of higher education have a slightly different mission than the private, not operated by government, and the latter's focus is to generate profit (Koucky, Bartusek 2010). One of the tasks of such national and community institutions is to offer and maintain unprofitable degrees in the liberal arts, theology, and art. The mission of all the universities is promotion of culture, but this characteristic of the mission does not always create profit. In the case of private universities, its characteristic is to promote corporate culture.

1. Basic trends in higher education

To assess the state of higher education in the Czech Republic, basic global trends must be considered. Globally, the importance of higher education is noticeable. This is due to the increase in the role of science in a market economy, particularly in the innovation process, and the opportunities it offers for training focused on the needs of the labor market (Aghion et al. 2008). The high percentage of young people graduating from high schools allows the country to be competitive in the global market. Some argue that fifty percent of students should continue their education at a higher level (Skibniewski 2010).

Because of the development of science and the progress of technology, there is a need for a quick curriculum content adaptation that follows these changes in the labor market. This situation requires the transition from the highly specialized studies to a broader, multi-level continuing education (Mika 2009: 71-72). Such training, divided into relatively short periods would provide the opportunity to an operative start, a pause and resume of studies in order to react to the current market situation; to gain different specializations tailored to the specific work needs. Current advances in technology allow facilitating remote learning, for example the use of e-learning (ICT). Besides the e-learning as an alternative form of education, there are also complete virtual universities. Many of them are business founded by large corporations in order to offer training to their employees

for the corporations' needs. Such universities provide training and postgraduate specialized workshops. These new type of institutions are not bound to a building or a campus. Classes are held in rented rooms, office, labs or just in cyberspace (Skibniewski 2010). This positive aspect of teaching form can also be vulnerable and some of its dangers should be emphasized: depersonalization, where students rarely or not at all meet with a teacher; teaching content loses its individual character because it is often taken out of interpersonal context. Promotion of culture is much more limited for students taking evening or virtual classes. Besides education, the traditional form of schooling offers a long lasting relationship in the environment promoting culture and art.

Administrations of many universities, such as Purdue, Stanford, MIT, the University of Michigan, and the University of Illinois have long recognized and encouraged faculty members to engage in a wide range of activities outside the university; their academic staff members are largely affiliated with or employed by corporations and their expertise and research benefit the corporations. The general trend in the development of Czech universities is in line with the existing system, which puts less emphasis on the development of academic staff and the level of education of humanities and emphasizes the importance of technical and economic studies.

Along with political transitions privately owned institutions became a reality. For investors, higher education has become an economic activity. This fact has changed the perception of higher education. Knowledge is increasingly seen as a commodity, curricula as products and the students as customers (Kerr 2001: 64-96). Students expect that investment in education will help them achieve a better position in the labor market. Higher education institutions in order to gain new students use marketing techniques similar to those of companies.

In managing education, institutions require a well-crafted and specific approach. Administration should be required to display both managerial skills and the highest academic level but quite often it contradicts. In the Czech Republic, private education for their administration prefers to choose people skilled in management rather than those of the highest academic level, with the highest degrees. To help solve this dilemma in private education, two separate administrative functions should be created: managerial and representative. Increasing number of people wants to access higher education but it does not always go hand in hand with their intellectual potential. The government subsidizes higher education institutions depending not only on the number of students admitted, but also on the degrees it offers. A further element of the funding of public universities is their achievements in the field of science, also their publications and their quality, projects and

the quality, quality of faculty and degrees the staff holds. The Czech government's protective role of the universities gradually decreases. Every year the amount of government's subsidies allocated in the public schools also decreases. The rules that keep changing cause great turmoil and the solution for diminishing financial resources is found in radical steps in the form of reducing the amount of subjects taught and by dismissing the faculty. Consequently, this process leads the universities to scale down its focus to courses on a narrow specialization of study and weakens the meaning of universities as centers of scientific research for universal and interdisciplinary studies (Polkington, Tupper 2002).

Because of the lack of financial resources, the universities collaborate with smaller towns and cities to locate their branches there to create environment for study at home or in the vicinity of the significantly lower cost of studying which also encourages more people to study. By establishing local centers for study, it originates places of reputation and prestige. Such university branches contribute to the promotion of art and culture through participation and creativity of local students and their academic staff.

2. Ethos of a University

Ethos is a set of ethical values that are widely accepted in a given place and time in history; it regulates mutual relations of members of any social structure. Ethos of a university exists in an unwritten form. Universities are an integral part of the social system consisting of individuals, institutions, and traditions, where new ideas are formulated, verified and presented to the public. Research, discussions, lectures, literary and artistic workshops conducted at universities should reach beyond the walls of the universities and thus enrich the whole society.

The basic value of the academic ethos is to serve the truth. This value is the starting point for the three major functions of higher education, which includes: research, education, and service to society. In the service to society there are elements: creation and promotion of culture.

3. In service of the truth

A characteristic feature of university education is an introduction to the universal knowledge. It means that any discipline's research and results is supporting and cooperates with other disciplines. Disciplines' Individualism and exclusiveness sooner or later can cause exhaustion of its potential and can obstruct or narrow down reality horizons. (John Paul II. Meetings with Deans). In this commercialized world the discipline and studies that bring material gains are preferred. In the fields of technical sciences, there

is a much greater threat to isolate them from the anthropological and ethical considerations than the in the field of the humanities. In the Czech Republic, the field of economy is a negative example of separation from the fields of philosophy and ethics which results in losing its humanistic roots. Many publications point out this attitude and the most important work about it was published by Tomáš Sedlacek (2011) *Economics of Good and Evil*.

Science does not exist for its own good; it should be in the service of humankind. It seems to be necessary to continue the development of the humanities to help people understand and master the world of technology. Spiritual dimension of a person should also been take into account. In the spirit of ethos, the purpose of higher education is not to convey knowledge only but to teach people to think independently (Tomczak 2010).

4. Academic freedom

Academic freedom of research, freedom of teaching and institutional autonomy is the basic values of ethos. An important feature of academic freedom is tolerance of different views. Tolerance does not interfere with the integrity and violate the dignity of another person. Imperatively, tolerance respects different opinions, accepts everyone's right to have a belief in anything, even though a believe seems absurd or unreasonable. The grant of the right for all people to express their opinions does not weaken anybody's mean to search for truth and the opportunity to express their views as objective ones. A university's task is to verify the veracity of opinions. This task is not in conflict with the principle of tolerance, especially when it is applied to the search for truth in a genuine academic discussion within the framework of generally available scientific methods. Also, a public proclamation that some views are false is not contrary to the principle of tolerance, especially when it is conducted without deliberate disregard of the persons and their views.

5. Personalism: freedom and human dignity

The theory of personalism confirms that a human being is a person, a rational and free being, an ontological and legal subject and is manifested as such. Scientists should consider this statement as it applies to every human being. Freedom of science and culture are the major challenges for social personalism. These basic human freedoms are reaffirmed, particular by the UN's Charter of Fundamental Rights and Freedoms, Article 27, and refer to the fact that a person has the right to participate freely in the cultural life of a society, should have access to the arts and participate in the development of science and consequently should benefit from this progress.

Development of culture derives directly from a person's cognitive nature and status as a social being. The freedom of scientific research within a specific methodology provides a person with a spiritual comfort. However, this freedom is not absolute; it requires respect for and protection of human rights and civil society in the framework of the universal common good. The only limitation of the freedom of scientific research lies in the goodness of a person and the goodness of society such as universities, nations, countries and the whole human community.

In addition to the required autonomy of the universities standing against political pressure it is important for scientists to cultivate inner freedom within themselves that allows them to seek both, the truth about human beings and the reality that surrounds them. Science can not be an instrument for the ideology and the politics; it can not only serve pragmatic-economic needs of the modern time. The task of the university is not only to gain partial knowledge, but the synthesis of universal knowledge, which is in the service of human being as a person (Tarner 1996: 91-113). Pluralism of scientific disciplines is essential to freedom of scientific research and research methods. The relativism about truth is not caused by the division of the sciences into humanities, technical and philosophical studies; rather, it reflects a multidimensional nature of truth present in the different aspects of reality.

The freedom of science requires tolerance for different scientific disciplines and fields of science, because no one has monopoly on truth. The climate of fanaticism, monopoly on truth and scientific pride are the threat to academic freedom. Czech universities historically experienced Nazism then, subsequently totalitarian Marxist ideology trying to completely control scientific research for ideological purposes. This control has manifested itself not only in government censorship, but also in ideological enslavement of scientists who under such pressure have censored each other and itself.

A true scientist is a person who is internally free from various forms of moral evil. Science can not be separated from the general ethical standards, because without compliance to the principles will be without internal restrains. Every human behavior is subject to appraisal according to moral values. In this light we consider individual ethics of particular professions such as medical, social workers and psychologists. Also, the scientific work can not be judged as ethically neutral. Practically, the results of scientific research are of great importance for a society and the scientists should reflect on their ethos. Scientific cooperation has allowed the scientist to developed nuclear, biological and chemical weapons. (Kowalczyk 2010). Not all ethical standards must necessarily be legally defined, but should become a part of the widely understood ethos of the university.

6. The Christian roots of the universities ethos

Ethos of the university has been initiated in medieval Europe creating a specific model of the relationship between a master and his disciple organized as corporations. This model existed earlier in the medieval guilds of artisans and commercial guilds in which the candidates have to undergo formation, which included not only the gradual acquisition of knowledge and skills in the chosen craft, but also a candidate had to participate in the craftsman's family life. A candidate, together with his master's family belonged to a local guild taking part in its holidays, sharing its symbols and ceremonies. All this inner world experiences formed ethos of individual professions. It was a real community of people with their own weaknesses, but they saw themselves not as competitors in the production of the same or similar products, but as people of the same fate.

This style of organizational structure of university ethos was adapted from its beginning. Student-teacher relationships were not only on the level of communication or the transmission of information, but also, an important dimension of this relationship was on intellectual and spiritual formation level. A master was a model – albeit imperfectly-an identification model, which students could choose as their own. From a psychological and educational point of view, it is a process of socialization, in which students' attitudes reflects masters', and is not based only on the normative-legal principle but also on identification with the person who carries certain values and attitudes. Considering artistic masters, schools of followers were formed around them as well. In those cases, universities were uniquely generated environments promoting culture and art and were the most common places where artwork originated

7. Service to the society

Universities carry a huge moral potential and stand in defense of justice and law. They assess current social situations and inspire critical thinking in order to find ways to fix social problems.

Universities' duties besides the transfer of scientific knowledge and information also transfer certain values, norms and rules that should be respected in the academic environment so that students do not export to their professional and private life any type of „moral schizophrenia”.

Another important objective is that universities shape members of the society simultaneously with, teaching skills and delivering knowledge.

8. Creation of national elites

In the Czech Republic, universities have lost their ability to create personalities of the rank of national leaders. One of the main reasons for the loss of importance of higher education is, undoubtedly, its mass character and prestige reduction has followed. Czech universities have gone through acquisition of the largest possible number of students. University's administration often presses the faculty to pass students and thus prevented the reduction in the number of students. In creating national elites, the devaluation of higher education shifts it from the universities to political parties. Higher education is no longer the basis for the formation of intellectual and ethical elite, but merely a „passport” for obtaining a position in a political party. Model personalities of national elites no longer come from national intellectuals and thinkers as Thomas G. Masaryk, Karel Čapek or Vaclav Havel, but from pragmatic, socio-political leaders as Vaclav Klaus and Miloš Zeman. The state's political culture results in the lack of an intellectual and ethical environment. A typical symptom of a lack of qualified social elites in the Czech Republic is the nation's disgust towards politics and politicians and all political programs.

9. Promotion of culture in the Universities

Throughout its history, the universities created the environment for literature and art denominated in various forms. Although many artistic trends were not initiated in university, their development and discussion based on them however are supported by the academic environment. One of the purpose of higher education is to make students sensitive towards art and to deploy in them critical reception of the arts. The popular as well as the elite cultures should find their place in the form of exhibitions, concerts, recitals, meeting with authors, thematic discussions, and movie and theater clubs. Academic choirs pride themselves with glorious traditions; it proves that the interest in the arts is not abandoned. Annually, traditional students holidays could help promote culture (an example of it could be the students' holiday in Poland called „Juvenalia”), but this is a low form of promotion demanding a low lifestyle from students. It would be a wish that contemporary art would be displayed in the monotonous hallways of the venues. Happenings could become a part of the academic life demonstrating a different reality than the mundane subjectivity. Mutual cooperation between universities and colleges, high schools, lyceums and elementary schools could allow for establishing academic centers in a local, municipal environ. This simple university promotion would reach all sorts of its future students. High school students facing a crossroads should be their most important target.

Those students are eager to meet other people and taste other ideas and at the same time spending their free time usefully and in fun.

Conclusions

Starting with university ethos, its historical roots and mission we come to the year of 1989 and beyond and face the real situation of higher education in Czech society. Political and economic changes brought freedom to scientific research, but also posed universities and other institutions of higher learning in a position of market players. Continuous changes in policy and strategy towards education did not contribute to stabilizing the academic environment, but brought uncertainty, which is expressed in a continuous reduction of funds for higher education. There is a lack of strategic vision for the coming years. In such an uncertain situation, higher education should refer to their roots anchored in the ethos of the university. Even in such an unfavorable situation for higher education in the Czech Republic, university ethos should be reminded that those schools exist to serve the truth, provide freedom of speech, unbiased scientific research, defend personalism, and above all, human dignity against any system. The very important part of the service to society is the formation of national elites and the promotion of culture. Culture as a carrier of universal and particular values of national and regional characters should be welcomed in higher education venues. In their context, universities and other institutions of higher education are called to promote the arts and culture by encouraging students to participate in various forms of cultural activities.

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