

HUMBOLDT AND THE UNIVERSITY OF TODAY: FROM THE PRESENT INHERITANCE TO A WORTHWHILE SUSTAINABLE FUTURE

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ABSTRACT

This paper looks back on the ideas of Humboldt and presents at the same time the idea of a *sustainable university* for the future (taking the University of Graz, Austria as an example). Currently five different Austrian universities are being investigated with respect to sustainable education. A critical view on today's university management and the educational approach are used to span a bow from common tertiary educational institutions to *sustainable* educational institutions. Sustainable universities are shown to be more than mere business units engaged in permanent competition for new *clients*. In fact, they are more like mutually supportive companions, life partners, think tanks, and holistic systems etc., which aim to serve both individuals and society as a whole.

FROM HUMBOLDT'S IDEA TO TODAY'S UNIVERSITY

Humboldt developed his *idea of the university* at a time (1729-1818) when *half of all German Universities were being closed down due to their increasing insignificance and decline in student numbers* and when 'more valuable' alternatives such as *academies* or *special schools* were also being promoted [1, p. 165]. In the sense of Humboldt the foundation of the University of Berlin in 1810 was not merely a reaction against the upcoming academies and special schools but also an *institutional step by which existing universities were to be sacrificed* [1, p. 165]. Humboldt wanted to found a superior tertiary institution that would not even bear the old designation of *university*. However, as this proved to be politically controversial the term *university* was retained. A key part of the intended university reformation process was the establishment of the faculty of philosophy. This was supposed to focus on the search for truth, while the so-called *upper faculties*, i.e. the special schools, were to concentrate more on applied fields related to the concept of utility. Both areas were to be subsumed under an overarching framework in the form of a superior tertiary institution or university. The reform faced resistance from both directions and was thus only partly enforced. Humboldt's initial idea of building a superior tertiary institution by combining the ailing old universities and new academies or special schools thus became obsolete and the new institution was reduced to an 'institutionalized idea of mankind' [1, p. 167].

What are universities today and where is science leading us? Two short answers are provided here: Universities are tertiary educational institutions and are forerunners for future academic decision makers – so called *heroes of tomorrow*. Hero is used here in the sense of the ancient Greek *Akademios* who saved ancient Athens from destruction, and to whom an area outside the city was dedicated. In the fourth century Plato founded the first philosopher's garden which was designed to be a discussion forum for his students [2, p. 78] and to allow citizens to develop their ability to discuss several problems from many different perspectives.

Universities of today accomplish future oriented research and discover, preserve and conserve the legacy of past cultures and societies. Beyond that universities may also be viewed as a form of company which *in the light of their disciplines, their methods and their theoretical structures* [3, p. 64] function like any other company engaged in market activity. The insights generated serve the

needs of society. While supply, in the form of knowledge generation, and demand, in the form of social needs, adjust to each other continuously, the process of adjustment remains relatively slow since educational programs do not react as quickly as the changes in today's complex society require. The question of where science is leading us is answered even more quickly than the first question: *we do not know. By comparing what it has learned so far with what still remains unknown, only science itself can determine the direction. But the answer must always remain provisional. To offer a more exact answer, science would already have to know that which it cannot yet know, and that which can only be revealed by future progress or its absence* [3, p. 60].

A CRITICAL VIEW OF UNIVERSITY MANAGEMENT

Today's critics often refer to universities as being unadventurous, unimaginative or devoid of in-depth theoretical thought. The idea of academic freedom seems to be long gone and discussions of reform only consider tuition fees, budgets and potential changes in curricula which have already been dealt with umpteen times [1, p. 161]. In today's universities, which still believe themselves to be true representatives of Humboldt's original ideas, the number of inconsistencies continues to increase. One such inconsistency concerns the ordering or classification of knowledge (ranking or demarcation of various disciplines or subject areas etc.) [1, p. 169]. Harking back to old ideals will not be sufficient to preserve university education in an age which demands skills and applied knowledge irrespective of level or price. [1, p. 179]. For universities in Austria and elsewhere, negative trends appear to be multiplying. Anyhow, one can state that current Austrian universities have shifted from being pure educational institutions to being economically oriented 'companies' which are becoming more and more dependent on innovation or continuously growing 'sales figures'.

However, who are the future researchers and what is expected of them? How much education may they receive and how much time will they have to gain knowledge – knowledge that enables them to deal with an uncertain future and which is dependent on university budgets? University education in Austria is linked to international education programs that are far from being coherent. We need to ask whether today's educational university programs actually provide the specific skills that critical and constructive future decision makers need. Are today's education programs still appropriate in our rapidly changing society?

Anyone who begins to study at a university today – no matter in which discipline – has grand plans for the future. There is a high probability that he or she will have to decide upon complex issues and to act reliably under high pressure, and in the face of value conflicts and uncertainty. Such an individual requires specific skills. Existing knowledge has to be upgraded and new information must be incorporated constantly. Causes and effects have to be screened, basic facts selected from unessential matters, courses of actions to be chosen, orders of problem solving organized and processes steered. However, one does not want to live in a city in which the chief of security of the electric company does not have these skills. Higher education has to generate academically established sagacity and the ability to act upon it. Such skills should empower one to solve problems beyond a university setting [5, p. 21]. Gaining the ability to understand complex problems and their interconnections is the foundation stone in the education of all university students.

THE SUSTAINABLE UNIVERSITY

Currently the term sustainability has attained a wealth of linguistic variants which can hardly be outbitten. It is used so excessively that hardly anyone remembers its initially meaning. The closest interpretation of the term leads back to the 13th century where it was used in forestry [6, p. 17-35]. The essence of the term means *eternal* which describes a process of development which cannot come to a standstill and therefore is very difficult to realize. If one complements *eternal* with *fit for the future* it leads back to the definition of sustainability which is well known in our modern world: *Development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs* [7, p. 8]. According to this definition, sustainability is a system-dependent, iterative and repetitive process which always depends on the prevailing context.

To *act sustainably* means to have the ability to plan future scenarios ahead and to find the best possible solutions. And we can do this, because the human being is the only animal that thinks about the future. *To see is to experience the world as it is, to remember is to experience the world as it was, but to imagine is to experience the world as it isn't and has never been, but as it might be. The greatest achievement of the human brain is its ability to imagine objects and episodes that do not exist in the realm of the real, and it is this ability that allows us to think about the future* [8, p. 4-5]. Nevertheless, we have to be aware that we are engaged on a journey which merely has the potential to lead into a sustainable future. We are never really able to know what the future will provide for us.

Universities have to take many possible futures into consideration in challenging and developing the minds of those destined to guide the values needed in future societies.. Within an ongoing process of change sustainability requires that changes are made in such a way that the quality of life is enhanced rather than diminished. One question again arises: Which part of the society needs changes and innovations and what does this imply with respect to education? [9, p. 74]. Educational goals need to be attainable and to embody positive values for the future. University education programs are often compared to those of service companies since they share several common characteristics: non-materiality, inability of storage, simultaneity of production and realization, direct contact between suppliers and demanders, freedom of location and individuality [10 p. 21].

The University of Graz/Austria can be mentioned here as an example of good practice. It has more than twenty years experience in the realm of sustainable development. At the end of the last decade, the University of Graz, together with a further 150 companies, signed the UNESCO Bonn Declaration and hence committed itself to a path of sustainable development. The concept of sustainable development has already been realized at several levels. For example, the task-force *sustainability4U* [14] is an alliance between the four universities of Graz (University of Graz, Technical University, Medical University and University of Arts). Many sustainable projects have already been developed and implemented such as a yearly lecture series. Currently the University of Graz is planning a national project together with the University of Natural Resources and Life Sciences in Vienna and the Technical University of Graz. A large survey on sustainable education is currently being undertaken – data on this survey will be available within the next few months.

SUSTAINABILITY NEEDS SYSTEM THINKING

Economic, ecological, technical and social developments over the past decades have led to a totally different society today compared to that found in the times of Humboldt. The complexity of our time forces us to look simultaneously at the requirements of individuals and of society as a whole. We thus need really good role models and viable perspectives, not only for the present, but also for the future. University education, based on correct values and systems thinking can help us satisfy both needs.

However, what is meant by systems thinking? *The whole is more than the sum of its parts* in the context of university education What does systems thinking mean in the context of sustainable development? The discipline of systems thinking aims to understand totalities. This discipline is required in order to recognize interrelations and not mere static snapshots. Systems thinking is a collection of general principles that were developed during the 20st century and covers diverse disciplines such as natural science, social science, technical science and management [13 p. 88].

As already mentioned the term sustainability is strongly connected to the Brundtland definition: *Development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs* [7, p. 8]. Today critics assert that this definition is too vague and thus non-workable, and that one can use the term sustainability to turn almost everything into an issue of sustainability.. The term itself thus becomes irrelevant [12 p. 70]. Beyond this: The problem in agreeing on the meaning of sustainable development is not fundamentally about agreeing upon a precise definition, but about agreeing upon the *values* that would underlie any such definition [12 p. 70].

The difficulties in dealing with overall systems relate primarily to the number of different perspectives the numerous observers of a system have. Different pictures of the world lead to very different actions. The complexity of non-concrete issues such as knowledge transfer among various research units or stakeholders increases enormously. University education which embodies the appropriate values can serve to unite various participants, aid the flow of communication across stakeholders, and reduce the level of complexity such that a systemic approach becomes viable and operational.

CONCLUSION

The ongoing debate on sustainable development encompasses an entire range of global, national, local and individual problems. Worldwide economic, ecological and social disasters affect everyone in one way or another. It's a small world and we are all becoming global players, either actively or passively. Freedom fighters in Africa, as well as consumers in Europe or the US all influence the world's future. The question is: how can we and the next generations cope with the present inheritance and ensure a worthwhile future?

Today's universities play a key role in the production of global players, decision makers and *social architects*, i.e. of those responsible for guiding future developments. Future generations should be able to learn from the past and to develop fitting solutions for themselves, their children and grandchildren. There is thus a clear need for appropriate education and the creation of robust, interdisciplinary knowledge, knowledge which is widely intelligible and capable of guiding society through the maze of confusion currently surrounding the notion of sustainable development.

In building a bridge from Humboldt's ideas of higher education to the tertiary educational system of today we are able to recognize the process of a sustainable development. As educational institutions of the highest rank, universities make an indispensable contribution in moving societies along the path of sustainability. The move from a known present, to an unknown sustainable future demands a persistent, systemic and cross-disciplinary approach. This also needs to be subject to continuous

cross-checking and verification in order to ensure that direction and values remain consistent along the path chosen.

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