

Quo Vadis, University?

Luka CULIBERG

Department of Asian Studies

Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana (Slovenia)

Abstract

When the new coronavirus induced Covid-19 pandemic spread across the globe in the early spring of 2020, universities around the world closed down and moved quickly to adapt to the 'new reality' by relying on modern technology and moving their curricula online. However, these extraordinary circumstances were not taken as an opportunity to reflect on and reform the many ills of the modern university, but rather aimed to secure the status quo and expected the students to accept the new reality of reduced online curricula. At the same time this has, in the author's opinion, revealed the structural problems of rigid curricula and the lack of much needed flexibility in order to move beyond reproducing instrumentalised knowledge and to reopen the university and its humanities programmes as venues of 'science in the making'.

Keywords: pandemic, university, curricula, students, knowledge, theory

In the early 2020, a rapid spread of a new type of viral infection, named Covid-19, taking a huge toll on human life, found the world disoriented and utterly unprepared. It was hardly the first deadly epidemic on a global scale, but it was definitely the biggest in the so-called digital age which triggered various kinds of new responses marked by unprecedented global connectedness. One thing that was doubtlessly unparalleled in any of the previous pandemics in history and more or less universal across the globe, was the reaction of the higher education institutions worldwide. The majority of these institutions in the disease-stricken countries closed their lecture rooms and campuses and moved their programmes online in the early spring of 2020.

University and campus closures are by no means unprecedented. They are as old as the universities themselves. During the bubonic plague epidemics, the medieval

universities regularly closed down and students usually fled the cities. During the plague epidemic in seventeenth century England, Isaac Newton famously fled to the countryside where, during the quarantine, he allegedly developed some of his most famous theories. I have no idea how other students, Newton's colleagues, spent their time during the closure of Cambridge University and whether it was *annus mirabilis* for them as well, but it certainly would not be fair to expect all students to actually advance in their studies just by being left alone without access to the university's infrastructure and its features such as *ex chatedra* lectures, seminars, library resources, student discussions, and so on.

However, this move online via various internet platforms was, to say the least, a double-edged sword. Certainly, it enabled millions of students to continue their studies uninterrupted though necessarily in a truncated form, but on the other hand, it also compelled them to work according to the prescribed schedule of the curriculum despite difficult, precarious and uneven conditions and circumstances for many of them. First of all, moving courses online was very different for students of technical or practical studies which require either lab equipment or field work, or other types of materials and resources. Further, the circumstances in which foreign students found themselves were much more difficult compared to other students. Many were not allowed into the host country, even after being awarded a grant, such as the MEXT or JASSO scholarships in the case of foreign students planning to study in Japan, or again, many could not leave the host country without running the risk of not being able to return.¹ We must also bear in mind how uneven was (or still is) the situation of individual students coming from different social and economic backgrounds, as well as different health conditions, depending on the country or family situation. Last but not least, we should not forget the great discrepancies in their access to technology, required for online programmes, as well as access to other resources such as library books or online databases (Li & Lalani 2020).

Yet, by moving the classes online, every student was expected to follow and complete the same prescribed curriculum. Needless to say, the fact of uneven backgrounds holds true also in the case of regular on-campus studying, but this can hardly be compared to the situation of a global pandemic, where access to basic resources, such as libraries, and the possibility of social contacts with colleagues, were severely obstructed. By double-edged sword I am therefore suggesting that

while the students were ‘able’ to continue their studies during the pandemic, they also ‘had’ to continue them. They were denied the possibility of fleeing the campuses and cities for the countryside and continuing their studies after the epidemic had passed. Taking a year off, however, is more often than not seen in many societies as a career failure with possible social repercussions.

Another thing that was made apparent to us during the closure is the rigidity of the curricula of modern universities. Undergraduate programmes are almost in no way distinguishable from high school programmes where a certain amount of ‘content’ has to be processed in a certain amount of contact hours, a process that is quantifiable and, at least in Europe, translated into European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS). This system, according to the European Commission on Education and Training:

[...] is a tool of the European Higher Education Area for making studies and courses more transparent. It helps students to move between countries and to have their academic qualifications and study periods abroad recognised. ECTS allows credits taken at one higher education institution to be counted towards a qualification studied for at another. ECTS credits represent learning based on defined learning outcomes and their associated workload. ECTS enhances the flexibility of study programmes for students. It also supports the planning, delivery and evaluation of higher education programmes. It is a central tool in the Bologna Process, which aims to make national education systems more comparable internationally. ECTS also helps make other documents, such as the Diploma Supplement, clearer and easier to use in different countries.

If the university in general, and the humanities in particular, wish to retain some of their old purpose of critical thinking and questioning rather than simply reproducing knowledge, flexibility is one of the key issues that in my opinion need to be addressed. ‘Learning based on defined learning outcomes’ goes contrary to the supposed ideal of the humanities. Educators like to invoke clichés such as the necessity of ‘thinking outside the box’, but we are more often than not completely unwilling to let students actually venture outside that box. Secondly, introducing ‘comparability’ of study curricula as a key measure for promoting mobility basically limits the possibilities of real theoretical work, because such

work can hardly conform to the standardised forms for curricula or project applications. At the same time the Bologna system fosters further bureaucratisation and increases the workload of the teaching staff which can inadvertently lead to reduced quality of teaching.

The result is too often replacement of ‘theoretical work’ with ‘knowledge’, i.e., with instrumentalised ‘skills’ transformed into a market commodity, knowledge that produces added value which is realised on the market. The path that leads to that knowledge is a Bologna system curriculum where the contact hours of study process are converted into credits – mathematical units reflecting the level of the acquired skill. The measure of the quality of such knowledge is its practical usefulness. Such system is leading the humanities and social sciences away from its epistemological foundation of producing explanatory schemes into dedicating its energies to teaching pragmatic techniques provided by various narrow specialist empirical studies.

Theory can only progress when it can question and revolutionise its own foundations. It can only open new horizons, new paradigms and new knowledge if it is allowed to leave the proverbial box. It is no surprise that the majority of the world-shaking theoretical breakthroughs and discoveries happened outside the university framework, which is and has been for most of the time a conservative institution. For example, in 1530 King Francis I of France established the Collège Royal, known today as the Collège de France, as an alternative to the rigid and conservative Sorbonne in order to create a venue where lectures were public, free and accessible to everyone, while its mission, summarized in its motto *Docet Omnia* (It teaches everything), was to teach ‘science in the making’ (*Enseigner la recherche en train de se faire*), i.e., to produce and teach theory, not simply reproduce knowledge (Les grandes heures du Collège de France).

Half a millennium later the Bologna Process that reformed the majority of European universities took a diametrically opposite approach by formulating curricula based on a promise to equip students with skills for practical application in accordance with the current needs of the market. When the goal of the curriculum is to teach factual knowledge and practical skills, and to produce future experts out of students who are required only to mechanically reproduce the acquired knowledge for which they are awarded credit points, students can never become equal interlocutors in the

process of the development of scientific discourse. Such development is inevitably produced through dialogue. However, the students mainly remain passive recipients of a finished product – knowledge, that is not subjected to critical scrutiny.

Skills are for production, skills are for the labour market, they are quantifiable and easily translated into value. To make it clear, there is nothing wrong with skills themselves, they are necessary for any kind of work, not in the least for theoretical and intellectual work. Writing skills, language skills, communication skills, teaching skills, are all very important, but they are too often perceived as a goal instead of as a means for achieving that goal. For example, students of Japanese Studies naturally need to acquire Japanese language skills, but that is just the point of departure to begin the actual work of this type of cultural studies.

However, the way undergraduate programmes are structured and implemented and the way they are based on the requirements imposed on students to complete these programmes, students too often perceive these programmes precisely as specialised training schools for acquiring specific skills. For example, Japanese studies are thus often perceived as a programme for learning Japanese language. Sometimes the students even express their annoyance or reluctance to the fact that they have to take courses such as literature or history, or even Chinese history or philosophy for that matter, when all they ever wanted was to become proficient in Japanese to read manga or translate video games. But that is hardly the fault of the students. It is the university's responsibility to make the humanities programmes engaging.

Reducing university education to nothing more than a professional school for acquiring specific skills means reducing university programmes to internships providing quantifiable and useful 'expert' knowledge. This perception has other consequences: understood as such, knowledge provided by universities becomes a simple commodity, i.e., a product, offered by universities for a price paid for by the customers, i.e., the students. Students as customers demand quality products for their money, so here again the flexibility of research and curricula is extremely curtailed, because it is expected of university programmes to provide courses with clearly 'defined learning outcomes' which need to be specified in the programme syllabus together with expected skills gained by finishing the course. Researchers thus become service providers. The quality of the product they provide is judged by the labour market (where those with 'better

skills' have the advantage), which in turn means that it is the labour market that dictates the contents of university programmes.

As I have implied earlier, the modern university is a diverse locus of higher learning and research which includes, broadly speaking, natural sciences, social sciences, humanities, engineering, art, architecture etc. each requiring field-specific approaches as well as expecting field-specific outcomes. The main purpose of the architecture programme, for example, is to equip students with the necessary skills to become good architects, as it is the purpose of various technical or medical science programmes to produce good engineers or good physicians equipped with the necessary skills for the profession. However, the basic sciences or humanities were not conceived as applied sciences or techniques to be translated directly into specific skills, but rather as methods for understanding the world and ourselves in it. This means that one single, uniform and comparable way of constructing university programmes and curricula necessarily goes contrary to the nature of certain areas of research and knowledge production. Yet the forms for syllabi construction that need to specify acquired skills, or those for project grant applications that demand the specification of the research outcomes and their practical usefulness, or the rules of the publication process in journals owned by huge private corporations, etc., follow more or less identical patterns whether one is studying philosophy or pharmacy. And while in the latter field one can perhaps specify the outcome of research in a straightforward manner, for example, as 'research and development of a vaccine for the new strain of virus', the 'outcome' of a philosophical research study is a much vaguer matter.

The things that mainly concern me in this essay and the ideas that I propose here, therefore apply primarily to the status of the humanities within the institution such as a university. It could be that the natural sciences perceive no problems or challenges within the current framework of the university which certainly seems to be tailored more along their lines. What I am saying is that the present state of the humanities is far from ideal and that many structural reforms are necessary. For example, at the moment of writing this the universities in the US are preparing for the beginning of a new semester which is probably going to be entirely moved online or will attempt some sort of 'hybrid' version of courses. Many students at this point are understandably raising questions, such as whether the expensive tuition fees of the US universities are going to be reduced. Quite naturally they feel

the product – and we have already established that they perceive their curricula as products – they are getting, i.e., the online courses, will be inferior to the regular course at the university, and so, again quite understandably, they expect a reduced price. Frustrated professors, on the other hand, are struggling to explain that they are putting the same amount, or quite often rather more, of work into preparing and adapting their syllabi for online courses.

The current situation in the US thus exposes the ideological nature of the value of higher education. Does the tuition price reflect the labour the educators put into preparing the courses or does it reflect the perceived value of the end product, i.e., the quality of skills which students acquire during the course? The paradox is inherent in the system of tuition fees. Like healthcare, higher education is a civilizational norm and should be made available to all members of society by joint effort, i.e., funded by society. Free higher education such as practiced, for example in Slovenia, solves the value paradox between the input of labour of educators and the output in the form of a degree earned by the students. The ‘market value’ of a person with a university degree is doubtlessly higher than that of a person without one, but this is not directly measurable in terms of the cost of a researcher’s labour or the price of a university programme, like being cured of cancer is not measurable by the labour input of surgeons or the price payed for the healthcare system. Public university can avoid the corporate model typical of US universities. After all, a university is not only an educational institution it is also a privileged place of research, and the results of this research, conducted within a public university, funded with public money, should be in the public domain and accessible to the public.

This is further related to the problem of academic publishing. It is absurd, to say the least, that research results achieved in the context of a public university, funded by public money, is then given for free to private publishing corporations which sell it back, at a high price, to the same public that funded it in the first place. At the same time, these private corporations function as arbiters of academic excellency, because the ‘publish or perish’ imperative is intrinsically connected to publishing in these ‘prestigious’ journals.

Based on the above reflections, I believe universities, or at least their humanities sections, should go far beyond deliberations on how to cope with the present

emergency circumstances by adapting their courses and exams to online platforms. Leaving the question of whether we should return to lecture rooms or stay on Zoom, whether we should wear masks and keep ‘social distance’ to epidemiologists, humanists should use this opportunity to address deeper structural problems which have become even more obvious during these times of pandemic.

The curricula that follow technical programme forms with defined learning outcomes, should be replaced by humanities-specific flexible curricula. We need to be aware that historical and human sciences do not simply study facts that are external to humans, but rather study the actions of humans on the world and the meanings we attribute to these actions. So by studying human societies and their actions within the world, we must be aware that our ‘knowing’ itself is a human fact and therefore an object of our research. Subject and object of knowledge thus overlap and the question of objectivity is quite different from the natural sciences.

There are areas, such as the above-mentioned restructuring of curricula, which are supposed to be at the discretion of universities as, at least in theory, autonomous research institutions, but there are others which lie outside the jurisdiction of the universities yet which should be addressed as well, such as the principle that education should be free and accessible to all. This can be achieved by publicly funded public universities that require no tuition. We should insist that research be published with open access, available for free to the public financing it. The system of mandatory publishing in high impact factor journals owned by private corporations should be abolished. Humanities scholars should not be forced to publish ‘original scientific papers’ which is an epistemological absurdity, but should return to publishing historiographical, philosophical or theoretical treatises, essays and monographs. Finally, the students as active members of the academic community should participate in, or even initiate, these much-needed reforms.

The crisis caused by the global pandemic of Covid-19 resonates throughout the social fabric, and the higher education sector is just one segment of society affected by the situation. In many aspects of our daily lives we have become used to the notion of the ‘new normal’, which is a radical idea going far beyond simply accepting certain adjustments or modifications to our usual normality. The notion of new normal implies the shift of normality itself. We no longer simply cope with certain deviations of our old normal we actually internalise

these deviations as the new normal. Adjusting the university courses to online platforms is nothing more than a deviation of the old normality of the university. I believe the crisis is also an opportunity to go beyond and aspire for a new normality of the university. While some historical occurrences of university closures, such as student protests and occupations of universities, tried precisely to break away from the rigidities of the old normal, the closure due to the Covid-19 pandemic is a 'passive event' which has left many students disoriented and many teaching staff at the mercy of university guidelines as to how to proceed with the academic year. And while the spring semester definitely did not proceed in the sense of 'business as usual', it nevertheless did not produce any serious breakthroughs from the students' side. Because the closure was not a student intervention, it did not include any student induced changes.

Depending on the epidemiological situation in individual countries, the leaderships of universities will issue guidelines to the academic staff as to how to proceed with the next semester. In the event that the universities remain closed, we will adapt our courses to video conferences, recorded lectures and other online platforms, while students will passively follow these online courses to gain their quantifiable credit points. We will be focusing our energies on how to best adapt our curricula to online teaching, how to ensure students do not cheat at online exams, etc. However, we should maybe also be considering what our role as educators is and how to implement structural reforms that will bring about a real new normal of the university.

Of course, there is only so much that academic staff can do. I am sure many are doing their utmost to give their students the best possible education under the present circumstances and have found inventive ways to adapt to the situation. But university is a rigid and conservative institution, and once the epidemic has passed it will continue to function in the manner of business as usual. The real change must come from the students themselves. They must demand more from universities, and the academic staff must stand by them to form an academic community or alliance in order to resist the bureaucratic system that is the university. Students should demand more than just comparable skills and credit points, they should demand public, free and accessible education based on the

docet omnia principle, they should demand to be part of the ‘science in the making’. Maybe when the pandemic is over and the universities reopen, it will be the time for students to close them down again and demand such a change?

ⁱ The lockdown measures varied according to each country and were of course state imposed. In the case of Japan, for example, foreign students could not enter the country from March until August (Japan Times, 23 August 2020). Moreover, it would seem from many testimonies on social media in recent months, that the universities were not doing much in the way of taking a stand for the rights of their students.

References

- European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS). *European Commission. Education and Training*. <ec.europa.eu/education/resources-and-tools/european-credit-transfer-and-accumulation-system-ects_en> [Accessed: 2020.9.15].
- Japan Times, August 23, 2020. Japan likely to ease entry restrictions for foreign students by month's end. <www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2020/08/23/national/japan-likely-ease-entry-restrictions-foreign-students-months-end-source/> [Accessed: 2020.9.15].
- Les grandes heures du Collège de France [The Great Hours of the Collège de France]. *Edition-Originale.com* <www.edition-originale.com/fr/la-gazette-actualites/les-grandes-heures-du-college-de-france-178> [Accessed: 2020.9.15].
- LI Cathy and LALANI Farah (2020). The COVID-19 pandemic has changed education forever. This is how. *World Economic Forum*, 29 April. <www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/04/coronavirus-education-global-covid19-online-digital-learning/> [Accessed: 2020.9.15].