TASKS OF HIGER EDUCATION IN A MODERN GLOBAL SOCIETY

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Abstract

This paper outlines some specific issues related to the task of Higher education for the future. Research and teaching, the traditional mission of the university, are still central goals. Nowadays equity and inclusion are expected instead of elitarian access, and that implies successful learning for all, for disantvantaged groups too. Among the other tasks, the University has to create the conditions for developing ethos and social responsibility in the learning life of the students. Democracy of staff in the academic community, students participation, and active learning are to be encouraged. Criteria for Quality Assurance are to be developed, overcoming superficial standards and rankings in direction to indicators of community life and empowement of students (a Higher Education Development Index). In order to perform this tasks in the global scenario Universities need to keep their autonomy and to increase the awareness of their responsibility in giving their specific contribution for culture and society. The Internationalisation of Higher Education at Global Level (cooperation, networking, exchange of best practices, mobility, mutual recognition of outcomes) are costitutive parts of the University life. This article underlines the importance and contribution of Tertiary Level Educational Institutions to overall objectives in the fields of science, teaching, democracy, equity, internationalisation and human rights.

Key words: University, responsibility, development, empowerment.

Introductory remarks

I first outline basic components of the role of the University, and attempt to elaborate proposals aiming to enhance the impact of this historic Insitution to further improvement.
They influence development both educating the student population, and offering the independent contribution of the scientific and cultural world.

I'll make use of official documents of the Ministries of the member states and of the internat Institutions, and refer to my own personal experience as University professor in Italy and in some European countries.

The challenges of the 21. century make heavy demands on the Higher Educational Institutions who meet complex challenges in the contemporary era and it is worth to discuss their role in preparing young people and in modeling the future.

Among the most influencial pillars of our society such as economic and political powers, media, religious organisations, citizens organized in NGOs, and in interest groups, the Universities have to be active actors and to give their specific contribution.

The 'World Declaration on Higher Education For The Twenty-First Century: Vision And Action', of UNESCO (1998), states in the Preamble, that 'On the eve of a new century, there is an unprecedented demand for and a great diversification in higher education, as well as an increased awareness of its vital importance for sociocultural and economic development, and for building the future,..' (UNESCO 1998). The Fourth Bologna Policy Forum, held in Yerevan, 14-15 May 2015, underlines that the Ministry in charge for the Universities are committed to

democracy, human rights, and the rule of law.

The International Bodies at global level provide a number of broad orientations for developing policies and practices in order to prepare young people to acquire the competences needed in a knowledge society in the global village, full of contradictions. International Networks of Universities play an important role.

Committed University Development

A new range of skills are needed, in order to promote social cohesion, to prepare students as balanced persons, skilled and responsible labour force, active citizens, paying attention to pluralistic values and human rights, aiming to strengthen in young people a sense of belonging and of commitment. It includes thinking about the common future and about the place of the own country in the global scenario, discovering that we all are a Community of destiny in the contemporary society, rich of conflichts and of potential risks.

Higher Education Institutions are expected to give a solid education to the students as basis for their life, for the development of economy, and of a democratic society.

Strenghtening the role of the University for a better future implies focussing on several fields: quality and excellence in research and teaching/learning, inclusion, accreditation and Quality Assurance (QA), internationalisation, autonomy of the academic community, and awareness of the responsibility for the future.

The University education and training influence the common development and needs due attention by Institutions and by all decision makers, concerned for contributing to a sustainable future. The quality of research requires careful support and appropriate evaluation procedures. The quality teaching /learning can be improved enhancing the competence of teaching staff, with good recruitment procedures and training, and witth transparent formative/ participative evaluation of professors.

Active learning is strenghthened by forms of teaching providing opportunities for developing inquiry oriented learning, focussing more explicitly on collaborative learning and problem solving in teams, promoting self evaluation of the students with formative assessment (Bombardelli, 2015), with portoflio and Personal Development Plans. Developing learners' competence is an important part of the mission of higher education; the term "converging competences" points to the need not only to train individuals for specific tasks, but to educate the whole person. Education is about acquiring skills, but also about acquiring values and attitudes (Bergan, Damian 2010).

Improvements in our society and in our economy require high quality education for all, equity and inclusion; therefore higher education should be accessible to a higher number of students. Several Universities are engaged in an ongoing effort to improve their record in retaining and graduating entering students, guaranteeing access to a student population that contains a large number of low-income, low social classes, first-generation, commuter students. ET (Education and Training) 2020 of the European Union aims at the ambitious goal of pushing tertiary graduation rates to at least 40% of the population (ET 2020), promoting social mobility and smart and sustainable growth.

In order to allow access and good results to a wide range of students, attention has to be paid to differences of learning and of interests, promoting quality learning in a climate of respect of the cultural diversity.

Modern societies are inconceivable as isolated and mono-cultural entities. The global DImension

includes efforts for the development of open mindedness and respect for people of other countries, cultures and religions, raise awareness of cultural stereotypes, combating racism and xenofobia, reflecting on local and global cultural, structural, economic and institutional processes as well.

The interaction of various cultures enriches our societies; however, we also witness tensions between cultures. Intercultural dialogue is therefore one of the priorities of the Higher education, by its history and contemporary practice, is a natural promoter of intercultural understanding. Higher education institutions and campuses are themselves multicultural societies. In Higher Education we can create an international classrooms merging physical mobility with virtual mobility, and have the change to improve networking focusing on cooperation, exchange of best practices, students and staff mobility, mutual recognition of outcomes, encouraging proficinecy in foreign languages. Teaching mobility and networking among Universities mprove the results in acquiring, near the traditional disciplinary and interdisciplinary competence, open horizons not restricted within local and national borders.

The Erasmus plus programm has changed the landscape of Higher education in Europe. By now 3 million students had the chance to participate in an exchange and discover another culture and country, and 4 million are expected to do the same by 2020. Universities started to implement internationalisation policies, and the J.Monnet Programme is successful at global level in many faculties in teaching and research.

Quality is improved by connecting studies and research at international level, introducing joint Master and Doctoral study programme, disseminating best practices over the borders, developing new or improving existing common programs. At the moment, Double and Joint degree programmes at university level are difficult due to the big differences of outputs officially required by different countries.

Networking will be facilitated establishing pilot projects among Higher Education Institutions, attending International conferences, courses and workshops, organising bilateral meetings, work -campus, trips. There is lack of transparency, and fragmented information about aims, general contents of courses, exchanges, etc. in the different Universities. The difficulties will be reduced by providing clear overviews of the qualifications, focusing on issues related to the recognition of qualifications, credit transfer, main elements, such as level, workload, quality, profile and learning outcomes, examining generic and subject-specific competences, requirements of the labour market, as a necessary, although not sufficient, condition for both student and labour mobility.

Quality assurance is one of the key topics in the current higher education debate. The most common current criteria like the number of publication or the number of quotations are quite dangerous. The quality of the scientific production should be stated by all means, excluding stereotipic solutions.

A mechanisms of coherent quality management and quality assurance has to be established, thanks to the widening of horizons, the enhancement of possibilities given by the exchange of information, and experiences. First of all a group of experienced independent peer rewievers, trained to adopt common criteria, not general abstract standards, will extend the level of QA and avoid the risk of apparent evaluation.

It would be hellpful agreeing an evaluation system abandoning abstract standards and rankings in favour of more appropriate measures comparable to the HDI Human Development Index in economy, introducing a well balanced 'High Education Development Index'.

The evaluation of Universities should include the level of inclusion, the democratic decison

making, and their contribution to the students' education for active citizenship (Barrera, Meira Soares, 2010).

Higher education governance is a key component of Higher education considering both overall higher education policies and specific aspects of it such as access to research results, financing, equal opportunities. The public responsibility for higher education and research is a cornerstone of the university heritage. Yet, our societies are changing rapidly, and clinging to old solutions will not further the very values that these solutions were originally designed to protect (Weber, Bergan, 2005). While public funding of higher education and research is still important, although not sufficient, the concept of public responsibility must be kept, and understood widely. The cooperation with the private sector should not influence the academic freedom of universities.

Autonomy of Higher Education Institutions is not optional; if the Academic world is guided from outside, by external authorities, and accepts inappropriate aims like working for competition only, it misses the duty of giving the own specific contribution to the common global development.

Internal democracy benefits universities and higher education institutions in promoting high level reserch and in preparing students to become participating, democratic adult citizens; deans, rectors and university staff can operate on a day-to-day basis. Democratic life and democratic governance in the Academic Community are challenging, and demanding; it can be facilitated with the help of technologies (e forum etc.); students participation, voluntering contribute in creating the conditions for distinctive ethos of service and social responsibility (trust, comitment).

Higher education Institutions can not avoid wondering for what sort of world do we work to build up. This mision is not just a supplement, is incorporated into lessons, curricula of all subjects and in academic life.

Final remarks

Educated, qualified and committed citizens, deeply involved in creating and sustaining social cohesion and democracy, are essential for human progress, for advancing research and the quality of life of all. People need high qualification, awareness of the challenges of our time, competences for life and for work, active participation. Although superficial debate could give the impression that the sole purpose of Higher education is to prepare for the labour market, this important role is complemented by tasks as preparation for democratic citizenship, personal development, contribution to a sustainable future. Individual responsibility is a key factor for the working life as well, together with community empowerment, entrepreneurship and creativity.
To fulfil their role, Higher Education Institutions have to be aware of their task of preparing for citizenship, besides employment, for personal growth as well as for the development of a broad knowledge based society.

This article has explored the role and purposes of Higher education in contemporary, complex societies by creating a culture of high achievement, including a long term view for the common responsibility. I attempted to elaborate proposals aiming to enhance the achievement of the main goals of Higher Education in the current time.

Universities cooperate in building up the future anyway, conscious or unconscious, positive or negative; the quality of teaching needs the due attention by Institutions and by all decision makers. The present article brings together various aspects of the role of the university

as a site of democratic citizenship, ranging from student participation in higher education governance to the higher education institution as an actor in democratic society.

Public responsibility for higher education and research, internal governance are relevant for the establishment of the Global Higher Education Area, in its responsibility towards the advancement of the society in justice, peace and prosperity. I hope that the provided analysis will encourage further discussion and interest among policy makers and practitioners and will improve practice.

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