Educating Citizens at Universities

by

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Now is the time to create more European citizenship. Universities cannot distance themselves from this. Civic education is one of the emergent social needs and universities have the functions and tools to participate. Course content, educative methodologies and university faculty are some of the tools that could be used to improve the education of citizens, not only that of professionals heading for the labour market. Universities have new responsibilities to a society that expects a quick and certain response.

The university is changing day by day. The development of society, science, and changes to the world map are quickly transforming relations between people. These demographic, social, political and economic changes require a greater capacity from the university to respond to emergent demands.

European universities are working hard on this response, and many of their actions are centred on, among others, the improvement of their course offerings in line with emergent demands, the methodological changes in teaching in agreement with the new paradigm of teaching-learning, and the creation of quality systems that guarantee quality levels, minimums of excellence, fortifying the universities' accountability and facilitating the comparison of courses and degrees obtained in different university systems. These reforms comprise the evaluation of the harmonization process of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), which has been followed by the European ministers of education since the Bologna agreements. Nevertheless, some changes come as reactions to events that force a university to modify its conduct, performance and services. For that reason it would, from a deeper perspective, be necessary to think about aspects that are the basis of the relationship between university and society, for example:

- What kind of universities do we have?

- What social demands are being satisfied?

- What reorientations are required?

Certainly, from these reflections, we can obtain information that confirms the weaknesses that are intuited from the performance of university activities. Some of these weaknesses have a heavy social impact or, at least, are related to some of the social phenomena that limit development and obstruct coexistence. For example, the Spanish are the least entrepreneurial of all Europeans (according to Eurobarometer data, 70% declare they do not plan to start a business, compared to the European average of 52%), they have a low productivity rate (84 as opposed to a European average value of 100 – data from the Instituto Nacional de Estadística, Spain) and a large proportion of them abandon their university studies (30% compared to the European average of 14%, according to Eurostat). Universities cannot distance themselves from this. Universities could be failing to fulfil their own functions as modern universities, functions that arise from the identification of society's emergent demands.

The functions that, traditionally, have been carried out by the university, did not satisfy José Ortega y Gasset (1983). More than seventy years ago, he attributed to the university a "promoting principle" role in Europe, which could be extrapolated to the world. The university has to contribute to the formation of society's human capital, has to maintain social leadership on the subjects of interest to its surrounding community and has to work, not only on educating professionals aiming to find a productive occupation, but also on educating citizens who contribute to the improvement of social coexistence. In order to face these functions derived from emergent demands, a university could design its strategies based on two approaches: people-centred or institution-centred, the latter referring to the universities and institutions that participate in higher education policy.

Civic education and the development of human capital consist of people-centred strategies, which encourage the necessary individual attitudes and values for co-existence and participation in the development of society. Pestalozzi (Michavila, 2002) said that it was necessary "to educate the head, to educate the hands, to educate the heart". It is a mistake to believe that the university does not have responsibilities in the civic education of the people and a mistake for it to centre its activity only on the education of professionals for the labour market. The education of citizens is one of the responses to society's emergent demands because universities could contribute to what Delors (1996) said about the meaning of learning: "to learn to know, to learn to do, to learn to be and to learn to live together".

These kinds of people-centred strategies could be developed from at least three basic aspects of the university: the content, the educative methodologies and the faculty. Regarding the faculty, there are strategies on instruction, evaluation and incentives and academic life. In their course offerings, the universities have a tool for civic formation; the faculty can influence course content in order to avoid excessive specialization; to encourage the study of subjects with a cross-sectional character, general interest with on courses on, for example, human rights, sustainable development, regional history and culture – of special relevance for Europe – etc.; and find balance and harmony between humanism, sciences and technology.

The improvement of educative methodologies in higher education can facilitate the implementation of these people-centred strategies. The days have gone when a student was a passive agent in the classroom and with little participation in laboratories. The reform of methodologies is necessary in order to move to proactive educative methods, supported by the new forms of teaching time management and information technologies and communication. The reduction – not elimination – of the traditional class lesson leave time for seminars, practical work, laboratories and tutoring, allow the increase of interactive learning and the use of discussion techniques, presentations, etc. Any of these reforms will not be possible if the university does not faculty guidelines for the improvement of the educative methodologies, both in pedagogical aspects and the update of knowledge.

Some of the institution-centred strategies are those created inside the universities and are related to the way universities are governed and managed to respond to society's emergent demands. Many of these strategies are centred on the promotion of internationalization and mobility for the enrichment of the education process of the students and professors, not only in the professional sphere, but also in the personal sphere through the knowledge of different cultures and languages. The creation of research and teaching networks fortifies the interchange of experiences and approximates the different identities that could be a part each other; this could be the case for the European Union. Joint studies between universities – in the same or different countries – is one of the many institutional strategies that could have an effect on the fortification of civic education, at least in a region like Europe. All these strategies have to comprise the universities' strategic plans.

Other strategies are those that arise from the design of educative policies. These could mostly concentrate on the challenges in the aim for a new civic education in Europe. An initial difficulty is in the responsibility for the design of the educative policies, centred in the States. There is conflicting information regarding the allocation of educative responsibilities; only 9% of Europeans consider that parliament should legislate on education, whereas 67% think that the European Union should have competition in scientific and technical research. It is as if the university functions of teaching and research could be separated or as if the role of the university was minimal in the scientific and technological production of the region. This could be, perhaps, a result of European citizens' fear that their organizations might have a more interventionist and homogenizing attitude.

Added to this difficulty there are others regarding, for example,

- The financing[1] of the European universities – which is insufficient and limited from both public and private sources.

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1. The European Commission, through Official Communications, indicates the importance of increasing the financing for research and development in Europe to 3% of the regional GDP, *COM(2002) 499 final. More research for Europe. Towards 3% of GDP*, and also emphasizes the relevance of increasing and diversifying the financing and improving the management *COM(2002) 779 final. Investing efficiently in education and training. An imperative for Europe* and *COM (2005) 152 final. Mobilising the brainpower of Europe: enabling universities to make their full contribution to the Lisbon Strategy*.

- The accelerated process of European construction – which, paradoxically, had to bring with itself more European citizenship.

- Globalization – which narrows the border between the cultural identity and universality.

- The reception of new immigrants of diverse cultures and the resulting unemployment and social exclusion.

In spite of such difficulties, the necessity of creating more European citizenship is evident. The Sorbonne Declaration, 1998 already insisted that universities "continue to play a pivotal role [in the] development" of the "the intellectual, cultural, social and technical dimensions" of Europe", and this was ratified in 1999 in Bologna by 29 countries, and was remarked on in the goals of Lisbon 2000[2] for the European area. Efforts are made by different European institutions through different actions (*e.g.* the Socrates and Leonardo programs), although it is clear that more could come from the creation of observatories of European citizenship, with the participation of universities that carried out periodic studies of the development of European citizenship.

Now is the time to create more European citizenship, to make reality that which was said about it in the Maastricht Treaty in 1992: "every person holding the nationality of a member State shall be a citizen of the Union". Universities have a great and inevitable responsibility in this task because they have to educate young people to be faithful to the principles and values of democracy, and, also, to respect diversity; they have to educate young people in the continuity of the historical arguments of humanism and rationality; and they have to educate young people in the principles of sustainability and globalization. It is time to think about what our universities are doing to bring about a change of attitude in individuals, how are they responding to the needs of learning for change? Society and European States have the right to demand from universities an education in values and an education for the construction of Europe.

Therefore, education for citizenship has to be made up of civic education that teaches our youth all about our institutions and history; human rights – their promotion and protection; intercultural education – for the fight against the racism, discrimination, intolerance and ethnocentrism; education for peace – to resolve world conflicts without violence; and global education – to understand that we are all interdependent in a diverse world. For this, the university has the means: information, values, competences, skills and practices. The university has everything – the human resources, the knowledge and the tools – to participate in this purpose, and just has to recover its role in social development and in the resolution of conflicts, and its leadership to make it possible.

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2.   To make the EU "the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-driven economy by 2010".

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