

What is the Value of Education

by

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Introduction

If one looks at the definition of the word “Value” one will find two different meanings;

1. an amount, as of goods, services, or money, considered to be a fair and suitable equivalent for something else; a fair price or return;
2. a principle, standard, or quality considered worthwhile or desirable.

Likewise when one discusses the value of education one is confronted with a similar contrast. The value of education has long been discussed in Europe and around the world. Plato, in one of his many discourses, expounded that *“By maintaining a sound system of education you produce citizens of good character, and citizens of sound character.”* The reasoning that education’s main value is its ability to help society and its citizens grow was, and still is, fostered by many academics and philosophers. Nowadays the value of Education, according to other experts in the field, has another interpretation. Pierre Bourdieu in his text *“Distinction: a social critique of the judgement of taste”*⁷, explains that *“The economy of student worth – seeking the ‘easy child’ and seeking success in the performative culture – is very much a product, albeit a side-effect, of current education policy”*. He goes on to argue that *“the derogation of ethics, brought about by endogenous privatisation and the ‘disciplines’ of the market, becomes very apparent. In the business of survival in the market place, the niceties of care and equal value, become easily dispensable.”* He concludes by writing that *“The social relations between providers and ‘clients’ and among the providers themselves are changed significantly. This is a process of ‘ethical-retooling’”*.

So the question is - has there been a shift in the value of education? From a social to a more economic importance? When one hears European politicians speak about education we hear talk about financial resources, economic progress and profit [as well as workforce, employability, efficiency, top-20s, commodity] – all in the name of achieving the “most competitive economy in the world”. They sometimes seem oblivious to the fact that the same talk of profit, resources and progress are equivalently important in another light – a light that has been shining on education from the beginning of time. I am referring to the light of societal growth.

“The **profit** we possess after study is to have become better and wiser.”
Michel de Montaigne

“Our **progress** as a nation can be no swifter than our progress in education. The human mind is our fundamental **resource**.” John F. Kennedy

What I am saying is that yes, a knowledge based economy is not a bad thing. Having a flexible and employable workforce should be a significant aim for society. But these aims can be achieved while also sticking to the true value of Education. We need to have quality education that fosters:

- the value of dialogue and mutual understanding;
- the value of open mindedness and critical thinking;
- the value of honesty and respect;
- the value of democracy;
- the value of the rule of law;
- the value of active citizenship;
- the value of peace, freedom and respect of human rights.

These are the values that are unfortunately lacking in many of the current affairs in today's world. We should not simply strive to have a workforce, but a society, with individuals that can contribute both socially and economically – a “creative society” as opposed to simply a “knowledge economy”. Is it truly hard to admit that all the money in the world, can never buy our people these values needed to live peacefully together?

So if we agree that these values are indeed important and should thus be fostered – our next question should be “how can we achieve this?” Academics have the main role – not the sole role though, since politicians, students, social partners and society do play a part – but one must understand that they are the ones who should channel the above-mentioned values through the education they impart. And it is in the delivery of a holistic education, for example, where ethics plays an important function – for when academics act contrary to the abovementioned values, which we like to refer to as Academic Corruption, then it is ultimately society that suffers.

The importance of Ethics

One of the meanings of Ethics is that we human beings engage in a continuous effort of studying our own moral beliefs and moral conduct, and strive to ensure that we, and the institutions we help to shape, live up to standards that are reasonable and solidly-based.

Thus the ethics fostered by our governments and higher education institutions when dealing with education, for example, is paramount to the fostering among students, reasonable and solidly-based standards so that these can be then reproduced in society.

I aim to raise three issues that we face within European Higher education – hoping that the questions I put will help strengthen the need for more ethical discussions on higher education.

The first issue I would like to raise is whether or not current trends of the **commodification of education** affect the values imparted by higher education and thus those of our society?

DF Noble, in his article on “Technology and the Commodification of Higher Education”² explains that “*The commodification of education requires the interruption of this fundamental*

educational process and the disintegration and distillation of the educational experience into discrete, reified, and ultimately saleable things or packages of things”.

Is it thus ethical, for example, to “produce” graduates that are tailor-made to work in specific companies knowing that they will not possess the flexible knowledge of changing company or job? Do we want courses that aim to simply part knowledge without any emphasis on the importance of social interaction, and thus have an effective workforce of social inadequates?

And have we ever thought of what impact the market-orientation of education is having on the “psyche” of our students and academics? We do live in a day and age where people refer to students as “consumers” of education; whose personal gain from consuming such a product is so much higher than any gain society receives. We live in a day and age where more importance is being given to a Rector’s management skills than his/her academic background. Do we truly believe that there are no repercussions in remodelling the ethos of the stakeholders in education?

If we bring up students with the belief that in order to be successful one has to efficiently use one’s time and personal human capital as opposed to striving to fulfil their true human potential and thus aid society in the process, then societal-based activities, such as voluntary and community work, or even the studying of the arts, like philosophy and history, could easily be seen as an ineffective use of time and resources.

How far will a rector bend core academic values in order to ease pressure from the governmental demand to reduce costs and increase profits? Will more students graduate when more money is needed in an education system that finances universities based on the amount of graduates produced? Will student representation in the governance of an institution be challenged due to the fostering of a business model of governance?

I do believe that these ethical questions need to be addressed, because by addressing them we would not be simply addressing the economic realities of today but also the very fabric of our future societies.

I will move on to the second issue, that of **Academic Corruption**. Academic Corruption is not simply a form of bribery, it has deeper connotations. As I have mentioned, education should confer values, like the importance of democracy and the respect for the rule of law, values that are the building blocks for a better and stronger society. Hence, Academic Corruption can be considered as a betrayal of such values by academics and students within the higher education system – which in turn leads to the degradation of society. Academic Corruption exists for many reasons and is not limited to a region or a type of institution – it takes many forms and thus should be sought and addressed before the damage caused becomes irreparable.

Let us take some basic examples. In Italy, students complain that some professors, teaching at public university, advise students to take extra classes at private institutes to be able to pass their examinations. In the United Kingdom our member union is quite cautious about the fact that alumni networks play an unclear role when it comes to students entering highly selective universities. This contrasts to the Ukraine, where direct bribery to gain access seems to be a common problem. In Hungary for example, our NUS recorded an interesting case which happened on the national level with infrastructural grants from the European Union. Experts sitting on the project-approval panel asked the rectors of certain universities to pay them in order for their projects to be recommended. And the list goes on, from examination leaks in Spain to direct political influences in Belarus; from the buying of degrees in Bosnia and Herzegovina to party political influence in the hiring of lectures in Belgium; from the “old boys clubs” in the Netherlands to the lack of transparency in acceptance criteria in

Germany. Some of the examples I have mentioned have not been proved, yet I'm sure you yourselves have heard of such cases. Denial of their existence means that no enquiry will be held, – which in turn means the problems will persist and become accepted as a standard, an “ethical” norm. Like the fact that in Malta a specific academic is known for giving his results one and half years late for the last few years. Would you consider it ethical to publish results one and a half years late? Or give the same lecture, from the same notes, for 10 years in a row without any interest of preparing students for the future and not the past?

How can one expect a student to believe in the rule of law fostered by his state, if the first real concrete exposure to this value was the corrupted version fostered by his/her higher education institution?

In order to truly pass on the values needed in a truly democratic society we need to have higher education institutions that are truly democratic. Through ethical standards we can make sure that this becomes a reality. It is unethical to commit or foster academic corruption and likewise, to sit idle while it runs rampant in one's institution. Concrete measures have to be put in place to firstly, find out why this corruption is occurring, and secondly, to not only solve but also prevent these events from happening. More discussion about Student Rights is also needed and this is one of the projects ESIB is working on at the moment, a European Charter of Student Rights.

The third and final issue I would like to address is that of Access to Higher Education

Sometimes, it seems as if access to education is like world peace or a brighter tomorrow, something that everyone mentions in passing but no-one seriously believes in! I think, though, that it is difficult to separate access and diversity from broader ethical debates and values. At a simple level, there is a persisting worry that the necessary public funding of higher education is not a justifiable use of the public's money, since it is considered that only a privileged few benefit. Although it is true that not every person will be suited for a particular course, the underlying demand of students and many others across Europe in the past quarter-century is that artificial barriers, particularly the most subtle ones of prejudice and discrimination, must be dismantled.

Let me also address, the thorny question of tuition fees. Some have argued that owing to the private benefit accruing to university graduates and the under representation of marginalised and poorer groups in HE participation in some countries, means that tuition fees should be reintroduced or significantly increased, at least for some students. I would respond, though, that there are serious ethical and philosophical questions pertaining to such a strategy. If we are to accept the claims of higher education as a transformative force, as an engagement between students and ideas and amongst students and their teachers, how is a participation fee acceptable? Very few leaders or decision-makers in Europe believe that higher education is an optional extra or a trivial pursuit. Therefore, an ethical funding policy is one that sees applicants as diverse individuals, valuing the content of their minds and not their bank accounts. We in ESIB have seen the damage that fees have caused to many education systems and have quite some difficulties with the rhetoric of political leaders who argue that under funding can be solved by charging students, young and old, for the education that we are being told is essential, indispensable even, to lead us towards becoming the most competitive economy in the world. If it is so important, is it acceptable - and dare I say, ethical - to levy a fee for it. Would we charge for the right to vote? Set a per-word fee for free speech? I think not.

Conclusion

To conclude I would like to end with a quote from Einstein who said that:

“I believe, indeed, that overemphasis on the purely intellectual attitude, often directed solely to the practical and factual, in our education, has led directly to the impairment of ethical values. I am not thinking so much of the dangers with which technical progress has directly confronted mankind, as of the stifling of mutual human considerations by a ‘matter-of-fact’ habit of thought which has come to lie like a killing frost upon human relations. Without ‘ethical culture’ there is no salvation for humanity.”

It is important I believe that we discuss the issues we are faced with, issues like the ones I have mentioned in this paper, thinking not only of the economical but also the ethical repercussions we will face, maybe not directly today but in the near future. We seem to have different visions of how higher education should advance in the world – but if we at least agree about the value of education as a common good that should be accessible for all mankind so that everyone can live a better life, both on a social and economical level, then a good and constructive dialogue can be held and good solutions achieved.

Let me finish by telling you ESIB’s vision of Europe. The president of the European Union, the Hon. Barroso, explained his strategy for Europe as being all about growth and jobs. Hence even education is all about growth and jobs and the students in Europe agree with this. What we suggest, though, is that it should be shadowed by the word “sustainable”. Growth for the sake of growth is not a path towards a bright future. We cannot talk about “more researchers” without thinking of the social and economic conditions for researchers, the ethics of research and the opportunities available for historically underrepresented social and ethnic groups. We cannot achieve Lisbon goals of growth and jobs without asking what we are growing towards, is it a narrow concept of statistics or is it meaningful social solidarity?

What we also believe is that growth and jobs is not the end but a means to achieve a higher purpose, a higher “growth” we should strive for –and this is societal growth - the growth of the individual, based on societal values, as part of an ever growing world society. The supply of accessible quality education supplied by strong universities, based on ethical standards and in the interest of the society and not merely a company, is not a question, it is an answer to our future.

¹ Bourdieu, P. (1986). *Distinction: a social critique of the judgement of taste*. London, Routledge

² Technology and the commodification of higher education DF NOBLE - Monthly Review, 2002 - uta.ed