

Church and university:
Human dignity in a knowledge based society: the role of the university

Ingeborg Gabriel, Vienna

Intervention at the conference: Ora et labora, 3rd July 2005, Rome

Your excellencies, dear colleagues, ladies and gentlemen

Firstly I want to thank you for the honour to speak at this meeting on behalf of the Rector of the University of Vienna who has been elected President of the European University Association this spring.

This last session is dedicated to the relationship between the university and the church in their common aim to promote a “new culture of Labour in Europe”.

Let me start with a metaphor:

The centre of European towns as they developed in the 13th century was dominated by three buildings the church (or cathedral), the townhall and the university. Around them the working and living places of craftsmen and tradesmen were located. This picture of the city can be seen as a visual representation of the main pursuits of men: Worship of God, the search for truth and knowledge and the pursuit of the common good through politics, work and trade.

The structure is still there – as are universities, churches and townhalls. But the city in its outer appearance has undergone significant transformations already in the course of industrialization and it is undergoing further changes on its way to a knowledge based society. The information technologies are since less than two decades radically changing the nature of work as well as the organization of production and human living conditions - with them the role of the university, which has to be defined in this new socio-economic context.

In the 13th and 14th centuries the foundations of present European culture were laid at the transition from a feudal to an urban culture. The first universities were founded at that time and the university as an idea as well as a reality was and is part of this culture. The word – *universitas* – contains the programme of the institution: the search for and the teaching of knowledge in its universality, the *universitas litterarum*.

It originally encompassed four faculties: theology, jurisprudence, philosophy (including the natural sciences) and medicine which were to present the universality of knowledge. This was still the structure of Vienna university when I studied there in the 1970th - since then things changed radically: we now have 18 faculties and the faculty of medicine has become a university of its own. Similar processes have taken place at other universities. This shows (whatever the administrative advantages may be) an inherent tendency towards the fragmentation of knowledge which is taking place in an unprecedented rapidity.

The second part of the programme of the university is, that as the *universitas magistrorum and studentorum* it forms a community not only in the legal or administrative sense (which is also the case) but in the strictly scientific sense. Knowledge is to be acquired through personal discourse in a scientific community. (The questiones of Thomas of Aquinas show this in a paradigmatic, formalized way).

The two core elements of the globally unique European concept of the university are thus

- the quest for the unity of knowledge – which theologically is grounded in the unity of the creation
- and its dialogical and communale acquisition As Plato put it beautifully in his seventh letter: By holding discourse many times and by being together in confidence and search for the truth suddenly a light springs up like from a flying spark (Platon 7. Brief 341c).

In pursuing the search for truth the university also serves the common good and the community. This, by the way was stated as its main aim in the foundational charta of the university of Vienna from 1365, issued by Emperor Rudolf I, known as the founder.

What does this mean for today?

Sociologically we find ourselves in a period of transition from an industrial to the knowledge-based society, which share important characteristics, but also differ in significant aspects.

Modern man since the age of enlightenment defines himself as “worker and owner” as a *homo faber* – whose work transforms the world according to his needs and creates his property, which in turn protects his liberty. For Enlightenment philosophy (as well as for Marx) work therefore constitutes the central pursuit of man.

In this context the first and foremost aim of science was and is its usability for production through technical inventions and their potential usage in the economy. This utilitarian approach led to a grave crisis in the university system at the end of the 18th and the beginning of the 19th century. Between 1790 and 1820 many universities in the German speaking countries were closed and replaced by technical schools, which were to give technical training directly applicable for the working process.

The natural sciences insofar as they serve as the basis for technical science and economic progress acquired a position of dominance.

This situation is not far from today's. The complaints about the marginalization of the humanities are nearly identical in Newman's Idea of the University and in current writings on university issues, as those of Ralf Dahrendorf and Hans Grimm, the president of the German Fakultätentag. Behind this lie however deeper anthropological questions, which help to better understand the problem.

Natural sciences produce knowledge, which can contribute to the "wealth of nations": In societies where wealth has become the main and only aim, which can command public consensus, this priority of the applied sciences reflects the basic interests of the society and consequently politics and its view of the common good as consisting in economic growth.

But there also existed from the very beginning strong counter-movement against the functionalization of knowledge:

Adam Smith, the founder of modern economics, who was a moral philosopher by profession saw - with admirable farsightedness - that the monotony the division of labor in industrial society demanded has de-humanizing effects on the labourer who "becomes as stupid and ignorant as it is possible for a human creature to become, his sentiments become stunted, and he becomes altogether incapable of judging." (A. Smith, Wealth of nations, Book V/1). Adam Smith therefore pled for widespread universal education as a public good.

The idea of the *universitas litterarum* was revived in Germany at the beginning of the 19th century by Wilhelm von Humboldt, who defended the ideal of universal knowledge on humanistic grounds and on the basis of Romantic ideas.

Thus there are two different trends concerning the university in industrial society.

One that aims at the radical functionalization of knowledge, and the other one that sees in accordance with the original idea the university as the place in the city where universal *knowledge is taught* – as J. H. Newman in his “The Idea of the university” put it.

The transformation from an industrial to a knowledge based society as well as the new socio-economical context makes this inherent tension between functional and let me call it educational usefulness between these two versions of the university even more poignant and critical.

This I think for two reasons:

Firstly on financial premises: globalization processes undermine national economies and lead to an increase of competition in the economic sphere. Public goods and services including the universities loose public support and financing and get under increasing pressure to proof their usefulness in a situation of increasing worldwide economic competition.

Secondly because pluralization and individualization which characterize present day western societies make it difficult to discuss political, which are also ethical and cultural questions in public. This strengthens the trend towards positivism: facts are OK (even if they may be irrelevant). But the discussion of philosophical, cultural lest religious issues is seriously questioned, firstly because they cannot be “solved” and may lead to dissent. Thus despite the need for intercultural and ethical studies to strengthen social coherence in multicultural and multireligious societies, there is the tendency to exclude these issues form the public agenda and consequently from the university.

Though in this regard, I dare say, there is also a change taking place.

Taking these two trends together, the pressure on humanities in the universities is increasing, not to speak of theology for which it is as difficult to proof its functional usefulness and which looses ground also because of the continuing secularization of European societies.

I want to argue, however, that a knowledge based society has an even greater need for university education in the original sense – as universality of knowledge and discourse on it - than the industrial society.

1. The question of communication and personality formation:

The radically changes in society and in work, e.g. the fact that the traditional ways of fulltime und lifelong employment are becoming the exception rather than the rule, confront the individual with a high degree of uncertainty, and the ever increasing need for professional and personal flexibility.

Flexibility originally means the ability of a tree to bend and consequently get back into an upright position. Applied to human beings flexibility therefore means that they despite all adaptations they need to make in work and personal life have a firm core or personality centre which enables them to remain themselves and that is also creative human beings.

A friend of mine once paraphrasing the famous phrase of Luther before the catholic authorities put it in the simple formula: Here I stand and therefore I can also act otherwise.

As P. Ricoeur has shown the personal identity this entails is rooted in values and convictions rather than in changing role models and functions.

Whereas in industrial society the monotony of work had potentially dehumanizing Effects in a knowledge based society it is the information flood (the word is evocative) which endangers human integrity.

E. g. the use of the internet creates a magnificent sense of universality. I can get the information from it for which I formerly had to visit libraries around the world and I can find out about any subject I happen to be interested in. This offers an easy access to universal knowledge former generations could not even dream of.

However, this knowledge remains useless for me or may be even misleading if it I cannot integrate it into an already existing framework of convictions, values, beliefs, which have to come from another source.

The limiting factor thus is no more the acquisition of knowledge, but the transmission of those criteria which enable the person to make judgements on it.

This is true for everyday information as well as for complicated scientific question and ethical as well as political issues.

The common place that students today have no longer to be taught facts, but how they are able to find it, becomes most questionable under theses circumstance. Facts are only a minor part of knowledge. This constitutes also the main problem of the basically functionalistic PISA-Concept. Its main criteria are geared towards enhancing the ability of students to apply knowledge to a given situation, but not to creatively and also

critically interpret it by themselves. The point of reference thus is not the practice of life (the good life in the Aristotelian sense and the common good) and the ability to participate actively in society so vital for democracy. Whether the student is able to grasp the meaning of things, to make appropriate judgements and consequently decisions according to human and ethical criteria and thus creatively participate in social life is not part of this functionalistic approach.

The university should distinguish herself from – the most useful - technical schools in that it gives students not only a package of informations (which can well be acquired over the internet), but helps them to structure it in such a way that he can use it and communicate about it with others in a creative and distinctive way.

Just to illustrate this: Some weeks ago I had a seminar with an international group of students. One of them was a delightfully bright Chinese girl. I think she met for the first time of her life a theologian and wanted to enter into a conversation. So she asked me, what I thought of the Leonardo Da Vinci Acts.

Now two things happened which are typical for a knowledge based society. I did not know what the Da Vinci acts were - apparently they are bestseller novels according to which Da Vinci was an off-spring of Jesus, whose descendants formed a sect which exists up to this day. On the other hand this was the only thing the Chinese student happened to know about Christianity.

So we were unable to communicate, because our sets of information were too different. The most intelligent person confronted with information about a subject completely foreign to her will not be able to integrate it in a way that makes sense because this presupposes a general framework of culturally transmitted knowledge which she or he simply does not have.

The fragmentation of knowledge thus hampers discourse and communication, which are at the basis of the creation of new knowledge.

This has far-reaching consequences for the individual as well as for the society:

The student may acquire a sort of patch-work knowledge, which he or she has to put together individually without any assurance that the puzzle corresponds to reality. Socially it is a potential source of misunderstanding and conflict. For the democracy it may cripple people's ability to judge and form opinions and positions, which correspond to reality.

2. Two questions of justice:

The knowledge-based society thus has an inherent tendency to create a two class society regarding the availability of knowledge as well as its socially and individually productive usage.

There exists a digital divide between those who can afford the technical means and gain access to the information society and those who cannot. This is the consequence of the more general problem of access to goods, and especially to public goods between rich and poor and rich and poor countries, which also creates immense tension in these communities. Thus according to the UNDP Human development report 26, 3% of the US-American population used internet, but only 0,04% of the population in South-East Asia and still less than 1% in Latin America. (UNDP 1999, 74).

But there is – in industrial societies where the use of internet is skyrocketing – also another challenge in addition to the question of access: the development of a rift between those who can make proper usage of the information and those who cannot. This presupposes not only individual abilities, but also a sort of common knowledge for students to refer to. Without this their knowledge becomes meaningless or fragmented.

Let me come to a conclusion:

I started out with picture of the city with the university, the townhall and the church at its center. This view has been transformed by industrial society, where factories and the homes moved to the outskirts and became so to speak their own center. In the knowledge based society this process is carried a step further. The idea of centrality becomes obscured through a growing individualization and virtualization of structures.

This is also a metaphor for the problem the person is confronted with today: the fragmentation of its knowledge, values and ultimately personality.

The university should not follow this trend indiscriminately. In the view of the growing fragmentation of knowledge and human discourse the challenge is more than ever to keep in view its original concept. The emphasis placed on ethics as an integrating factor, e.g. in Zürich and Vienna, is one step in this direction.

University education is more than functional education for work or a mere presentation of disparate facts. It is the place where students as the future leaders of the community are taught to make sense of their knowledge in their own subjects, to question given

answers and to acquire a basic knowledge of the anthropological, cultural and ultimately religious issues which are important for human life. It is also a place where students should learn to communicate their ideas to others, to discuss in structured and fruitful way, to develop a culture of discourse which lies at the basis of political life. This will also enable them to contribute to their own science, the common good in democratic societies and in a rapidly changing globalizing world which requires the respect of others and other cultures and therefore needs a good understanding of one's own.

And – so the final question - what is to be the role of the church in the whole process? The establishment of the universities in the 13th century in the period of transition from feudal to urban society brought the theology from the (mainly) Benedictine monasteries to the city. There are voices today that this could also be a solution for the dilemmas we are faced with and is the only option for a reintegration of work, research and worship, to leave so to speak the sinking ship of modern Western culture. We cannot predict the future. But for the present if – as Pope John Paul II. put it in his first encyclical *Redemptor hominis* – man is the way of the church, there exists a fundamental obligation of the church and therefore of theology to creative accompany the changes taking place and contribute to a universal and truly human university education which is, as I tried to argue, most urgently needed in the transformation process.

I thank your for your attention.

Literature used:

Weißbuch der Europäischen Kommission: Lehren und Lernen. Auf dem Weg zur kognitiven Gesellschaft, Brüssel 1996.

R. Sennett, *Der flexible Mensch*, Berlin 2000 (Original; *The corrosion of character* 1998).

J. H. Newman, *The idea of a university*, <http://www.newmanreader.org/works/idea/>

A. Smith, *The Wealth of Nations*, english internet-version.

Final document of the Glasgow convention: Strong universities for Europe, www.euaconvention.org/cont.asp?id

Declarations of Principles. Building the information Society: a global challenge in the new Millenium: World summit on the information society, geneva 2003 www.itu.int/wsis/docs/geneva/official/dop.html