The GAPS Think Piece - Issue 11

Universities cannot solve all the problems in the world.
But they should try.

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As I am writing this, people around me are discussing the aftermath of the UK vote to exit the European Union. I belong to one of the groups that benefit a lot from the European Union: the EU migrants who moved to another country for a better (or more satisfying) job. So I have very personal reasons to oppose the Leave campaign, but I try to understand it. And part of me is grieving with the "leave" campaigners who dream about the easy, national solutions to the complex, international challenges. I commiserate with the "native" population feeling disenfranchised by foreigners, overwhelmed by growing insecurities in their lives.

The problem is that the results of this vote won't change anything. The developments in technology, economy, society and in the environment will still be closely linked, and we will continue to feel out of breath, helpless or disenfranchised by them. For the problems that humanity is facing today, there aren't any local, national solutions. And the changes and challenges of the last decades are probably small, compared to the likely changes that will hit us in the coming decades.

The outlook might also be challenging because the process we have to solve our problems – politics – seems inaccessible to many, if not most, citizens, and especially young people: "Young people have been turned off politics."[1] There seems to be a "civic empowerment gap"[2]: Everyone has their vote, but apparently it is mostly affluent and middle-class people that feel they can influence politics. This feeling of not being part of the debate, but being condemned to passively endure the effects of others' decisions is troubling, and can take an ugly turn, especially when the economic situation worsens. But we need to start with the assumption that many people don't know how (and why) to engage. Active citizenship needs to be learned, and it is not enough that we rely mostly on parents to teach their kids how – nor can they teach what they never experienced themselves. Educational institutions need to teach systematically how to participate in society.

This idea is certainly not new. The Talloires Network, founded in 2005, is an "international association of institutions committed to strengthening the civic roles and social responsibilities of higher education"[3]. And the issue is certainly gaining more traction with the decision of the OECD to add a metrics on "global competence" to the PISA study, assessing how educational systems succeed in teaching young people how to "support the development of peaceful, diverse communities"[4].

Because if we don't do it systematically, we might contribute to even more disengagement: A study of 23,000 students at 23 colleges conducted by the Association of American Colleges and Universities in 2009 found that freshmen on campus felt more strongly about their presence and involvement in their new community than upper year students: 50.5 percent of freshmen believed that they had a responsibility to contribute to the larger community compared to 41.1 percent of seniors. "This means that, upon leaving college, more students felt less responsible for becoming a voice in their communities then when entering the university."[5]

This year, the project ESPRIT ends, funded in the EU Tempus program. The goal of the project was "to analyze, map and strengthen the social and public roles of higher education institutions in Israel, together with universities from European countries."[6] The project explores the social mission that universities have, e.g. when they improve access to university, when they offer public or community engagement programs[7], but also when a university engages in green programs[8] or improve equality for their employees[9]. So the ESPRIT project is not telling universities to engage in these activities. Universities all over the world are already doing that, it is not a new thing for them. But do we recognize these contributions appropriately?

Until now, assessments of universities have tended to focus solely on the academic aspects of their activities, namely research and teaching. Even the U-Multirank university ranking, which extended the range of dimensions by which to assess universities[10], does not include the dimension of social impact of universities.

Universities educate an increasingly large share of school leavers. And they are not only educators, they are also the main source for all the knowledge that we have about the role of education for the ability of young persons to participate in society. Many countries have policies for widening access to university, and the next thing we learn is that there are still disadvantages for certain groups of students: We know that the disadvantages of underrepresented groups have "little to do with any real deficiency in terms of ability". Even so, the inequalities – based on economic and educational background – continue during and after university[11]. Tim Blackman, vice-chancellor of Middlesex University, UK, argued recently that universities should not focus on ability when they select their students: "Institutions with diverse student bodies, where the peak of academic achievement is to enable those with mixed abilities to learn successfully together and where the measure of great discoveries is not just densely written articles behind publishers' paywalls but innovations that make a difference: that is an alternative vision of higher education for the 21st century."[12]

But how can we achieve this? Do universities have the tools to do that and are they willing and able to change? Because it will change the focus of academia. Universities will no longer be just an institutional framework for research, teaching and learning. They need to reinvent themselves as social enterprises, where the process of how research is being done, how the students learn as well as the teaching contexts are just as important as the results. Even more, the activities need to be interlinked. Being a part of the university needs to be an experience that enables the students to participate successfully in processes or systems outside of the university, in companies, in politics.

So e.g. improving the green impact of the institution needs to become a part of the learning experience of the students. And instead of expecting the students to adapt to the academic context and dismiss their past experiences, lecturers need to learn how to engage with the students' diverse backgrounds in a way that enriches teaching and learning and enables students to reflect on and engage productively with their own background.

There are strong signs that the learning experience will be limited if the universities don't actively engage in inclusivity. Experiences from ethnically diverse communities suggest that diversity is not a positive experience per se: Comparing attitudes towards minorities in cities, a study showed[13] that being exposed to minorities doesn't automatically lead to less prejudices. Contact between different ethnic groups is necessary in order to learn how to live together peacefully, and this peace seems to be vulnerable to negative media reports and stereotypes.

This is also a lesson learned by companies that started to manage diversity among their staff: For individuals, this might be an enriching experience. For the company, it can lead to conflicts and low productivity if diversity is not managed well. The approach of "diversity management" adds the idea that diversity is in fact an untapped resource which can be used e.g. to improve cooperation within the company, the company's products or customer service, and thus contribute to the company's success.

So how can universities use ethnic as well as social diversity of students and staff for improving teaching and learning, research and internal governance? And how can these experiences be used to have a positive impact on society?

Learn more about the negative effects of diversity
Universities already know about negative effects of diversity. The lower success rate of minority students is one of them, others are the effort that lecturers need to apply to groups of students with different levels of knowledge and experience, or the issues arising when international students act differently from what lecturers expected. And, truth be told, the struggle to include women at university is still not over, even after all these decades, as gender inequalities as well as pervasive experiences of sexual harassment show. And the increasing demand for cooperation among disciplines is difficult to deliver, seeing as even the diversity created by the institution itself is not easily dealt with.

At the same time, this offers the chance to learn more about what the university is actually doing when there is teaching and learning and research, answering the question, "What was it that worked with the old group of students that does not work now anymore?"

Diversity can be exasperating. However, if we leave it at that, it will be the "others" who have to carry the burden of lack of integration and inclusion. So the more transparent we are about the negative effects that diversity can have, and how much work we need to put in in order to make it work, the higher is the probability that we might actually succeed.

What is it that everybody is mean to contribute to?

Universities already address diversity as well as non-academic goals in their mission statements and strategies. However, this does not automatically mean that they will be ready or able to prioritize these issues. So what is it exactly that the university wants to prepare the students for - and how and where is that accomplished?

In the context of a diversity management approach it would be important to develop in detail how these goals can be reached and what the individuals' contributions could look like. In a "all hands on deck" situation, which are the abilities and perspectives that we haven't put to good use yet? It is important to be aware that this will lead to a lot of change. It will change how the institution does things, and it may even change the goals that the institution wants to achieve.

But contributing to the university's goals is obviously not why a student goes to university. Students probably want to get an education that helps them to find a career. The university's agenda to transform them into academics, into critical thinkers, active citizens or entrepreneurs, needs to be presented convincingly as part of the educational program.

What does that mean, practically?

First of all, none of this just happens on its own. It never did, it was done by other agents, probably the parents of the students. It needs increasingly more planning; it needs to be implemented into the activities of the institutions.

Therefore, it is not something that individual lecturers can successfully take on on their own. It requires an institutional, managed approach that enables institutional learning. It is necessary to face the awful truths of our dear traditions and how the way we always did things leads to advantages for some and comes with disadvantages for others. And academic staff needs help to understand their role in this context: What does student-orientation mean in a context of non-academic educational goals and a diverse student body? How does the knowledge about disadvantages and the effects of diversity translate into productive pedagogies? What does student success mean in the university's context and what contributes to it? And how does all of that change the university as an institution?

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2 Neundorf/Smets quoting political philosopher Meira Levinson.

3 http://talloiresnetwork.tufts.edu/

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