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Elite vs. Mass Higher Education - A Reflection On the Purpose of Higher Education

Klemen Miklavič

International Expert on Education & Chief Analyst for the European Quality Assurance Agency

Today, we often hear that open door policies at universities hamper the pursuit of excellence and leave the best talents drowning in mediocrity. This opinion is voiced not only by academics, but also heard from national policy makers, international organizations and the EU Commission, among others. But, however new it might seem at first glance, this issue has been recurrent and is largely the consequence of social relations, institutions and ideas that prevail in a given historical context.

This article aims to present a snapshot of the ideas and structures that underpin contemporary views on the role and purpose of higher education in relation to its openness to *mass enrolments*, *equality* and *excellence*. It does so with reference to the circumstances that have given rise to these same concerns in the past and that currently engage the higher education community (and general public). It will look at the driving forces behind the transformation of higher education over the past century and especially its massive expansion. Eventually, it will interpret what lies beneath the tendency to re-litisation of universities and reflect on the role and purpose of higher education in the future.

End of higher education

The first aspect to be considered when talking about modern higher education is that there is no such thing as higher education any longer. Instead we have *mass higher education*. High enrolment rates, often exceeding 50% of each generation, are one of its main characteristics. Never before in history has such a large share of young people enrolled in higher education.



This key transformation has profoundly marked modern universities and higher education in Europe and other parts of the world. While, on the one hand, the phenomenon of relatively open universities is presented as an achievement, on the other hand it is possible to observe scepticism. Critics commonly claim that there are too many graduates on the labour market and that the quality of teaching and learning suffers under the bulk of students, who are supposedly often not even interested in studying.

The driving social forces propelling the massification of higher education

How could a transformation of this magnitude have occurred in such a relatively short period? The relatively static framework of institutions, with their norms, values, beliefs and traditions, provides resistance to rapid and far-reaching changes. Universities can be understood as an integral part of the institutional setting that forms the foundation of the modern western nation-state and one could expect that such a profound transformation would be impossible.

But, nevertheless, the massification is a large-scale shift and it happened in a relatively short time. The explanation for this cannot be found simply by examining higher education. Mass enrolments must certainly be attributed to larger social changes that have occurred in post-World War II Europe. In the second half of the 20th century, enrolment rates in the universities of Western Europe and the US started to increase¹. At the time, Europe was recovering from the devastation of the inequalities created in the 19th and early 20th centuries and the consequent two world conflicts. The World War II aftermath revealed a profoundly changed ideational face of an exhausted Europe. The socialist east and the social-democratic/Keynesian west accepted egalitarianism into their core values. In conjunction with the changes in the structures of economy and society (on the road to the post-industrial and post-modern era) this can be considered as a crucial activator for increasing enrolments in higher education.

¹ Massification was not an entirely new phenomenon when it appeared in the Western world. For example, in many Latin American countries, massification or better de-elitisation of universities had already begun in the 1920s with the 1918 reform in Argentina (the so called *Cordoba reform*).



In practical terms, the widely accepted doctrine of equal opportunity in western social democracies saw higher education and university, in particular, as one of the primary means for emancipation of economically and socially disadvantaged groups. The mission of supporting social and political stability of nations by creating greater opportunity for vertical social mobility and breaking down traditional class divisions, became the guiding idea for the modernisation of higher education in the West².

Tension between the liberal humanist and egalitarian (welfare state) ideation of higher education

Prior to massification, the typical Western university education of the 19th and early 20th centuries was reserved to a small share of society. Higher education represented the venue where intellectual elites nurtured their manners and social networks, but also where typically elitist state professionals were trained³. The ideational climate was very different at the time. An anecdotal sketch reflecting the spirit of the times can be found in one of Friedrich Nietzsche's lectures, in which he presented widening access to higher education as a challenge to the brilliant mind and true education. Convinced that only a small number of "truly educated" people can ever exist in our society, he warned about the perils of open doors to universities⁴.

The phenomenon of massification of higher education was naturally at odds with 19th century ideas. But besides coming from a different ideational and institutional platform, it also influenced the restructuring of society and influenced larger historical changes. For example, in Germany, the opening of the universities to a broader array of social groups contributed to the dismantling of the traditional social structures⁵.

² Calhoun, C. (2006). Is the University in Crisis? *Society*, 43(4), 8-18

³ Rüegg, W. (2004). Themes. In W. Rüegg (Ed.), *A History of the University in Europe. Universities in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (1800 - 1945)* (Vol. 3, pp. 3-31). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

⁴ Recently published as *Anti-Education: On the future of our education institutions*, edited by Paul Reitter and Chad Wellmon.

⁵ Habermas, J., & Blazek, J. R. (1987). The idea of the university: Learning processes. *New German Critique* (41), 3-22



The more the universities were accessible, the less they were able to reproduce the established elite and thereby undermined the stability of the prevailing social hierarchy. Gradually, higher education ceased to be an institution for/of elites.

This was not only true in the German context. In the Western world general, higher education opened itself to young people from diverse social backgrounds⁶.

Liberal and social-democratic views of higher education are not entirely at odds with each other. They are reconciled through the idea of citizenship. The institutional setting of the Western world after two World Wars encompassed a greater emphasis on collective citizenship and social literacy, key ingredients in achieving stability in democracies; 'public goods' that provide the mechanisms for socialisation⁷. Widely accessible universities were designed to bring the masses from ignorance to enlightenment. Massification can be explained through both social emancipation/democratisation and the liberal humanist ideal of national institutions. In both visions, the university and state are closely intertwined - one could even say mutually constitutive.

The emergence of the new elitisation of higher education

So what lies behind the recent calls for the 're-elitisation' of higher education? Arguments in favour of a return to elitism are often grounded in superficial reasoning that sees stricter selection at the gates of the university as a necessary pre-condition to higher quality. This narrative is often heard in conservative academic circles reluctant to acknowledge the variety of social backgrounds of today's students. However, a more serious scholar will look deeper to find the causes and rationales behind the trend to support a new elitisation of higher education.

⁶ Scott, P. (1998). Massification, internationalization and globalization. In P. Scott (Ed.), *The globalization of higher education* (pp. 108-129). London: Society for Research into Higher Education & Open University Press.

⁷ Zgaga, P. (2009). Higher Education and Citizenship: 'the full range of purposes'. *European Educational Research Journal*, 8(2), 175-188.



One of the explanations can be linked to the vision of the emerging global economy. Through the post-World War II decades, new types of economy and the expansion of non-industrial sectors have gradually replaced more traditional industries. The contemporary economies have seen the role of knowledge increasing dramatically. The modes and geographical distribution of economic activities are transforming in a way that encourages the perception of knowledge as essential global asset which in turn has brought knowledge production into a closer relationship with a broad range of industries. Ensuring skilled labour and applied research is considered as crucial for modern forms of production, hence the view of higher education as a support to the growth of knowledge-intensive industry⁸.

Higher education is once again moving into the centre of policymaking, but this time from another angle: as the generator of knowledge for economic competitiveness. This process has been accompanied by the emergence of a range of legitimising narratives, among which most notable is that of the *knowledge economy*⁹. In the public discourse, this facilitates the gradual normalisation of the idea of knowledge in service of economic competitiveness. Embedded in this idea, the university becomes politicised more than ever and subject to reform, often suggested by international reform scripts¹⁰.

It is in this setting that the ground is once again becoming fertile for elitisation. Only the best achievers can contribute to the advancement of research and innovation at the universities. Nowadays various national and international policy scripts are advocating the differentiation for the sake of excellence and a high level of research and skilled workforce output. Vertical differentiation of universities, and a growing emphasis on the global elite universities, is ever more present in the policy discourse.

⁸ Olssen, M., & Peters, M. A. (2005). Neoliberalism, higher education and the knowledge economy: from the free market to knowledge capitalism. *Journal of Education Policy*, 20(3), 313-345.

⁹ Jessop, B. (2008). A Cultural Political Economy of Competitiveness and its implications for Higher Education. In B. Jessop, N. Fairclough, & R. Wodak (Eds.), *Education and the Knowledge-Based Economy in Europe* (pp. 13-39). Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.

¹⁰ Notably in the various economic strategies on national and regional levels (e.g. Lisbon strategy of the EU)



The process of severing hierarchies has been facilitated by the funding schemes, market deregulation and popular instruments like university rankings. Attracting talent from all over the globe is one of the highly prioritised activities of universities and governments. Prestige has become the new currency on the global market of higher education.

What sustains the re-elitisation of higher education?

The current rationale underlying the return of the idea of elite universities has little to do with the ideas that gave rise to the rebirth of university in the 19th century in continental Europe. But why do the norms and values of egalitarianism not resist the inversion of massification, given their strength in bringing about the massification of higher education in the first place?

In searching for a possible answer, one is led to conclude that an altered social context no longer supports the egalitarian welfare state institutions that made the case for higher education after World War II. In the post-industrial era, living standards have gradually increased; life paths have been individualised, loosening the class identity. The traditional family has given way to diversification of lifestyles, especially in rapidly growing urban societies. The economic emancipation (and also gender equality) achieved by democratising post-primary education and increased mobility became the norm and has been taken for granted. Instead, new ideas and values, such as individual career success, competitiveness, individualism, new lifestyles, etc. has replaced community-oriented values.¹¹

This evolution left the door ajar for the silent rise of tolerance towards new forms of inequality. From the ashes of disintegrated traditions and identities, new and more complex forms of social distinction (which do not always carry class attributes) have emerged¹². Consequently, re-elitisation has unfolded organically fuelled by the tendency of elites to look for ways to reproduce their status by seeking to enrol their children into hierarchically differentiated (elite) universities. A differentiation that is enabled by growing international mobility.

¹¹ Beck, U. (1992) Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity. Sage, London.

¹²Ibid.



The knowledge that an institution gives to the student is only second to the prestige of the label on the diploma.

Today, higher education no longer guarantees a secure and wealthier future. With the masses of graduates and new structure of the world of work, university graduation is often only the ticket to enter the competition for scarcely available jobs. In this, the name of the university may be enough to make a difference though.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is fair to say that the current re-elitisation of higher education should not be compared to the “elitist” ideas about higher education that were popular in the liberal humanist fashion of the 19th century. It has nothing to do with the liberal humanist ideal of the university as the forefront of the enlightenment of humankind, citizenship and formation of a broadly educated individual. The explanation for the new forms of elitism in higher education can be found only in the complexity of changing times. At the crux of this shift lies the re-structuring of economy and society and consequent emergence of new ideas, values and norms. The desire for increasing economic performance through higher education and research has found its way onto the political agenda because of these more fundamental changes in society. The re-elitisation of higher education in the guise of the discourse of excellence and achieving ‘world class’ universities is expected to boost the economic competitiveness in a global race. Hence, it is about the idea of knowledge as the driving force of the competitive global economy.

The crucial question: Does this suggest that Europe and other parts of the world are abandoning the idea of higher education as the means for achieving a better future for economically and socially deprived groups? The evolutions of ideas, norms and values in the restructured society and economy suggest a “yes” to this question. The necessity to emancipate large masses of industrial working class children is over. In the post-modern setting, the masses are enrolling in a broad spectrum of diverse higher education institutions, adjusting their learning paths to individually tailored careers. Unlike in the mid-20th century, today the opportunities of individuals from a variety of social backgrounds to steer their own destiny is taken for granted.



In this individualised society, it is evident that the egalitarian ideas of the welfare state are losing ground to the aspirations of individuals and the ambitions of economies to compete on the global scene.

In the meantime, new inequalities are taking shape and are quietly being imbedded into the fabric of post-modern society. Youth unemployment, insecure job arrangements, persistent economic uncertainty, and a slavery-like dependence on employers in some contexts, are examples of the growing tensions in society. The re-litisation of higher education is inevitably exacerbating these phenomena. Lessons from the past suggest that rising inequality sooner or later escalates into open conflict and violence with dire consequences. The question to reflect upon sounds somewhat classical: Is this the kind of society we want and what is the role and purpose of higher education in it? It is perhaps the right time to bring up the lessons from the past and re-invigorate the norms and values that sprung from these lessons? A reflection and contextualisation of these lessons in the contemporary socio-economic context is inevitable.

Klemen Miklavič has been an international expert on education with more than 15 years of experience in education reforms in EU, Western Balkans, Latin America, Middle East and Myanmar. He worked as a consultant, expert and free-lance researcher for a number of intergovernmental organizations, NGOs and research centres such as *Council of Europe*, *OSCE Mission in Kosovo*, *Spark* etc. Currently he is working for the *European Quality Assurance Agency* as the chief analyst and for the *Scottish Qualification Authority* as the qualification framework expert for the Middle East. He is also affiliated to the Centre for Educational Policy Studies at the University of Ljubljana and worked as visiting researcher at the University of Oslo and University of Deusto (Bilbao). He published a number of articles, including: *Meaning and perceptions of higher education in Western Balkans* (together with Komljenovic, J.) Edited volume (Sense Publishers, 2013). *Imagining higher education in European knowledge economy: Discourse and ideas in the communications of the EU* (together with Komljenovič, J.). Edited volume (Peter Lang, 2013). *Academic values against the commodification of higher education. Edited volume* (Springer, 2012). [Reforming higher education in transition between national and international reform initiatives: the case of Slovenia](#). In the journal *European education* (M.E. Sharpe, 2012). [Europeanisation in action: the \(re\)construction and role of higher education in post-conflict settings](#). In the *Journal of the European higher education area*. (Raabe 2012).

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