

The university as an educational institution

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On the occasion of the 370th birthday of the student nations (*osakunnat, nationerna*) at the University of Helsinki, the authors of this anthology are wondering to what extent and in which way the student nations have contributed and still contribute to the educational task of the university, in the meaning of bringing up the students. It is the merit of the editor that this question runs as a nice connecting thread throughout the volume. In one of the editor's own chapters the topic is dealt with more specifically, offering an historical overview of the role of the student nations (organized on a regional basis) and other kinds of student unions in transforming the students into (academic) citizens. Yet it is mainly through the personal memories of some seniors from different student nations that the educational task of those nations receives a more tangible and enlivened interpretation. When reflecting on how their activities within the student nations have had an impact on their later life, it becomes clear that they owe them a lot: offering experience in holding meetings, debating, reaching compromises, accounting and teamwork; providing a wider view on the world, and at the same time countering the threat of a too exclusive focus on the capital city in policy making; developing their social skills; and above all networking, with fellow students of different ages and from different disciplines.

Indeed, there is a touch of advertising in listing these characteristics as such, and actually – unintentionally – sometimes the book even resembles a bit a kind of pamphlet to extol the virtues of the student nations. In her article, Hanna Hannus reinforces this impression by asking rightly why the University of Helsinki does not make use of the existence of the student nations as means of image building. The availability of this exceptional kind of additional training school could certainly convince particular students to choose to study in Helsinki. Without elaborating the international comparisons, implicitly the uniqueness of the system of student organisations in Helsinki is referred to frequently. In many European countries the regionally based student nations did not survive the transition from the Ancien Régime to the modern period, and also after the student revolt of 1968 the Helsinki student nations succeeded in preserving their strong position.

And still the book is much more than a promotional brochure, mainly thanks to its well-founded historical approach. The majority of the authors has a background in history and has been active within one of the student nations. The previously mentioned question is widened to the different interpretations that were given to the educational task of the university throughout history, in combination with other tasks of the university (such as vocational training and research): e.g. through a general preparatory degree in the philosophical faculty, through a chair in (moral) philosophy or ethics, through the supervision by the inspectors of the nations or by other members of the academic community, through the privilege of a separate jurisdiction which effectively enabled the rector to punish the students,

through the supervision on the formation of political opinions among the students particularly after 1848, or through the experience of living as an independent student within the academic community for a couple of years as a whole.

Because in several chapters the entire history of the university passes the revue, this results automatically in some unnecessary repetitions, and inevitably at times also in somewhat superficial expressions. For instance, the authors hold on a bit to the traditional, yet meanwhile superseded, interpretation of the Humboldtian university ideal. Even though Humboldt's ideas about academic autonomy and the combination of education and research indeed date back to the beginning of the nineteenth century, they hardly met with any response in that period, both in Germany and abroad. A bit too often the balance between known information and new insights is leaning over to the former. When taking into account that the book is clearly intended for a wider audience however, this remark is not really applicable and should maybe even be taken rather as a compliment.

As Arto Aniluoto shows in his article, the educational task of the university is also a legal obligation with a long historical background. In the law of 2009 the tasks of the universities are defined as follows: "the advancement of research and civilization, teaching on a research basis, and the education of students in the service of the country (*isänmaa*) and humanity". Especially the reference to one's country is striking in this regard in an international context, but Aniluoto discusses in the first place how this long-lasting legal obligation has always been adapted to specific circumstances, yet simultaneously gave evidence of a remarkable degree of continuity (just like history of education in general). In recent years, the educational task is regarded as being part of the service to society, viz. the third task of the university, next to and after research and teaching, mostly also in that order. An interesting suggestion in this regard comes from the former vice-rector of the University of Helsinki, Kimmo Kontula, to strive for one integrated task of the university: "to teach and educate on a research basis for the most important expert tasks within the society" (p. 177).

In the second part of the book, the historical approach is complemented with a more contemporary angle. On the basis of a survey among second year students it is examined how the students themselves perceive the educational task of the university and the role of student unions in it. In this respect there is not made a distinction between student nations and student unions organized per faculty or per discipline. The latter were founded from the interwar period and stood often in conflict with the much older student nations. In the 1960s, for instance, the faculty organisations were accused of narrow-minded specialism preparing the students only on their professional life, whereas the student nations, by their own account, looked after a broader upbringing. On the one hand the results of the survey show the difficulties that student organisations are facing during neoliberal times: students lack the time to engage themselves in the board of student communities, also in consequence of the law on shortening their course of study; more efficiency is demanded from them by all kinds of stakeholders; approximately 80% of the students combine studies and work; and all of them are worried about the 'employability' of their degree.

On the other hand, in an extremely convincing way, the authors avoid to become nostalgic and to raise their voice in complaint about the lost ideal of the *Bildungsuniversität*. Not everything was better in the good old days, as stated by Johanna Ahola-Launonen. The search for a balance between vocational training and general education is of all time, just like freedom and responsibility always went together. The idea of self-development and self-education (by the authors ascribed to Humboldt) and the attempt to make oneself useful for the development of society do not contradict each other. Of course, one cannot deny that the educational ideal is pushed into the background lately, but nevertheless university

administration, teachers, as well as students still emphasize its importance as part of the university's service to society. Some faculties make this attitude concrete by rewarding credits to students for taking up a position in the board of student organisations, and in 2012 a campaign was launched by the University of Helsinki to urge students to engage themselves within the student communities, through the slogan "One cannot learn everything from books". However, according to the authors, the educational task of the university still deserves to be given a bit more publicity.

With regard to the recent period, it is striking to what extent students fall back on old traditions, such as the use of student flags, ribbons of student unions, overalls, speeches, decorations, traditional songs, old dances, etc. A particular manifestation of this trend are the so-called *sitsit*, a specific kind of festive dinner. When looking to the nice pictures of this sort of events, one starts to wonder whether foreign students are actually included in them. By definition student nations aim at students from the own region, but what has been and is their attitude towards the increasing number of students from abroad? How to give a new interpretation to this kind of regionally based institutions in an increasingly international sphere as the contemporary university? Maybe on the occasion of a future jubilee, these kinds of questions will receive an equally interesting and profound answer as it has been achieved for the central questions of this book.

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