

Pieter Dhondt

Education being the core business of a university – threatened in Finland too?

Research, teaching and service to society is the generally accepted triad of tasks within the modern university, and is generally accepted in that order in terms of appearance and importance, at least in the eyes of the university authorities. However, had the same considerations been taken into account at the end of the nineteenth century, at a time when the Western research university had gradually taken hold, the triad would have run very differently: vocational training, scientific schooling and liberal education. Even though research had gradually established itself within universities, up until the end of the nineteenth century it was first and foremost considered an educational institution. In a long-term perspective, the research imperative has only been introduced fairly recently.

In these short reflections I aim to examine to what extent and in what way these different aspects of the university as an educational institution still play a role in Finland today. Since this thought experiment is entirely based on my own personal experiences during the past decade and written out as a purely subjective account, allow me to briefly introduce myself. I am of Belgian origin and studied modern history at the KU Leuven, specialising in university history in Berlin and Edinburgh. After having obtained my doctoral degree at my home university, I have been working as postdoctoral researcher at the University of Helsinki (for three years) and the Université libre de Bruxelles, and as lecturer in the history of education at Ghent University. From October 2012, I have been appointed at the University of Eastern Finland as senior lecturer in general history, and since March 2020 I combine these tasks with my functions as head of the Department of Geographical and Historical Studies. In my research I have focused on, for instance, the intercultural transfer of university ideas within Europe in the nineteenth century, the history of academic mobil-

ity, student revolts and university celebrations. My current research deals primarily with medical history, including the development of medical education at universities and colleges of higher education and the history of medical uncertainty.

At the time of my move to Finland, there was a lot of interest and enthusiasm worldwide, but especially also in Belgium, for the successful model of Finnish education, as measured by the excellent PISA results. I myself also shared this enthusiasm and, both to family and to colleagues, I passionately defended characteristics of Finnish education about which educational experts in Belgium wondered to what extent these could possibly be adopted in order to increase the quality of education offered in their own country, e.g. comprehensive curricula up to the age of 16, different practices of inclusive education, and the larger degree of autonomy of highly trained teachers. Of course, the focus of these debates was on basic education, but I assumed that inevitably this high quality of education should reflect on higher education as well.

I even wrote about this topic for a Belgian audience,¹ even though already at the time I opposed the rhetoric of the Finnish ministry of education to regard the education model as an export product. After all, many Finnish researchers had convincingly demonstrated that the most crucial characteristics of Finnish education were not the result of a series of consciously made (political) decisions, but rather of a series of coincidental circumstances, which are much more difficult to copy from one country to another.² The insight into processes of convergence in which different national education systems (particularly within the PISA group) increasingly aligned themselves in an atmosphere of competition and benchmarking had to be combined with an awareness of the impact of broader (cultural)

¹ Pieter Dhondt, Een historische kijk op het Finse onderwijssucces [A historical look at Finnish educational success], *Hermes. Tijdschrift van de Vlaamse vereniging voor leraren geschiedenis* 23 (2019), no. 3: 12–15.

² E.g., Hannu Simola and Risto Rinne, Education Politics and Contingency. Belief, Status and Trust Behind the Finnish PISA Miracle, in: Miguel A. Pereyra, Hans-Georg Kotthoff and Robert Cowen (eds.), *PISA Under Examination. Changing Knowledge, Changing Tests, and Changing Schools* (Rotterdam: Sense Publishers 2011): 225–244.

developments on which policy makers have no control, except the free will to deal with these coincidences in one way or another, I argued.

Some of these historical and cultural circumstances are, for example, the strong belief in education (which, by the way, is directly translated through all kinds of concrete policy measures, such as study support or the development of an extensive network of adult education centres), equality thinking, and the high appreciation of teachers, in combination with a culture of trust and autonomy. In my opinion, the importance of such broad social developments also leads to the fact that if one wants to be inspired by the Finnish model, one should start at a much earlier stage and thus not limit oneself to primary or secondary education, where the discussion in Belgium focused on. I therefore concluded my article in a somewhat provocative manner by stating that the real basis of Finnish educational success lies in the excellent, almost individual care for babies and toddlers, the late start of actual education and the short school days in primary education, what results in a great deal of independence for children, who are given the space to develop themselves in freedom, a conclusion with which I still largely agree.

As far as universities are concerned, the high regard for education is most visibly illustrated in the successful passing of the *ylioppilastutkinto* (matriculation exam). Not only are the graduates listed one by one in the newspaper, but they are also celebrated with an extensive party, a special clack, and a pin for the proud mothers. Somehow, we, as a Belgian family, have never been able to fully integrate in this area... Through these demanding entrance examinations, in combination with huge investments in higher education (itself being free of charge), the university can keep its intellectual elitist character to a certain extent, without having to use limited financial means or being of low birth as objections to enter.³ The outcome, at least ideally, would be a stronger community of teachers and students, working together at an equal level for the advancement of knowledge.

³ E.g., Osmo Kivinen, Juha Hedman and Päivi Kaipainen, From Elite University to Mass Higher Education. Educational Expansion, Equality of Opportunity and Returns to University Education, *Acta Sociologica* 50 (2007), no. 3: 231–247.

However, in practice the severe selection through the entrance examinations also has a clear downside. As I experienced in Scotland too, where students equally must pass a demanding selection procedure, too many students are inclined to consider obtaining a study place as their greatest achievement, after which they can leisurely start their actual studies. To explain the (in my experience) generally less demanding nature of university studies in Finland only by referring to the strict admissions procedure is of course far too simplistic. Later in the text I do point out a few additional factors that may help to clarify this, even though the real explanation is probably the combination of all these factors together. Moreover, I also realise that I must be extremely careful in this regard, when extrapolating from my individual experiences. At the same time many colleagues confirm that it is always Finnish students who complain about excessive workload, while foreign students often very explicitly point out the ease with which they can collect credits during their stay abroad. In my view, the so-called book exams are the pinnacle of such easily obtainable credits.

And yet this could not and cannot dampen my enthusiasm. Many of the coincidental circumstances mentioned above clearly also have an impact on the universities and on the quality of the education offered there, which often takes place in small groups with sufficient time and space for reflection, direct interaction, and personal initiatives. This in turn reflects the high degree of independence among most Finnish youth. In particular, the great freedom and autonomy must be cherished in this context, in result of which – and almost in imitation of the classic and at the same time mythical German late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century university – professors and students can offer and follow education ‘in complete freedom, without barriers between the faculties, nor between universities themselves’ (the latter aspect nowadays through all kinds of umbrella initiatives and cross-institutional studies).⁴ A very concrete recent example of this in my own career is the ease with which I managed to engage myself in a course on the history of medicine for students of medicine and history together.

⁴ See Sylvia Paletschek, Die Erfindung der Humboldtschen Universität. Die Konstruktion der deutschen Universitätsidee in der erste Hälfte der 20. Jahrhundert, *Historische Anthropologie. Kultur – Gesellschaft – Alltag* 10 (2002), no. 2: 183–205.

The fact that this subject had been included already in the medical curriculum (although still as an elective) indicates how much the tradition of general education is treasured in Finland. Certainly, within Anglo-Saxon academic circles already towards the end of the 2000s the complaint was uttered that universities are no longer there to educate, but to train.⁵ However, when I moved to Joensuu in 2012, this theme did not really seem to be an issue here. The combination of major and minor subjects, among other measures, prevents students from developing too much into narrowly trained professional specialists, and instead stimulates a greater openness towards insights from other disciplines and general education. As a teacher, this implicates quite a fascinating challenge due to the very different prior knowledge among the students (which is undoubtedly another explanation for the alleged less demanding character of some of the courses). Other indications of such a preference for liberal education are numerous. Today, for instance, the importance of generic skills is emphasised or the development of three broad bachelor programs (sciences, humanities, and social sciences) is considered, instead of the dozens of programs that exist now.

Unfortunately, also the high degree of independence again has a downside. In consequence of the financial support that students receive from the Social Insurance Institution (Kela) (in itself being another indication of the great social appreciation for education in general), often they are also financially independent. It is a shame by the way how many of the students take this support for granted without realising sufficiently how exceptional such a level of financial support actually is from an international perspective. Nevertheless, (as elsewhere) many students supplement their income through some kind of student job and therefore often take on other roles in society, in addition to their status as a student. Although this undoubtedly reduces the risks of being unworldly as an academic, all together it contributes to my experience of Finnish students generally being

⁵ E.g., Gaye Tuchman, *Wannabe U: Inside the Corporate University* (Chicago: University Press 2009).

less devoted to their studies compared to many of their Western European peers. They are students, but certainly not exclusively. This in turn often translates into strong practices and customs of flexibility among teaching staff (e.g., in terms of deadlines, attendance requirements, teaching and examination formats), which in my view does not always benefit the quality of education (and which again may result in less demanding standards).

Moreover, concrete developments in recent years, which are primarily driven by the Ministry of Education, point in a different direction. Even though the general appreciation for education certainly remains intact, undeniably the economic rhetoric is also increasingly adopted in Finland. In the current financial model different output measurements (e.g., the number of ‘produced’ bachelor, master and doctoral degrees, the number of publications, or the amount of acquired external funding) dictate the budget of the universities. There are definitely good reasons for tackling the long-standing problem of students graduating slowly or not at all, yet current efficiency thinking clearly entails risks too. The development of critical thinking requires time. But perceived as customers, and being pressured to graduate quickly enough, students experience no longer to have enough time at their disposal to bury themselves in a specific topic in absolute freedom. Lecturers for their part cannot invest enough time in teaching because of a similar need of more efficiency, in their personal targets as well as in the financing scheme of higher education in general. Also, the increasing number of scholars who wonder whether and to what extent the ideal of liberal education is in danger is an obvious indication of this shifting trend.⁶

The strong tradition of profound vocational training is equally affected by this more explicit focus on efficiency and employability. In the currently ongoing update of the teaching curricula at our own faculty, the genuine interest in skills such as critical thinking, language proficiency or multicultural competence, is in a scarily explicit way replaced by the

⁶ E.g. Sari Kivistö and Sami Pihlström, *Sivistyksen puolustus. Miksi akateemista elämää tarvitaan?* (Helsinki: Gaudeamus 2018) and Arto Nevala, Simo Häyrynen and Jukka Korpela, *Fantastinen yliopistouudistus: sopeutuva akateemisuus ja sivistysihanteen muutos* (Joensuu: Kirjokansi kustantamo 2023).

approach towards these ‘generic skills’ as a meaningless list to be added by the responsible teacher to the course description, which then in due course can easily be copied by the students to their own cv in order to increase their chances on the labour market. Whether or not these skills are really acquired within these courses appears to be of minor importance. For the time being, the fairly common practice of apprenticeships in many subjects does not yet seem threatened, but at the same time it feels only a matter of time before savings might also have an impact in this regard.

These apprenticeships (again, currently still generously funded by the government) are definitely worth to be preserved in answer to rather common complaints (mostly uttered by students) that often return in evaluations of degree programmes: an imbalance between purely theoretical and more practical courses, professors who do not have any feeling with the professional practice they are talking about and a purely scholarly schooling that is insufficiently connected to the real professional practice. Indeed, after all, only a very small minority of the students will continue as a researcher, even though all of them are trained to become one. Next to such apprenticeships, the attention for other courses focusing on work relevance is a must in the current curriculum development.

Based on my own modest personal experience, I dare say that the third aspect of a university education, viz. scientific schooling, is the least highly developed. From an international perspective, Finland has adopted the research imperative comparatively late, as I elaborated myself with regard to the field of medicine.⁷ And when looking to my own discipline, the demands for a bachelor or master dissertation in history at the University of Eastern Finland and at the University of Helsinki are significantly lower than at other universities I have been working, in Belgium, Germany, France and Britain. Unfortunately, the situation seems to become even more dramatic when one considers the current discussion about doctoral training. The constantly ongoing devaluation of diplomas (which as such is impossible to stop) threatens to gain momentum in this. Doctoral dis-

⁷ Pieter Dhondt, *Transnational Currents in Finnish Medical Education, (c. 1800–1920), Starting from a 1922 Discourse, Paedagogica Historica. International Journal of the History of Education* 48 (2012), no. 5: 692–710.

sertations in the form of a monograph are increasingly discouraged in all disciplines, and for an article-based dissertation the demands might be lowered on a relatively short term to two accepted and one submitted article (only). At the same time, the ambition is to increase the scholastic character of the doctoral schooling, and thus no longer starting from the ambition to educate independent researchers, but instead also in this context to focus on the increased ‘production’ of degrees. I really hope that these reforms will not lead to scholars with a Finnish doctoral degree being excluded from the international academic market. In addition, there is a risk that a major strength of the Finnish doctoral system will be undermined, namely that people can still start their doctoral training at a later age, which is far from obvious elsewhere.

From a cynical point of view, one could say that the right-wing oriented voter and taxpayer gets what he wants: a neoliberal university landscape characterised through strong processes of commodification. According to a growing number of critics, both coming from in- and outside the academic world, those who supply the necessary financial resources are gradually taking over the contemporary university. For some doom-mongers this development has that kind of impact that it even threatens the survival of the university as such, others are much more moderate in their criticism and sometimes even point to the advantages of, for instance, a close cooperation between the university and the industry. However, nobody denies that the ruling discourse in higher education is one of commodification, neoliberalism, functionalism, usefulness, and rationalisation.⁸ While in many Western European countries during recent years indications of cautious steps backwards can be noticed, Finnish universities got on this bandwagon later, but now they seem to (want to) behave like the best student in the class and reflect the interests of the currently right-wing government.

⁸ The literature on the commodification of higher education is extremely extensive, starting from the early 2000s. A more recent example is Leonidas Donskis, Ida Sabelis, Frans Kamsteeg and Harry Wels (eds.), *Academia in Crisis. The Rise and Risk of Neoliberal Education in Europe* (Value Inquiry Book Series 335) (Leiden: Brill 2019).

The idea that universities need to reflect the interests of the predominantly right-wing taxpayer, recently prompted the Belgian philosopher Andreas De Block to launch a plea to appoint more professors with a right-wing profile, based on the finding that, in general, university professors vote more left-wing than the average citizen.⁹ After all, universities are still largely paid for by the government, and so, according to De Block, it would be fairer if the composition of the professoriate also more accurately reflects the real political landscape. De Block's main motivation is that the current underrepresentation of researchers with a right-wing profile has a negative impact on the quality of scientific research because there is insufficient room for scholars with a different, more right-oriented opinion. However, in my view, what he does not consider enough is that major intellectual, social and cultural breakthroughs have always happened in conflict with what was going on in society. The clash of ideas that is indeed needed cannot be achieved by trying to reflect what is going on in society. On the contrary, you can achieve this precisely by protecting the academic freedom to conduct research on topics that are not in line with prevailing values and preferences. If the university, when formulating its questions, were only guided by what the population considers important, it would lose that critical role.

This critical role brings us back to our starting point, the university primarily as an educational institution, combining liberal education, vocational training, and scientific schooling. In my perception, in Finland the balance is clearly in favour of an exceptionally well-developed tradition of liberal or general education (which is certainly worth protecting), in combination with a lot of attention to a relevant and up to date vocational training. This is partly at the expense of a thorough scientific schooling where the requirements are less than what I have been used to elsewhere, although I am obviously extremely careful when extrapolating my individual experience in my own field to such general bold statements. Yet the reforms currently under discussion within the doctoral schooling point in the same direction. On the one hand I dare to claim that Finland still

⁹ Andreas De Block, *Is links gewoon slimmer [Is the left just smarter?]* (Tielt: Lannoo 2023).

reaches a comparatively good balance, but on the other hand developments tend to move towards the deprivation of education as being the core business of a university. Nevertheless, I want to end with a most important positive note. Despite all this, the high appreciation of teachers (including those at a university level), in combination with a culture of trust and autonomy, luckily continues. At least for the time being, academic freedom remains a high value within Finnish (academic) society.



Yliopisto – sivistyksen linnake. Esitelmätilaisuus Helsingin yliopiston pää-rakennuksen suuressa luentosalissa 1950-luvulla
Kuvaaja Väinö Aleksis Kannisto, Helsingin kaupunginmuseo