

Perspectives/Perspectives

QUO VADIS UNIVERSITAS?

OR

THE FUTURE OF UNIVERSITIES IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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In the late middle ages when the universities started out, philosophy was seen as a maid of theology. This imbalance changed with time and philosophy became a discipline in its own right. Today, the universities are threatened with another subservient situation, significantly this time not only for philosophy, but the entire university becoming a maid to business and industry.

From their beginning universities contributed to lifelong education and learning, at least for a segment of society. Their major, and for most of their existence only, contribution has been teaching of full-time students. Later on in their historical development research has been added to teaching. Traditionally, and until fairly recently, these two roles of the universities have been considered as a sufficient contribution to the society of which they are a part.

Toward the end of the 19th century a new role, adult education, started to appear. This was the case at first in England from where it spread to other countries. In the second half of the 20th century, under the pressure of ever faster development of research and technology and changing social situation, the universities started to accept this new role and were establishing specific departments for adult (later continuing) education. This newly accepted role encompassed at first continuing education in the humanities and social sciences, other sciences, and later on continuing education in the professions

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and part-time degree study. Empowering adults to grow and to be active citizens has always been an important part of this activity.

In the 21st century, universities have to accept this third role as an integral part of their function. This new role must not become only an appendix to their traditional role or, even more damagingly, only a commercial part of the institution which is, according to a former UBC President, "a profit centre" providing funds to the "real" role of the university. This needs to happen, if not for any other reason than at least because of a self-enlightened interest of the universities. (It always puzzled me that there has not been a revolt among the adults who already, through their taxes, support to a significant degree the credit programs offered by the universities, and then are asked to pay 100% or more for their own continuing education.) Through extending their role to the needs of the adults (that is, voters), universities will strengthen their political position vis à vis state organs and governments, and will acquire a broader basis and support of their existence among the adult population, that is among the voters.

In addition to research, the universities thus will contribute to lifelong education and learning in four ways:

(1) Traditional full-time undergraduate and graduate programs

This is still the largest part of university activity which receives the largest proportion of the financial resources the university has at its disposal. After research, this is the activity with which the university faculty are most familiar and which is placed high among university priorities. However, we can no longer take it for granted that in the future most of the undergraduate students will go through university in an uninterrupted four year block. The most significant change in this university activity over recent years has been the rapidly increasing numbers of part-time students and the proportion of women among them.

(2) Part-time undergraduate and graduate programs

Students in this category are the fastest growing group in undergraduate and graduate programs. All indications point to the fact that, thanks to social, demographic and economic factors, the numbers of this type of university student will continue to grow, and it is quite possible to expect that they will in the not-too-distant future form more than 50% of all university students. For a number of reasons, both rooted within the university and external, the financial support of this form of study is inadequate. Significant numbers of faculty still are not convinced about the appropriateness of part-time degree

study. This group of students is different from the traditional full-time students, especially with respect to their age and maturity, and their work experience. The proportion of older adults and women in this student group is notable.

This has necessitated changes in how universities operate, how they allocate their resources and how the faculty teach the new type of student. Guided independent study, distance education and short-term full-time courses, both on and off campus, have become more and more prevalent. These courses are often scheduled at a time and place convenient for the students, rather than for the administrators or faculty. Access to counselling and library resources have been expanded to accommodate these new students. Diploma and certificate programs in specific areas of expertise, in addition to the traditional degree programs, are becoming the way for university graduates to acquire new knowledge and skills they need in the workplace and for advancement on the job. Life and work experience of these students will need to be taken into account, both in planning programs and courses, and in teaching. All of this already is happening to an extent, but the universities need to make a more substantial commitment to the new ways of teaching and learning.

(3) Non-credit general continuing education

Historically, university extension started out with random public lectures on topics of interest offered to the general public by university faculty. Today, general continuing education is a regular part of the university offering. It includes single lectures, courses, seminars and other programs in areas such as humanities and social sciences, other sciences, creative and performing arts, and other fields of teaching and research. Most damagingly, active citizenship education, which historically formed an important part of this activity, has almost completely vanished. Demand for non-credit general continuing education is steadily increasing. Although today many universities consider this activity as a legitimate and important part of their activities, financial support from university budget is insufficient and this activity is often significantly hampered by the demand that it be totally financially self-sustaining, if not producing surpluses for the university.

(4) Non-credit professional continuing education

This activity is the newest part of the university education provision. Thanks to professional, political and economic factors this activity is the fastest growing part of university contribution to lifelong education and learning. It

will become important to enable working professionals to update their knowledge and skills by attending as auditors regular credit courses in selected fields. Most of the professional faculties, especially Commerce, Education, Engineering, Law, and Medicine, today recognise their responsibility for continuing education of their graduates when they enter the professions. However, the extent of this activity differs considerably from faculty to faculty and from university to university. Unfortunately, again, the prevailing attitude of university administrations is that this activity should create surpluses for the university.

Envoi

The universities are important educational and social institutions supported by the society of which they are a part. They have a twofold role in the 21st century: They must, to an extent, stand apart from society and be keepers of universal values and critics of their own society, while they at the same time must contribute, from their independent scholarly and scientific perspective, to the social, scientific, technological, economic, political and cultural development of individuals and society.

In the current situation when the proportion of the funding of the universities from public sources is steadily decreasing and the universities are more and more looking for funding from business and industry, there is great danger that the universities will lose their scholarly and scientific independence and will become beholden to the private business and industry that fund them to an ever increasing extent. This will inevitably lead to research priorities skewed by the needs of business and industry, conflict of interest between some of the faculties, and censorship of research and publication seen as not in the interest of the providers of corporate funds. Therefore, the universities have to keep stressing the absolute need for adequate public funding of all the university contributions to the social, political, economic, cultural and individual development demanded of them by society.

Modern universities can fulfill their responsibility to society only if they devote significant scientific resources to research and teaching at all levels, from the traditional full-time credit programs to part-time credit programs and non-credit continuing education as equal partners. Only in this way will the universities take their rightful place in society and make their full contribution to lifelong education and learning in the 21st century.

Jindra Kulich worked for 25 years at the University of British Columbia's Extension Department, which then became the Centre for Continuing Studies (CCS), as a Program Director, then Assistant Director, then Director. He was also the Administrator of the Adult Education Diploma and publisher and editor of the Monographs on Comparative Studies in Adult Education, published by CCS at UBC. His scholarship has focused on comparative studies of adult education in Central Eastern and Northern Europe. He took early retirement in 1989 to work on adult education issues in Eastern Europe following the collapse of communism. He taught adult education courses in the university programs in Czechoslovakia.