

THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE UNIVERSITY, FROM ENCLOSED TO ELASTIC

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Hegel taught us that we cannot learn from history, i.e., we cannot make predictions of the future. But, at the same time, Hegel taught us about dialectics, that today’s situation, with its contradictions, will be transformed through *aufhebung*, and create a new situation, on a more advanced level but containing elements of today and the past. While not being a philosopher and not trained in Hegel’s dialectics, I will here use my 38,5 years of personal experience from working at different universities and present a potential future of the university institution.

I will describe three types of universities, using an analytical set of categories that put focus on some aspects of a university, and I will speculatively indicate some forces that produce the transformation of the university.

My claim is that western Europe experience a transformation period of the university, where the university is moving from the old type, the Enclosed university, via today’s transformational type, the Open university, to a new type, the Elastic university. The Enclosed university were a stable institution, with a distance to society, confined to its own activities in its own houses. The Open university is an institution exposed to and sensitive to the ideological and political forces of society, making the university inclined to adapt and adjust to these forces, and even magnifying them. The Elastic university has an enclosed character through its stress on scientific knowledge and guards against political

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influence but is open to society through its societal engagement as academics and through societies engagement at the university.

Some analytical categories of a university

A university is an organization producing scientific knowledge about nature and society through the activity of research, based on the scientific method, and distributing the knowledge through the activity of education. The location of the university has been a campus, in which the main bulk of the two activities have been located. The university is part of a value chain of knowledge, (e.g., kindergarten, elementary school, high school, university) where the university is located down-stream, at the end of the educational value chain. The receiver of the knowledge has mainly been the student, but also organizations and society. The staff of the universities have an orientation, expressing their function and identity at the university. The governance of the university is how its operations are directed, but here I also add how the university brand is created and maintained. Finally, academia as such has values, such as academic freedom and the Enlightenments value of free thought, where the emphasis on these values differs between the type of the university.

The university type of yesterday: The Enclosed university

The Enclosed university have all its main activities on a campus. The research is conducted in distinct and separate subjects and the education is performed in these subjects through separate courses. It has a distinct place in the value chain, where it receives young pupils from the lower-level educational institutions and then distribute their students into society. Sometimes they cooperate with other universities. The receiver of the university product is mainly the student in the education activities and staffs at other universities. The staff of the university is academic passive, which means that their identity is mainly expressed in their communication through books and through education at campus. The university

is governed through a colloquium where the full professors have a seat and act as leaders, where the Rector, the primus inter pares, is elected among the professors. The university creates its brand mainly through its reputation. The academic value of academic freedom is strongly guarded, while the Enlightenment value of Sapere aude, to think freely, is weak due to strong paradigms with a scholastic character, supported by the tendency of a professorship empire.

The university type of today: The Open university

The Enclosed university changed into the Open university. Several forces have contributed to this change. The principle of mass university has been established, with the aim of having more than half of the young population at least entering the university. Deprofessionalization has occurred, where the academic profession has been reduced in influence at the university, while the politicized university administration has gained power. Marketization have occurred, where university training and research have got characteristics as being a commodity offered in a marketplace. Politicization has appeared, both in society and at the university, implying that values and opinions are more important and more influential than scientific knowledge.

The Open university conduct education through courses subordinated into university programs. The research tends to follow policy, be it the university policy, government policy or policy of influential political organizations, such as the United Nations (UN), for example policy concerning political values such as sustainability and diversity. The university activities are so extensive that all the activities cannot be contained at a single campus, with the effect that the university activities are scattered around, not only in a city but in a region, and even internationally. While the university still gets supply from the lower-level educational institutions, it has now entered cooperation downwards in the value chain, with cooperation with organizations and corporations. They also teach

older people, under the idea of life-long education. It has co-creation activities with other universities on the vertical dimension in the value chain. The receiver of the service is both students and organizations. The staff contains categories of specialised teachers and specialised researchers, and have a third category, the political activist, sometimes termed communicators, that put out the university in the expanding political environment of opinions and values. The governance is through a corporate hierarchical administration, characterised by managers. In the branding, due to the commodification and the international competition, accreditation has become important. The academic values of academic freedom and freedom of thinking is markedly reduced in importance.

The university type of tomorrow: The Elastic university

The Open university can transform into the Elastic university. This is partly due to tensions in the Open university, mainly through the tension within the university between the Enclosed university focus on knowledge and the Open university focus on politics, but also due to strong material forces. The climate change and the Covid-19 virus pandemic put an emphasis on scientific knowledge. These factors have forced government organizations, both national and international, to take a lead in society. For example, while the market, through its private corporations, produce the vaccine, no country, to my knowledge, has decided to lean on the market for its distribution, but rather on government decisions about rules for distribution. Additionally, the pandemic has expanded the usage of the Internet, through e-trading in the marketplace, and at the university, meetings and education have moved from physical to virtual space.

The Elastic university will be a university where singular courses dominate but contains a mix of subjects. The research will put attention on societal issues but will be guided by the academic community's scientific interest. The location of its activities will, due to internet and extensive

cooperation with a variety of organizations, be scattered in the society. Activities can be physically located, for example, at a corporation, but mainly they will be virtually located. The unclear location will be reproduced in the value chain, where the university co-creates both downwards and upwards. Staff of the university will be engaged in lower-level educational institutions, as experts and as teachers, as well as staff at those institutions will be engaged at the university, as students, teachers, and researchers. Employees of organizations that today are receivers of the university students, will be engaged at the university, as students through life-long learning, and as teachers and researchers. Since the scientific knowledge has regained its prominence and preserved its societal influence, the university staff will be academic activists, which means that they are active parts of society, but not promoting political values, such as sustainability and diversity, as the Open university is doing, but being confined to presenting their scientific knowledge. Thus, the university is elastic. The governance of the university will return to the professional form, where the governance will be conducted through the colloquium, but now with the staff as the members. The branding will be through social reputation, produced through its relationships with society, since the members of the university, both staff and students, are scattered in the society. Finally, being subject to all those societal forces by being present in the society, the academic culture of the university will be strong, thus, academic freedom will be hailed. Due to its exposure to a diverse society, the staff will exploit, and therefore promote, the freedom of thought.

Conclusion

The idea of the Elastic university can easily be criticized, partly because size restrictions limit the opportunity for extensive argumentation, but also because it appears to be a dream, created by a person that does not support the Open university type. But, the wisdom of dialectics teaches us that what appears to be

new is just the old things, with its contradictions, but on a more advanced level. My prediction is based on the belief that the societal orientation of the Open university will continue its development, while at the same time, the Elastic university will revive some factors from the Enclosed university, that has been repressed in the Open university. These factors together, being open, yet being enclosed, are needed in the Elastic university in order to make the university able to survive as a creator and distributor of scientific knowledge.