

# **Autonomy and Governance in European Universities**

**Lecture in Hanoi November 25<sup>th</sup>, 2008**

**longer version**

In this paper I want to do three things in a schematic way: (1) Describe some main aspects of the present situation of European universities as regards their missions, educational aims and governing structures; (2) explain what I see as problematic in the development of European universities in recent times; (3) present some ideas concerning how I believe European universities may continue to carry out their historical role of preserving, transmitting and gaining knowledge.

My analysis is based, on the one hand, on a generic description of European universities and, on the other hand, on two examples with which I am intimately connected: the University of Iceland and the University of Luxembourg, both of which endeavour to live up to a European ideal.

## **1. The present situation of European universities**

The universities in Europe can be characterised with reference to three different academic traditions: the German tradition, which is often related to Humboldt; the French tradition, which may be traced back to Napoleon, and a British ideal which Cardinal Newman described in his famous book *The Idea of a University*. In the present situation, these traditions have merged, creating tensions that European universities face, to a greater or lesser extent, in each and every European country.

There are also three aspects that have to be taken into account when considering the university as an autonomous, social organisation: It must have a meaningful goal or basic mission; it must also have a view of how to realize its mission through a specific action plan with clear targets; and, finally, it must have a governing structure which allows it to organize itself in the manner most appropriate for its purpose, making its functioning both effective and efficient.

The three traditions I have mentioned, the French, the German and the British, all differ concerning these three basic aspects.

In the Napoleonic tradition the *mission* is to provide the *nation* to which the university belongs with the knowledge and expertise it needs. The main *educational aim* or objective is accordingly the training of professionals, who know how to perform their various functions for society. And the *governing structure* is hierarchical, the universities being submitted to the state that funds them and regulates them.

In the Humboldtian tradition the *mission* is service to scholarship or *science*. The main *educational aim* is accordingly the formation of the students for the advancement of the sciences, and the *governing structure* is collegial governance by academics themselves.

In the Newmanian tradition the *mission* is the service to the individual *student*; the *educational aim* is, accordingly, the development of the character and competences of the individual person, and the *governing structure* is professional management of the educational institution.

In order to understand the present situation of European universities I think it is important to recognize that these different traditions have progressively converged. The so-called Bologna process, which has been a common policy of European countries during the last 10 years, contributes directly to the amalgamation of these different traditions by introducing a common degree structure, standardized recognition procedures, qualifications frameworks and systems of quality assurance. My main point is thus the following: *A typical European university today is trying to fulfill—in its own special way—at the same time all the three different missions of serving the nation, the sciences, and the individual student; it is striving to reach the three different educational aims that I mentioned, and it attempts to have a governing structure which takes into account hierarchical regulation and academic self-governance while applying professional rules of management.* In general terms, it does not accept the division of labour implied by the original ideals. A typical European university is thus full of tensions that stem from the fact that it is trying to respect all these various missions, aims and governing structures.

These tensions explain the internal dynamics of the European university and the conflicts it constantly has to resolve both internally and externally. Its strength or weakness as an autonomous institution appears in how it manages these tensions and

conflicts. The main challenge of each and every university in Europe is to create, within this common framework, its own special identity out of this rich and diverse academic heritage, within a competitive environment where a multitude of strong and important interests are simultaneously operating both within the academy and in the larger society of which it is a part.

## **2. Universities as knowledge factories**

In the last ten to fifteen years, a strong tendency to change the universities in a certain way may be observed in Europe, a tendency which could alter the academic world. Briefly stated, *the national states and the business communities have urged the universities to take up working methods that are believed to be efficient in industry and commerce, to become more market oriented and try to renovate themselves in an entrepreneurial spirit.*

There are many reasons for this tendency. First, the universities have become institutions for mass education, not, as formerly, aimed only at a small elite. Their running costs have therefore multiplied. Second, they are looked upon as important drivers of economic growth. Third, there is a wide need for theoretical and technical knowledge, and universities have been looked upon more and more as knowledge factories, producing educated main-d'oeuvre and technical instruments to be used in the economy.<sup>1</sup>

This development has generated new problems for European universities, not least because they have been asked to provide increasing services to society without getting the financial support they consider necessary to so. They have had to do more with less money, i.e. to become much more efficient in terms of visible and immediate output than formerly, when scholars could take the time they thought appropriate to teach or to do research. In short, the universities have been encouraged to look at themselves *as business enterprises* that have to earn money by fulfilling specific, easily identifiable demands on the academic and educational market. Looking at the university as a business, one might say that it provides two products that are much in demand: diplomas

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<sup>1</sup> They also have taken on board a lot of different fields and disciplines that were not traditionally considered to be within the purview of academia.

or degrees that certify professional competence, and theories or methods which are useful for solving various kinds of technical problems.

### **3. Autonomy and accountability: the contract between the university and the state**

The public policy of most European states has been aimed making the universities autonomous, like independent companies, so they can better adapt to the demands of the society. At the same time, the public authorities have made it quite clear to the universities that they have to demonstrate their accountability, i.e. how they are fulfilling the demands.<sup>2</sup> *Autonomy* and *accountability* have become key concepts in European university policy. In order to make their autonomy and accountability clear, most if not all European universities now have contracts with the public authorities of their countries, contracts which stipulate what the universities have accepted to do within a given period and how much money the state will give to them to fulfil the tasks they have taken on. One important part of such a contract usually is for the universities to develop their own internal quality-control system and for the state to establish an external quality-assurance mechanism.<sup>3</sup>

There are many things that need to be recognized and respected when a contract is made between a university and a national state. One must recognize the fact that most if not all universities are trying to do more than they have the capacity to do. This stems from the fact that the different missions of serving the nation, the sciences and the individual student are present in every university in Europe, and they are certainly very much present in the two universities I know best, the University of Iceland and the University of Luxembourg. The ambition of both these universities, as national universities, is to serve their respective nations by developing high quality teaching and research in many different fields. The state may want to reduce the missions and tasks of

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<sup>2</sup>This is often done by attaching funding directly to outputs; and this means that the universities become autonomous and accountable in the ways by which they produce these much predetermined goods.

<sup>3</sup> There are many interesting sides to this policy, especially when an informed and open dialogue between the academics and the politicians is developed while preparing or renewing the contract between the state and a university. Such a dialogue can be essential for the university in order to establish its autonomy vis-à-vis the political and financial powers and also to make clear its internal autonomy, i.e. how it makes decisions as an independent entity and solves internal conflicts. [0]

a given university, but an institution which follows its own nature always tries to develop in many different directions because of the many different interests that are at stake both within, and outside of, the institution.

The public authorities have to respect this fact and recognize that the *autonomy* of a university not only consists in its capacity to make decisions at the top level as to its specific objectives, but also to allow its academics to develop their activities in the way they think are the most appropriate. Accordingly the *accountability* of a university should not *only* be thought of in terms of a set of tasks defined in a contract with the state but must also be thought of as assuming the responsibility of satisfying the needs and demands of a great number of stakeholders both within and outside the university.

Another fact, closely related to the one I just mentioned, is that the state has no possibility to represent all the various stakeholders in a university, who range from the individual student and his family to big business corporations or NGO's, not to mention all the cultural, political and economic interests that may be at stake in the development of a given university. In its contract with a university, the state should therefore not try to cover all the issues that might be of interest for the society, but instead respect and rely on the *freedom* given to the expertise and zeal of the university faculty to develop according to new opportunities or initiatives and try to create favorable conditions for the university to perform as well as possible whatever it tries to do, by the scope it sets itself. Here an external quality assurance system can be most helpful because it makes it possible for the university to look at itself as a whole from an objective outside perspective. But may never forget that accountability is an ethical concept which can never be completely grasped by technological methods as is sometimes believed.

#### **4. The danger of quantitative criteria**

A serious problem with the present development of European universities stems from the introduction of instruments that have been efficient in industry and commerce into academia. I am referring to the increased use of various measurements in the academic community which have become fashionable in recent times, when managerial methods appropriate in industry and commerce have been adopted by the universities. Having financial stakes attached these measurements push individual scholars and

institutions in certain directions according to the nature of the criteria that are being used. These criteria are quantitative and concern two specific outcomes or products of the academic activity, namely academic degrees and scientific publications. A university that produces the highest number of Phd students and articles in scientific journals and that harbours professors that are most cited in these same journals is likely to be ranked among “the leading world universities”. Whether these same universities are good universities in the meaningful sense of educating their students, of providing enriching services to their local communities, and of advancing our understanding of ourselves and the world, remains an open question.

One negative consequence of this development is that all universities tend to emphasize the same things, and uniformity becomes the rule at the cost of a diversity which might be much more useful to the society. This also means that important aspects of the academic activity tend to be neglected, especially those which aim at improving education and administration, where objective standards for measurement are more problematic. Moreover, the quantitative nature of such objective standards is not appropriate for a proper evaluation of the quality of the academic activity, which requires professional criticism, such as peer review. This is why the application, within the academic realm, of an industrial and commercial methodology which aims at increased production and sale is a real threat to the healthy development of the European academic community, and probably of the academic community worldwide. A competition based upon quantitative measurements is to some considerable degree alien to the activity and thinking of academic people. In the academic world there is, however, a fierce competition between ideas and theories, between different schools of thoughts, and, of course, between individual scholars in the same field. But this competition cannot be reflected in simplistic ranking, but requires an ongoing critical debate, more rigorous than any mechanical ranking. We are in fact facing two types of competition which are different in kind.

## **5. Economic globalisation and academic mondialisation**

The idea of a world-wide competition between universities for measurable achievements is indeed in the spirit of *the economic globalisation* that has lead to the

financial crises now shaking the world. But it is not in the spirit of the universal advancement of science and understanding that is the proper end of the academic activity, The world is witnessing an *academic mondialisation*—if I may use this French word—which has been going on for a long time and is mainly the work of the universities themselves, not only in Europe, but all over the world. Academic mondialisation is of an entirely different nature than the economic globalisation that has captured European public attention for the last two decades. It has to do with knowledge, not money. One might say that just as banks are responsible for money, universities are responsible for knowledge. Knowledge resembles money to the extent that, like money, it can be distributed throughout the world; but it is more interesting than money, because it can be distributed to everyone, everywhere, at the same time. And it does not diminish when distributed; on the contrary, its value increases by being shared by many people.

The responsibility that universities have for knowledge is of utmost importance because it is with our knowledge—with our theories, with our technology, and with our wisdom—that we create our human world. That is why I use the French word “mondialisation”, the word “monde” meaning “world”. A literally translation of “mondialisation” would be “worldwide-ization”, the formation of the world. It is interesting to know that the word “world” is originally composed of two words “ver” meaning “man” and “öld” meaning “time”, world being thus “the time of man [on earth]”, which is still used in my own language.

Our human world, is made of, and built upon, our spirit, with our feelings, thoughts, ideas, projects and actions. That is why the academic mondialisation I am talking about “wishes to be a humanization”, to quote the French philosopher, Jacques Derrida. But it is not certain that the academic mondialisation is the humanization it wishes to be, for a simple but fundamental reason. If theoretical and technological knowledge are separated from the ethical intention of freeing human beings from oppression and ignorance, it is not certain that it will make the world a better place to live. Technological knowledge may even contribute to global destruction, if we do not learn how to use it properly to construct the human world.

## **6. The technological nature of economic globalisation**

When we look at the history of humanity, it is obvious that technological innovations and ideas have developed and spread more quickly than theoretical and ethical beliefs. The economical globalisation which has been going on in the last decades is *technological* in nature, and academic faculties, research institutes and institutes of higher education have in fact made it possible. That is why the proponents of the economical globalisation have come to look at the universities mainly if not basically as core factories within the global system of production and commerce.<sup>4</sup> And this explains (at least to a certain extent) why the methodology of industry and commerce have been introduced into academia.

Academics, especially those in the natural sciences and technological studies, have in fact gladly participated in this development, for one obvious reason: Their activity of searching for knowledge is being valued more than ever by the political and economical powers that provide the financial means to sustain it. Some academics have literally made themselves into the willing servants of the political and economical powers. The ideology of the totally free market, which teaches that all human relationships are at bottom of an economic nature, has of course also had an enormous effect on the academic development worldwide for the last decades.

The strength of the academic community—that is to say, of the community of those who have chosen to devote themselves to the acquisition, preservation and transmission of knowledge—is what Derrida calls “an unconditional resistance” to all ideology, all dogmas, and all the powers that would manipulate ideas and theories for their own special interests, for example, [I quote Derrida] “to state powers (and thus to the power of the nation-state...), to economic powers (to corporations and to national and international capital), to the powers of the media, ideological, religious and cultural powers, and so forth – in short, to all the powers that limit democracy to come.”<sup>5</sup> The “modern university”, Derrida claims, should be without condition. “This university demands and

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<sup>4</sup> The universities have since the middle of the 19th century been most important for industry. The natural and technological sciences have played a central role in this respect and will do for the future. But academics have always claimed that they were not merely servants to industry, but trying to forward to gain new knowledge for the benefit of mankind.

<sup>5</sup> Jacques Derrida, “The University Without Condition”, in *Without Alibi*, p. 204-205.

ought to be granted in principle, besides what is called academic freedom, an unconditional freedom to question and to assert, or even, going still further, the right to say publicly all that is required by research, knowledge, and thought concerning the truth. However enigmatic it may be, the reference to truth remains fundamental enough to be found, along with light (*lux*), on the symbolic insignias of more than one university. The university professes the truth, and that is its profession. It declares and promises an unlimited commitment to the truth.”<sup>6</sup>

### **7. The project of the university as humanization**

Here I would like to stress again the essential and very deep tension within the concept of knowledge itself, a tension which is inherent in the missions of the university as I outlined them at the beginning of my lecture. The “unlimited commitment to the truth” refers to the mission of serving not only science or scholarship but humanity itself by revealing the truth about the world and ourselves. This commitment to truth is ethical and theoretical at the same time, but it has very little to do with “technological knowledge”, which aims at producing the means that enable us to reach more effectively whatever goals we aim at. Technology is not concerned with truth, but with succeeding in doing whatever we want to do. It is economic in nature, and it is this way of thinking which has been systematically introduced into European universities in recent time, and is threatening their future.

As I see it the most important task of universities worldwide is to *resist* the overwhelming influence of technological thinking in academia and to fight for a different type of mondialisation: a mondialisation of ideas and theories that inform us truly about our own humanity, the ways of existing of the human beings and how they can find better solutions to their life-problems. It is not enough for universities to insist upon their unconditional freedom to search for the truth; they must also recognize that such a freedom implies the *obligation* to share with other human beings the ideas, the theories, the beliefs, and the intellectual values, that may contribute to meaningful human existence on earth. Instead of insisting upon the technological dimension of academic activity, one now must stress and re-stress the ethical dimension of that activity, i.e. that

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid. p. 202

theoretical knowledge does not acquire its proper meaning unless it is made part of the human struggle against what unjust and untrue. That is why, ultimately, the three missions which I mentioned at the beginning—service to science, to the Nation and to the individual student—converge in this project, which each and every university has to undertake in its own unique manner: that of humanizing the world.

I think that European universities have in the past greatly contributed to the world culture that is now in the making, where human rights and dignity are respected, But I also believe that they have recently succumbed to what might be called “the technological temptation”, and that they now have to recover the ideal of humanization, which is their most important legacy for future generations. For this recovery I think European universities need to see themselves as part of an international academic community which is developing all over the world. That is why an intercontinental cooperation between universities is so important where academics can share their ideas and beliefs and learn from the different academic traditions.

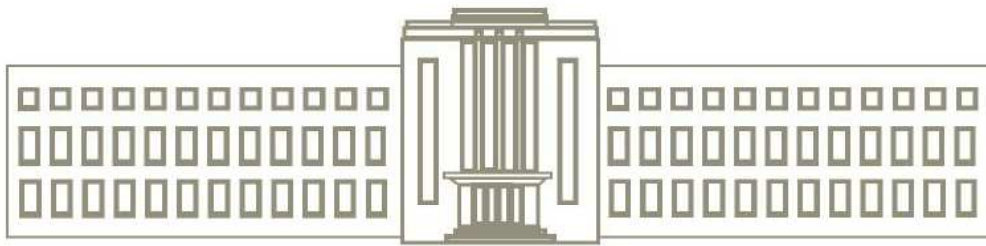
All universities should understand themselves as cosmopolitan institutions that have the ambition to serve not only their local communities but humanity wherever it is to be found on earth. That is how they can help the nations of the world to deal with the many theoretical, technical and ethical problems that they have to confront. They should bridge the gap between the thoughts and ideas that arise in the many corners of our planet and bring people together in the face of whatever divides countries, nations and individuals. Autonomy and governance of universities have to be conceived in the spirit of their task of humanizing the world.

*Páll Skúlason*



# “Autonomy and Governance in European Universities”

November 25, 2008, Hanoi  
Páll Skúlason





# Overview

- (1) characteristics of European universities as regards their missions, educational aims and governing structures
- (2) explain some aspects and problems with the recent development of European universities
- (3) present some ideas concerning the future of universities world-wide



## The present situation

Three different academic traditions:

- The German tradition (Humboldt)
- The French tradition (Napoleon)
- The British tradition (Newman)



## The university as an autonomous organisation

Dedicated to acquiring, disseminating, and preserving knowledge

Three basic ingredients:

- Basic mission
- Clear educational objective
- Governing structure



## The Napoleonic model

- The *mission* is to provide the *Nation*, to which the university belongs, with the knowledge and expertise it needs
- The main educational *aim* or objective is the training of the professional man
- The *governing structure* is hierarchical, the universities being submitted to the state that funds them and regulates them.



## The Humboldt model

- The *mission* is scholarship or science
- The educational *aim* is the formation of the student for the advancement of science
- The *governing structure* is the self-governance of the academics themselves.



## The Newman model

- The *mission* is the service to the individual *student*
- The educational *aim* is accordingly the development of the character and competences of the individual person
- The *governing structure* is the professional management of the educational institution.



## A typical European university: 3 x 3

- is trying to accomplish at the same time all the three different missions of serving the nation, the sciences, and the individual student
- it is striving to reach the three different educational aims
- it wants to have a governing structure which takes into account hierarchical regulation and academic self-governance while applying professional rules of management



## The Bologna process:

A common policy of European countries in the last 10 years contributes directly to the amalgamation of the different traditions by introducing

- a common degree structure,
- standardized recognition procedures,
- qualifications frameworks and
- systems of quality assurance



## **Universities as knowledge factories**

The national states and the business communities have urged the universities to take up working methods that are believed to be efficient in industry and commerce, to become more market oriented and try to renovate themselves in an entrepreneurial spirit.



## Reasons for this tendency

Universities have become

- mass institutions on an educational market
- drivers of economic growth

and

- technical, theoretical and ethical knowledge are becoming more important than ever



## New problems

- The institutions have been asked to provide much more services to the society without getting more financial support
- They also have to earn money by fulfilling specific easily identifiable demands on the academic and educational market



## Autonomy and accountability

- The state wants to make the universities more autonomous so they can better adapt to the demands of society
- The state wants the institutions to demonstrate accountability by attaching funds directly to outputs



## Contract with the public authorities

- Universities endeavour to do more than they have the capacity to do!
- Many different missions have been adopted by the national universities like the University of Iceland or the University of Luxembourg



## The contract

- Based upon the autonomy of the university to make decision at the top level
- Based upon the respect for the freedom and responsibility of the academic staff



## Limits of the contract

- The state has no possibility to represent all the various stakeholders of a university
- The university faculty must have the possibility to develop according to new opportunities



## Accountability

should not *only* be thought of as fulfilling a set of tasks defined in a contract with the state, but has to be thought of as assuming responsibility which may benefit great number of stakeholders both within and outside the university



## The danger of quantitative criteria

especially when (high) stakes are attached

Two specific outcomes:

- Academic degrees
- Scientific publications

Universities, everywhere, tend to emphasize the same things and uniformity becomes the rule at the cost of diversity which might be of much greater benefit to society



## Two types of competition

- A competition based upon quantitative scales (the new type)
- A competition between ideas and theories, between different schools of thoughts, and, of course, between individual scholars in the same field (the traditional type)



## Economic globalisation versus academic mondialisation

Globalisation of things and phenomena  
which can be bought with money

Mondialisation of knowledge (ideas, thoughts  
and theories, and perhaps visions)



## Technological nature of economic globalisation

academic faculties, research institutes and institutes of higher education have in fact made this globalisation possible



## Three types of knowledge

- Theoretical
- Technical
- Ethical

must be kept together:

The main responsibility of universities



## European universities

have succumbed to the “technological temptation”

but must endeavour to live up to the ideal of keeping together theoretic, technical and ethical knowledge



## Autonomy – legal, financial and ethical

is needed for of each and every university to engage in the acquisition, transmission and preservation of knowledge the way it thinks best to serve science, its nation and the individual student



## Cosmopolitan institutions

- aiming at developing knowledge for the benefit of mankind
- bringing people together in the face of whatever divides countries, nations and individuals



The project of the university  
should be humanization!

Thank you for your attention