

## ACADEMIC LEARNING BETWEEN TRADITION AND REFORM

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### Abstract

*Almost everybody is uncomfortable about academic training. It is expensive, it fails to meet the requirements of the present-day economy, and it does not provide the graduates the assets for a successful career. Our analysis point out to some misunderstandings that lie behind such views. Universities are wrongly considered as service-providers, since there is no way to guarantee the efficiency of their output. Moreover, a discrepancy between the social requirements and the knowledge content provided by academic training is benefic to some extent, as it stimulates technological and organizational change. The methods of teaching should be adapted to the possibilities of the information and communication technology, but one could not rely on the latter, in the absence of a coherent system of representations based on traditional approaches. We also show that the promotion of trans disciplinary fields amounts to the revival of the basic curricula structured in trivium and quadrivium.*

### INTRODUCTION

The beginning of the academic year is no longer a celebration, but an occasion to express regrets and frustrations. Everybody is uncomfortable about academic learning and everybody seems to know what to do about it. The tax-payers claim that it is expensive; the professors complain that they are paid badly; the students object that it does not help them enough to pursue a professional career successfully. Such cases as Steve Jobs's and Bill Gates's, who abandoned the university in order to conquer the market by the competences and abilities that they developed on their own, but also plenty of others, albeit less spectacular, support the claim that academic studies are no longer a necessary prerequisite for personal accomplishment. The family networks that run the university departments and control everything are upsetting everybody, although it used to be sort of a tradition to follow one's father in the chair: an efficient method for the reproduction of the elites. It is widely believed that a thorough reform would bring forth better forms.

It is incontestable that the university has long ceased to be the temple wherein the great priests - the professors - play the part of intercessors between knowledge and those thirsty for it. In the past, students were enrolling in order to get an education, today they enroll in order to get the training required to practice a craft or an art, in the framework of a specific job, hopefully remunerative. Traditionally, the relationship between the academic education and the worldly profession was not very strong. A graduate from a famous university (Oxbridge, Sorbonne, later on *Les grandes écoles* etc.) had better chances to get an employment in public administration and a political position, but this was not his immediate goal. Anyway, he did not rely on academic education in order to make a living. A young Englishman of adequate means wanted to get the status of a gentleman. A student in Paris, like François Villon, in the XV<sup>th</sup> century, or Emil Cioran, in the XX<sup>th</sup>, wanted to have a good time, in the company of the bohemian intelligentsia. In Romania, in 1947, G. Calinescu opened the academic year by a conference, wherein, apart from other meaningful insights, which we will deal upon in the sequel, defined the goals of the attendants: "A difficult condition of the university is the practical goal, in the purest materialistic sense that the students are focused on. A large number of young men, and especially, of young women, enroll in order to get a degree which would consolidate their position as employees"<sup>1</sup>. In other words, the students had already a job, which the academic degree would help to maintain, and, moreover, would rise the wage accordingly. That's how it worked, a diploma implied job security and payment improvements. Even today, many students have already a job and they expect that graduation would enhance the situation they have already achieved. Others wait for the completion of their studies, and rely on them for earning their meals. When they realize that academic training does not guarantee their upkeep, they blame the University for their Own Failure.

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<sup>1</sup> G. Călinescu, *Universitate-Universalitate. In: Secolul 20, 6(102), 1969, pag. 10.*

## ACADEMIC LEARNING

The relationship between the student and the university is a contractual one. The student accepts to fulfill his duties and to promote the examinations, the institution is supposed to provide the competencies and the abilities required to exercise a profession. The model is an economical one: the student pays, the academic supplier provides. The fact that the public university in Romania is tax-free is not relevant. The student is financed from the taxes imposed on the population, and his parents are a part from it. The big problem is that the benefit of the student is an intangible asset – knowledge and abilities -, which can be viewed either as a virtual product, or as a service that the professors are bound to offer. According to an axiom derived from the academic tradition, knowledge cannot be the object of a transaction. In the broken Latin of the Middle Ages, it is stated: „Scientia donum dei est, unde vendi non potest”<sup>2</sup>, which means that, as knowledge comes from God, it cannot be sold as any other commodity. The professor is not a supplier of knowledge, but an intermediary between knowledge and student. Intellectual commerce is only a free exchange of ideas, without any monetary base. At the third Lateran Council, in 1179, Pope Alexander the Third proclaimed the principle of free academic learning, based precisely on this assumption<sup>3</sup>. It follows from it that, ever after, in spite of the fact that the students, especially in Anglo-Saxon countries, pay for their tuition, the fee does not represent the price of knowledge, but of the physical effort involved in the teaching process. In Romania, the private universities, but, to some extent, also the public ones, imposed pay-for-tuition taxes. However, these do not refer to the value of knowledge, but to the cost of energy and time related to the act of teaching. In the case of the private universities, this cost is evaluated in economic terms, based on the expected profit; in the case of public universities, the cost is based on the budget *per capita* of student. It results that a professor is paid badly, just as a daily worker or a prostitute, by the hour. His body should be available for time intervals duly prescribed, ready to function, at its best. He can also make money by disseminating knowledge, on the condition that it should be incorporated in a tangible object, i.e. a book that can be mass produced. Nicolae Iorga published his lectures in his own newspaper, thus forcing the students to buy it. We are not aware of such cases when a professor got rich by his publications. The only example that comes to mind is Alan Bloom, the author of the bestseller *The Closing of the American Mind*. The book appealed to the general public by its virulent critique of academic learning in America, and, thus, satisfied the general expectation. Saul Bellow contributed not a little to advertise its success in his novel, *Ravelstein*. On the contrary, the need for a portfolio of publications, according to the rule „publish or perish” imposes high expenses on the author, since he is responsible for making himself known and building his renown by his writings and by taking part in scientific reunions. The fees to be paid for the various memberships in scientific associations also come into account. Prevented from selling knowledge, even if it is developed in its own laboratories, the university has come to be perceived as a service provider. Its customer is obviously the student, but, as a supplier of complex services, the university has to satisfy other customers too. The companies that hire on the work market are also customers of the university, as well as society as a whole. The first expect that universities should train, at the expense of tax-payers or of the students’ themselves, workforce directly usable to enhance their profits. Nobody seems to deem this requirement as uncanny, albeit this is clearly an aggression on academic autonomy<sup>4</sup>. Moreover, this requirement can contradict the long-term society’s expectations. To be sure, if the university trained people that were perfectly adequate to the present-day world, these people would have no drive or incentive to change the state of the world. The world would be preserved forever in *statu-quo-ante*. The university, on the contrary, should stimulate its students to change the ways that things go. G. Calinescu insisted, in his conference, upon the necessity to develop the critical spirit of the students: “The secondary school teaches notions dogmatically. The university involves the doubt, even in the formulation of the scientific principles, so that it fosters the critical spirit”<sup>5</sup>. The strain, the tension between what is taught in universities and what is needed in practical life is, eventually, beneficial, because it stimulates creativity, while a perfect adequacy between academic training and market requirements would make of any graduate a simple mechanism that would contribute to the maintaining of business as usual. We believe that companies should change their expectations concerning the academic output. They should select their employees according to their academic performances, because they are correlated to creativity and criticism. The training in current procedures can be performed there and then. Moreover, one should also take into account the dynamics of knowledge. Considering the field of Information Technology, a graduate ten years ago, who was perfectly adjusted to the state of the art of the time, would be completely useless today. Beyond transferring knowledge, beyond developing competences and abilities, the university should provide incentives and tools for continuous learning. Unlike a service-provider, the university cannot guarantee the efficiency of its training. Just like the barrister, who cannot be held responsible for a verdict in favor of his client, just like the physician, who is not

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<sup>2</sup> Peter Burke, *O istorie socială a cunoașterii*. Institutul European, Iași, 2004, pag. 216.

<sup>3</sup> Jacques Le Goff, *Intellectualii în evul mediu*. Editura Meridiane, București, 1994, pag. 113.

<sup>4</sup> The university’s autonomy means the freedom to pursue such fields of knowledge that the university considers worthwhile, irrespective of their immediate utility.

<sup>5</sup> *Op. cit.*, pag. 9.

liable for the health restoration, but only for a qualified cure, the professor cannot guarantee the professional success of his student; he only stages the preliminaries for its outcome.

The university is frequently confronted with the objection that it stifles the students with information, which is nowadays freely available on the internet. This is a misconception. The abundance of the available information requires supplementary guidance. In its absence, the search on the net would prove cumbersome and useless. The university is bound to provide the coherent system of knowledge, founded ultimately on the traditional training. It is true, however, that the present knowledge system is pyramidal. Each level (discipline) is supported by the previous one and supports, at its turn, the next one. As a matter-of-fact, information technology provides many a shortcut in the field of knowledge, which undermines the systematic progression from one level to the next. The great challenge to the university is to adapt its conceptual system, which used to be the basis of rationalization, to the new forms of electronic management of knowledge. The alternative would be that shrewd, self-taught individuals would tailor by and for themselves the most efficient paths between various fields of knowledge, developing unthought-of competences and abilities, without any relationship with systematic, academic curricula.

University does not only disseminate knowledge, it also produces it. In the old buildings of the “Politehnica” University, in Polizu Street, a marble relief preserves professor Nenitescu’s advice: You cannot pass on knowledge, unless you are yourself a producer of knowledge, or, at least, you attempt to be one”. Often, between teaching and researching, many a conflict arises. In Brecht’s play, *Galileo Galilei*, the protagonist complains to the manager of his university (the University of Padua) for his meager paycheck. The manager advises him to take up more students. “If I teach all the time, when would I learn?” asks the scientist. Then, the manager suggests he gave up equations of movement and invent something useful, fit to be commercialized. Galilei gets hold of a telescope, invented by someone else, improves it and presents it as a personal achievement. However, such cunning schemes cannot be often devised. Usually, teaching is the best form of learning, because this is a way of stepwise refinement of what you already know. Teaching something you yourself don’t know amounts to research, said Roland Barthes, upon his inaugural discourse, *The Lesson*, held at *Collège de France*. There is still another lesson, more dangerous both to the student and to the teacher, Ionesco’s *Lesson*. In the well known play, a female student comes up to the teacher; she is eager to get “the total PhD” that is a scientific overview of everything, world and life included. She is supported by her well-to-do parents, who are well aware that, in a “complex and complicated world”, knowledge means power. She is at first fully confident, but soon is overwhelmed by the complexity of knowledge and her vitality decreases gradually, until she becomes listless and is murdered by the professor. The latter, initially awkward and shy, gets intoxicated by reasoning and arguing and rises to the climax of committing the murder. The play supports two possible interpretations. First, knowledge is not benign, but malicious; its imprudent assimilation is bound to harm. Science without conscience involves not only the ruin of the soul<sup>6</sup>, but also the damage of the body. As the professor’s servant well knows, “mathematics is exhausting, and literature leads to the worst”. Another interpretation points to the vampirism implied in any pedagogical act. The professor feeds his vital force by consuming his students.

## IT AND TEACHING

Today teaching is a pyramidal process, based on prerequisites in our curricula. To increase quality of teaching we use IT offers. We use IT to increase speed and quantity of knowledge but is not enough. We think it is necessary to find shortcut to reach the goal.

Universities are constantly exploring new ways to use social media to fulfill their missions of engaging and sharing knowledge with their constituents. Social media tools like Facebook Pages, YouTube or Twitter have given universities an opportunity to speak to audiences on their own and to increase interactivity between professor and student’s. These social media tools are often used to supplement traditional press releases being sent out.

Members of online social networks can expect a significant chance of encountering spam posts and not negligible chance of coming across malicious link. The most obvious threat is concerning privacy and security.

Governments could theoretically launch hostile attacks on another State’s critical infrastructure, such as its telecommunications system or key public services, or attempt to acquire sensitive information. Actors who are not governments may attempt to do the same thing.

The complex nature of cyberspace makes such incidents liable to produce misunderstandings, unforeseen crises or even conflicts in the future. Meanwhile, terrorists have and will continue to use it to plan attacks and flood chat rooms with their ideology to recruit their next generation.

Research performed by psychologists from Edinburgh Napier University indicated that Facebook adds stress to users' lives. Causes of stress included fear of missing important social information, fear of offending contacts, discomfort or guilt from rejecting user requests or deleting unwanted contacts, the pressure to be entertaining, and having to use appropriate etiquette for different types of friends [8]. Many people who started using Facebook for positive purposes have found that the website has negatively impacted their actual lives.

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<sup>6</sup> *Science sans conscience n'est que ruine de l'âme*, according to Rabelais.

Teachers should have Twitter accounts because they like to stay informed about education and they like to learn new ideas about teaching. Twitter lets you do that better than any other tool on the Internet.

More than a place to tweet about the little things in life, think of Twitter as a way to connect to new information about any topic. You can paste a link in a tweet, and incredibly talented educators are pasting highly informative links to educational articles 24 hours a day, seven days a week. What makes this particularly helpful is that you can tag a particular tweet so that it makes it easy for anyone in the world to find it.

So here's how educators can find two great sources of educational information. After you log in to Twitter, go to the search field at the very top of the screen (**not** the What's Happening? field). Type the following into the search field: #edchat

The number symbol before edchat is called a "hashtag" or "hash." Your Twitter search results window will now populate with any tweet in the world that has that same "hashtag" in it. The Twitter #edchat hashtag search is a fantastic source of educational information for teachers. Take a few minutes to explore some of the links in those tweets. My favorite education hashtag, however, is: #edtech.

From Moodle, an instructional Web-based learning program used as a teaching supplement, to one-to-one computer initiatives (including mobile devices), technology has become part of daily life in and outside Titu Maiorescu classrooms.

## CONCLUSION

The reformation of academic training is meant to eliminate its perils and to enhance its benefits. The voice of the European Commissar for Education, Culture, and Multilingualism, Andruța Vasilie resounds authoritatively on the waves: the universities should provide not a mere specialty, but the means to integrate in the work market. This is the Master's Voice, but also *vox populi*. "Times are past when the geographer taught geography, the mathematician taught mathematics and the lawyer taught law. A basic degree should involve trans-disciplinary fields, such as communication, teamwork and decision-making"<sup>7</sup>. One cannot help wondering if this useful and thoughtful advice does not imply the return to the classical structure of medieval universities. Their curriculum, divided into *trivium* and *quadrivium*, duly attended, awarded the BS or the BA title (Bachelor of Science, or of Arts, respectively). The *trivium* included grammar, logic and rhetoric. The *quadrivium* included arithmetic, geometry, music and astronomy. On the whole, they composed the seven Liberal Arts: arts in the sense of *techné* (abilities) and liberal, because they emancipated the spirit, giving it control over itself and mastership of its instruments. The *trivium* develops the abilities to use the natural language in order to argue, to explain and to persuade; the *quadrivium* develops the abilities to master the mathematic language, in order to model the world (music is basically mathematics). It is obvious that the linguistic disciplines of nowadays, such as semiotics or the sciences of communication are simple extensions of the *trivium*, while calculus, modern algebra and programming languages fit perfectly into the *quadrivium*. The reformation can be completed by a reversal to the good old methods. Let the music sing „Vivat Academia, vivant professores”.

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