

On our (Black Forest) way to the education of tomorrow

What will higher education look like in 2040? What do *we* think it *should* look like? Those are the questions we, students of the liberal arts (and sciences), asked ourselves on a sunny Saturday afternoon while walking in the Black Forest. Inspiring ourselves from Bert van der Zwaan's book *Higher Education in 2040*, in which the rector of Utrecht University describes his thoughts on the future of the university, we exchanged ideas and opinions on how higher education will deal with the many challenges it is and will be facing.

In groups of 3 to 4 people, we first discussed the “*spell of production and quality*” looming over university staff, which often affects the quality of the teaching provided in higher education. How could instructors be incentivised to invest in pedagogy when their professional performances are (almost) solely judged on the quantity and impact of their publications? Would some teaching institutions benefit from a looser connection to research? Such questions we heartily debated under the shadow of the beautiful pine trees siding a forest path in the vicinity of the Kandelblickhütte.

After 15 minutes of intense thinking and debating we all sat on grass and tree stumps in order to share our conclusions with the other groups. Almost everyone agreed on the need for universities to value education more and for instructors to be less overwhelmed by their research obligations. We then transitioned to the second theme of the day: The role of the university and how its existence can be justified. We were asked to reflect on the three different lines of reasoning that van der Zwaan states are used to defend the existence of tertiary education: education for its own sake, education as a means to increase economic output and education as a way to find innovative solutions that help society.

Parting in small groups again in order to resume our bucolic walk, we started to passionately argue about what we think the role of the university should be. As the discussion progressed, we discovered somewhat large differences in opinions as to what justifies the university and its different programs. Should Celtic studies be justified in terms of their role in improving society? Or should we not even bother to find external justifications and continue investing in them because of their undeniable value for the students? Are humanities majors really of such low value to society that it is warranted to defund them in favor of STEM major and their economic outputs? Or are they actually necessary in order to avoid a profit-driven, morally bankrupt university? At times it seemed impossible to grapple with the complexity of those questions and the justifications for the different end goals of higher education, but everyone perceived how crucial the choice of answers was... And most seemed to share an understanding, maybe amplified by the context and nature of our gathering, that something is lost when the university is solely justified by quantifiable outputs.

On the way back to the hut, we finally talked about how curricula will look like in the future. Many groups agreed on the need for universities to train more “*T-shaped professionals*”: graduates whose education is rooted in a strong interdisciplinary training so that they can form connections with other disciplines in order to solve complex problems. Maybe this sounds familiar... We discussed the need for STEM graduates to learn from the social sciences and the humanities and, less extensively, for social science graduates to have a better understanding of technology and science. Were higher education planners to agree with our conclusions, it looks like more liberal education programs will be needed in the future!

Upon reaching the Kandelblickhütte, we sat all together again and set out to decide on the changes we agreed we would like to see happen to higher education in the future. In the short-term, it seemed important to us to bring more interdisciplinarity to university programs. Several ways of achieving this goal were put forward: organizing a week during which all students can attend interdisciplinary activities every year, allowing for more

flexibility in students' curricula, incentivising extracurricular activities, as well as organizing friendly debates in which students would hopefully bond over disagreement. More important and radical changes were also considered for the long term. To untangle education from research. To develop an umbrella approach that includes politics, citizenship and ethics classes specific for each program, as well as aspects of technological knowledge for social and human scientists. To empower less intensive, life-long learning models. And of course, to train more "T-shaped professionals".

Will the higher education of the future resemble what we have envisaged during a liberal education symposium in a lost hut in the Black Forest? Maybe not at all, and probably a bit in some respects. It is impossible to judge now, and our discussions might very well never have any impact on the future shape of the university. They might also changed the mind of a person who will have a say, even modest, in shaping higher education twenty years from now. Whatever happens in the future, however, was it not valuable in and of itself to take the time to go for a walk in the Black Forest on a sunny Saturday afternoon and talk about higher education?

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