

WE ARE THE LIGHTHOUSES IN THE DARK SEA OF INTELLECTUAL LAZINESS AND PURE IGNORANCE

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Reflecting back, how has the field of higher education changed in the last few decades?

I think that the changes in HE reflect the changes in our societies as a whole. I want to emphasise that my perspective is that of Scandinavia and Europe even though we might recognize common global trends. Educational institutions tend to be - despite the global influences - deeply rooted into the local culture and history.

If we think of major happenings within HE, we need to talk about two main phenomena: move from Industrial Societies to Knowledge Societies and Universities becoming institutions of mass education

“ HIGHER EDUCATION IS INCREASINGLY DYNAMIC AND IS REALLY COMPETITIVE. THERE IS A HUGE RANGE OF DISCIPLINES, MODES OF STUDY AND TYPES OF INSTITUTIONS AVAILABLE THROUGH GLOBAL PARTNERSHIPS ”

instead of being reserved for few. These two phenomena are of course related to one another, perhaps we could even say that the second one is – at least partially – a consequence of the first. The intensive technological

developments after the Second World War have contributed to a transformation of our societies where conditions of production and economy have radically changed leading to new requirements as individuals and citizens. New competences and skills are required. New types of knowledge emerge.

As conditions of production change, the question of employability of individuals becomes crucial. How do we guarantee that individuals have the competences and skills required? In Europe, the answer has been education: opening the secondary and tertiary education to an increasing number of people.

Increasing the number of students within HE has brought a lot of



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challenges and I think that HE is struggling with these challenges today. Heterogeneous background of the student population requires a new mind set from the teacher: individualization and flexibility in education have become central for the success.

What would be the role of research and development in the future higher education field?

My firm conviction is – and has always been – that research and development needs to go hand-in-hand with education. Education requires research and vice

versa. Education that is based on results of current research can be defined as quality education, and research that can be discussed, and critically examined within the academic context of HE, can develop its rigour. I think that it is of utmost importance that every teacher in HE is allowed to participate in research regularly. Own research activities will give the teacher a chance to stay connected with latest developments in the research field which then can be fed to the teaching. This is the way to guarantee good quality teaching which is informed by the latest research developments.

Do you believe technology can replace the human elements

such as teaching from higher education completely? What would be the role of technology in Future Higher education?

I work at a department where we develop new educational technologies and it has never occurred to me that we should be replacing teachers with technologies. In my understanding learning is mainly a social activity. We as humans learn in interaction with others, with peers and with teachers. A teacher has a crucial role in designing and leading the learning process. No machine is capable of undertaking that kind of an intricate role.



We may develop further educational technologies that support processes of collaboration and creativity within education and these technologies may have even a bigger role in the future. There is also a lot of discussion about further personalization of education and the learning experience with the emphasis on individual's needs and requirements. We are also developing diagnostic algorithms to assist teachers in their work. I would however be quite apprehensive regarding the application of machine learning in the educational context. We need to be very careful with the application of AI as our experience is still limited. We do not fully understand all the consequences yet. We have the responsibility to investigate all the ethical issues and establish sustainable procedures based on universal human values (if we can agree upon such). I can see that we have started the discussions in several aspects; for example, European Union has established Ethics & Guidelines for Trustworthy AI. (<https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single->

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market/en/news/ethics-guidelines-trustworthy-ai) I find this as an important development. We should not pause here thinking of guidelines. Ethic is an area that requires constant debate and reflection, as the technological development places us in new situations where ethical considerations are necessary.

Do you think universities have a more critical role in the sustainable development agenda?

I certainly believe that universities could play a more central role and of course even provide a critical perspective to the current discourse on sustainability. Research findings should inform political decision making and societal development. There I think every individual researcher has a great responsibility to reach out and make their research known in the society. Especially we in public universities using public funding for our research have the ethical responsibility to make our research useful for the society.

Cross collaborations between universities in developed countries and developing countries are increasing. In what ways will this help the developing world to revamp their education systems?

Development of HE needs to be done in all societies. Developing countries need to find their own unique ways

“ I THINK THAT IN THE PRESENT WORLD, WE REALLY NEED TO TAKE UP THE FIGHT AGAINST IGNORANCE, FAKE NEWS, AND FILTER BUBBLES. RESEARCH SHOWS THAT THE INTERNET AND SOCIAL MEDIA AMPLIFY CERTAIN HUMAN TENDENCIES TO RESIST INFORMATION AND FACTS THAT ARE AGAINST OUR EXISTING BELIEFS. PEOPLE SEEM TO GROUP WITH THOSE WHO HAVE SIMILAR IDEAS AND ATTITUDES. RESISTANCE TO FACTS CAN BE FOUND IN SO CALLED ECHO CHAMBERS AND FILTER BUBBLES WHERE THOSE WITH SIMILAR IDEAS ENFORCE THEIR OWN POSITION AGAINST DIFFERING IDEAS. THIS IS A VERY WORRYING DEVELOPMENT. AND HERE EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS AT ALL LEVELS HAVE AN IMPORTANT ROLE TO PLAY ”

of education and research, based on the local culture and history. In the enthusiasm of globalization we need to remember who we are and where we come from, because the knowledge of past builds a better future.

I am a friend of international collaboration and I have been working with colleagues in African and Asian countries. I think that mutual respect is a key to success. Western educational legacy lays heavily on HE institutions in many countries worldwide and I would really like to see a more critical positioning among academics in the global South. I think there is more room for academic diversity, and alternative knowledge systems. Particularly, if we think in terms of sustainability, we really need to draw on local and indigenous knowledge systems based on centuries of practice.

In your view, what would be the key challenges faced by universities?

I think that in the present world, we really need to take up the fight against ignorance, fake news, and filter bubbles. Research shows that the Internet and social media amplify certain human tendencies to resist information and facts that are against our existing beliefs. People seem to group with those who have similar ideas and attitudes. Resistance to facts can be found in so called echo chambers and filter bubbles where those with similar ideas enforce their own position against differing ideas. This is a very worrying development. And here educational institutions at all levels have an important role to play.

We are the lighthouses in the dark sea of intellectual laziness and pure ignorance. Xenophobic denial of the difference and the fear of unknown are unfortunately widely spread in today's world. This is why it is so important that we within academia act and react.

Our weapon in this fight is critical thinking; applying critical thinking in our everyday work and teaching critical thinking to our students.

What competencies are needed by academics to face these challenges?

Here I will turn to my intellectual roots: "Humboldtian tradition" and the "German concept of Bildung"; which says that universities and academics are the keepers of knowledge, keepers of "Bildung" (education).

I do this as a reaction to the present day tendency with HE institutions to follow neo-liberal principles where visibility, commodification and instrumentalization of knowledge make us part of a culture of performance rather than that of intellectual inquiry.

Humboldt's original idea of Bildung emphasized a process of holistic growth, self-realization of the individual as an entirety, freedom, and self-understanding. Further it brings a sense of social responsibility, which puts the development of the individual's unique potential and self at the center of educational processes. These ideas have been very much lost along the way but I think it is important at present crisis of knowledge to turn back to the original ideas of holistic growth of the individual freedom and social responsibility. Cultivating these within ourselves as academics and cultivating these within our students, I am convinced that we will be able to meet the challenges of the future and will be much better equipped to resist ignorance with tools of critical thinking, rigour of research methodologies and a knowledge base in "Bildung".

And, of course, we need to meet each of our students with compassion, recognising their uniqueness as human beings with own history and own preconditions.

■ **By Sulakshana De Alwis**