

Scientific communism and the capitalist economy: universities in the era of globalisation

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Introduction

It is a great honour to be here to celebrate with you these notable anniversaries of Laval University. Throughout its long history Laval has made a huge contribution to the educational, scientific and cultural development of Canada. I bring you greetings and congratulations from UNESCO, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation, which attaches the highest importance to its links with the world's universities.

At the personal level I am delighted to be back in Quebec City where I spent four very enjoyable and stimulating years between 1973 and 1977 when we were setting up the Télé-université at the Université du Québec. I had the privilege of working with Dr Fernand Grenier, a distinguished geographer who had come from being Dean of Arts at Laval to be Director-General of the Télé-université. It was a thrilling period in the development of higher education and, although I did not realise it at the time, my career then took a new direction, which allowed me, over the following quarter century, to observe the globalisation of universities at close hand.

Scientific communism and the capitalist economy: universities in the era of globalisation – what do I mean by my title? It's a phrase that I found in Pekka Himanen's book, *The Hacker Ethic: A Radical Approach to the Philosophy of Business*. He writes that 'present capitalism is based on the exploitation of scientific communism'. That is an elegant way of expressing a tension that has always been part of academic life, but which seems more acute today, namely the tension between knowledge as a common good and knowledge as private property.

That is also the question put to us by the organisers of this colloquium. 'How do international institutions see higher education issues in a time of accelerating globalisation? Are we headed down the road to mercantilism, or are we moving toward human sustainable development, which acknowledges the world of higher education as having the status of a global public good?'

I am not going to answer this question right away. It is a tendentious question anyway, because it expresses a false dichotomy and offers an artificial choice. Let me begin by examining the principles that guide UNESCO in its approach to education in general and to higher education in particular.

My first observation is that it would be hypocritical for UNESCO to oppose the globalisation of education, because the introduction to the Convention that established UNESCO at the end of the Second World War is a plea for globalisation, even though the word did not exist in 1945. We read there:

That the wide diffusion of culture, and the education of humanity for justice and liberty and peace are indispensable to the dignity of man and constitute a sacred duty which all the nations must fulfil in a spirit of mutual assistance and concern.

It continues:

For these reasons, the States Parties to this Constitution, believing in full and equal opportunities for education for all, in the unrestricted pursuit of objective truth, and in the free exchange of ideas and knowledge, are agreed and determined to develop and increase the means of communication between their peoples and to employ these means for the purposes of mutual understanding and a truer and more perfect knowledge of each other's lives.

I stress three ideas in this extract from the UNESCO constitution: first, 'the unrestricted pursuit of objective truth'; second, 'the free exchange of ideas and knowledge'; and third, 'increasing the means of communication between peoples'. These three ideas define a healthy vision of the globalisation of intellectual life and echo the evolution of the academic dogma, the academic mode of thinking and the principle of academic freedom over eight centuries.

By *academic dogma* I mean the simple statement that knowledge is important. It is a dogma, because you cannot prove it, but many believe that it is a basic tenet of humankind.

By the *academic mode of thinking* I mean the appeal to reason, the formulation of hypotheses, the search for evidence – in short, the scientific method in the broadest sense.

By *academic freedom*, to quote the conclusions of a conference organised by UNESCO in 1950, I mean the 'right and the freedom to research science for its own sake, wherever that research leads, the tolerance of opposite views and independence of any political interference'.

Are these values under threat today? Should we be erecting barricades to defend the vision of intellectual globalisation set out in UNESCO's constitution? Last year the UNESCO Courier devoted an issue to this question with the title *Politics and profit: Scholars at Risk*. It stressed, of course, the difficulties encountered by academics in countries whose regimes tolerate neither opposition nor freedom of speech.

But most of the articles were about the dangers created by large firms that fund work in universities. This funding often includes tight restrictions, either on the publication of research results or, more generally, on the research activities of the department in receipt of the funds. The authors quote cases where university authorities kowtowed only too readily to commercial pressures. They explained that universities were turning to the private sector for support because of the decline in the public funding of universities in many countries.

I make two comments about this issue. First, preventing the publication of research results is a shortsighted policy, especially for any organisation that hopes to take advantage of scientific progress. As Albert Einstein said, 'Restrictions on academic freedom only hinder the circulation of knowledge and therefore bias the judgements that countries make and the actions that they take'. I also quote Arnold Toynbee who said, in the same vein, 'self criticism and self correction are all too rare in human affairs. They are the sign of a maturity and of a spiritual force which provide hope for the future'. In summary, such restrictions are ineffective in commercial terms and are a drag on human progress.

Some examples of restrictions on the publication of research results on new pharmaceutical products have had wide press coverage here in Canada. In view of the

large settlements made by the courts to people who have suffered harmful side effects from drugs, any pharmaceutical firm has an interest in knowing about all the effects of its products as quickly as possible. Attempting to hide the evidence of side effects would seem likely to increase, rather than reduce, a company's legal problems.

My second comment is about the decreasing state financing of universities. There is no logical link between the idea of knowledge as a public good and the state financing of universities. Indeed, the notion of knowledge as the common property of humankind was around long before universities received funding from states. There is no problem if states contribute funds to universities, because universities can help nations to achieve certain goals. It is simply a question of proportion.

Research on the benefits of higher education shows that the advantage to the individual graduate is larger than the benefit to society at large. It is reasonable, therefore, for people to pay part of the cost of their higher education. Some object that this will lower the participation rate of people from poorer backgrounds. However, the research, to which Canadian scholars have made an important contribution, shows clear results. In countries with free tuition in higher education the participation rate from people from disadvantaged backgrounds is less than in countries which combine tuition fees with a programme of grants and bursaries.

I stress that I am talking here about higher education. In basic education – primary and secondary – UNESCO policy, as well as World Bank policy, is opposed to direct or indirect tuition fees. This is not a contradiction. The economic, social and cultural benefits that society as a whole derives from basic education are very significant. This is why one of the objectives of the world campaign for education for all, which UNESCO coordinates, is:

To ensure that by 2015 all children, especially girls, children in difficult circumstances, and from ethnic minorities have access to and complete free and compulsory primary education of good quality.

For a concise analysis of the role of the state at different levels of education I recommend Alison Wolf's recent book, *Does Education Matter? Myths about Education and Economic Growth*. One of her conclusions is that we are wrong to promote universities by stressing primarily their contribution to economic growth. She holds that we should rather emphasise their role in the intellectual, cultural and social life of their country and the world.

I would add that in this era of globalisation universities should promote international understanding. Since last year many people appeal to the 'clash of civilisations' as a way of understanding the current geopolitical tensions. Add to this post-modern attitudes and it is easy to exaggerate cultural differences and downplay the ideas of universal values and human rights.

UNESCO, which like the rest of the United Nations system was founded on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, viscerally opposes this new cultural relativism. One of our tools is the network of UNESCO chairs and the UNITWIN programme. This consists of five hundred professorial chairs in more than a hundred countries. They cover the range of UNESCO's interests and topics like human rights and press freedom.

Another feature of university development in this era of globalisation is the phenomenon of cross-border teaching. For students and scholars to be mobile is not,

of course, new. Everyone knows about Erasmus, the 16th century Dutch humanist who felt at home in all the universities of Europe. Even before that English students who were thrown out of the medieval University of Paris for bad behaviour helped to create Oxford University.

Today courses are mobile as well as students. For instance, the UK Open University, my former institution, has some 30,000 students outside the UK. Last year I enrolled as a student at that university while being resident in France.

UNESCO is interested in cross-border teaching for three reasons. First, we hope to persuade universities and countries not to make hasty judgements about this development, nor to confuse different phenomena. This form of teaching frequently uses distance education, which still arouses suspicion in some quarters, and often has a commercial flavour even – maybe especially – when the foreign institution is a public institution. Furthermore, it falls outside the control of national frameworks of higher education at a time when countries seem to want to control their universities more and more tightly.

For these reasons UNESCO has just set up a Global Forum for Quality Assurance, Accreditation, and the Recognition of Diplomas in Higher Education. Its first meeting will take place in Paris in October. The key objective is simply to provide the opportunity for discussion between people bringing diverse perspectives from around the world.

I hope that Forum's discussions will help UNESCO to draw up its action plan in this area. In particular, and this is the second aspect of cross-border teaching that interests us, we want to know whether we should help to develop international instruments to help students and institutions make choices about courses and programmes from foreign sources. Ought we, for instance, to put together a guide to good practice, as was done in the 1970s in response to the controversies about correspondence education? Should we draw up a list of accredited and quality assurance agencies that meet certain criteria of credibility and rigour?

These are some of complex questions raised by the globalisation of higher education. Until now the accreditation of academic degrees and diplomas has been done almost exclusively at the national level. The most significant exception is the International Baccalaureate. This diploma, covering the last two years of secondary education, today has very high credibility with universities throughout the world. It is governed and managed by an international non-governmental organisation. I note in passing that the programmes of the International Baccalaureate Organisation are in particularly widespread use here in Quebec. UNESCO is proud that it supported the creation of the International Baccalaureate Organisation thirty years ago and continues to enjoy close relations with it.

The third aspect of cross-border teaching of particular interest to UNESCO relates to developing countries. These countries react to the phenomenon in different ways. For some it is an attack on national sovereignty. For others, cross-border education is a way of compensating for the lack of higher education capacity in the country caused by insufficient resources.

UNESCO wants to help countries in the second category while ensuring that the mobility of courseware does not create yet another situation where globalisation causes money to flow from poor countries to rich ones. In this respect I note a very

promising development, namely the notion of open learning material. This is the equivalent, in the domain of teaching and learning of the open source software movement.

The idea is simple. It is to make an institution's learning materials freely available on the web. I would have liked to be able to tell you that it was the open universities that proposed this idea. In fact it came from a prestigious traditional university, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. I see this as the start of a very significant development for three reasons.

First, the learning material that an institution can put on the web is only part of the process of university teaching and learning. It must be supported by a process of mediation between the student and the material through a tutor or teacher. Furthermore, there is always the need for a teacher to comment on the students' work and to assess their performance through tests and examinations. However, if the world's teachers can access a range of learning materials of quality and adapt them to their needs, they will be able to devote more time to supporting students and less to preparing to communicate basic content.

Second, by exchanging learning materials freely, knowledge can be refined and progressed in an open and collective way, as urged by Einstein and Toynbee whom I quoted earlier.

Finally, open source learning materials are an encouraging example of the basic aim of UNESCO: *full and equal opportunities for education for all, the unrestricted pursuit of objective truth, and the free exchange of ideas and knowledge.*

I am not afraid to call this a form of scientific communism in the best academic tradition that will help the economic, cultural and social development of the whole world.

To conclude I come back to the question asked by the organisers of this colloquium: 'Are we headed down the road to mercantilism, or are we moving toward human sustainable development, which acknowledges the world of higher education as having the status of a global public good?'

I reply by changing a few words. We can contribute to a strategy of sustainable human development if universities commit themselves to the notion of knowledge as a public good and make their learning materials freely available on the web.

This global public good will help universities around the world, most notably those in developing countries, to improve their teaching while at the same time widening access to it and lowering the cost of higher education. It may seem like a revolutionary formula, but it is consistent with the best academic tradition.

References

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