



The future of university from different viewpoints: a commentary to Szulevicz et al. (2021)

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Abstract

This commentary is connecting the dots between the publication of Szulevicz et al., (2021) about the discrepancy of students' master theses and mainstream research and the upcoming book about the future of universities edited by Geberth & Woller (2023). University is changing fast, which can be prominently seen by comparing published research and the work of students. Danish students are seen as fulfilling Humboldt's ideal choosing niche topics for their theses. Meanwhile Austrian students demand more practical skills from their studies and German lecturers ask themselves, how much practice orientation might be too much. Neoliberalism seems to be at the bottom of the drastic changes which universities are going through. The authors criticize the influence of external funding on research in general.

Keywords Research · University · Neoliberalism · Studying

Research is a core value of university. Students usually encounter how research works during their first semesters at university. Until the end of their studies, they have likely written some seminar papers and come across some research projects. The Master thesis is a more or less independent work before finishing university, therefore it is worth to take a look at what students decide to work on for this important task. Szulevicz et al., (2021) compared the research method chosen by master

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students for their final thesis to published research. As Editors of the book “University in the 21st century” we were asked to write this commentary connecting some dots between the two projects. On a closer look, some questions and topics of the paper can be found in the book as well.

Editing the book “University in the 21st century” (Geberth & Woller, 2023) allowed us to collect a wide range of opinions about university life and research from different perspectives. We dove deep into how universities work now, why the current system does not seem to serve anybody and how it could be improved. We collected texts about the status quo of universities nowadays – with a focus on Europe – and possible challenges of the next years and decades. Doing research and the choices of students are important issues in the commented paper as well as in our book.

Szulevicz et al., (2021) describe a discrepancy between published research and student’s master theses with students favouring qualitative methods and theoretical perspectives like critical psychology and phenomenology. Interestingly, we experienced a discrepancy between students’ and lecturer’s perspectives about what university should be about. Nitsche et al., (2023) write from the perspective of Austrian students and demand more practice-oriented content of their studies. Wieser (2023) wrote from the lecturer’s perspective and asks himself the question if university gets too practical considering the new law of psychotherapy education in Germany. For him, psychology in Germany stands at a crossroads: academic freedom and theoretical diversity or professionalisation and a predictable future? It does not seem that grave of a discrepancy in Denmark, but there is obviously a different understanding between students and lecturers or researchers, of what university should provide. It is not that sure anymore, what university is about and what graduates should learn. The discrepancy of Danish Master theses and published research which Szulevicz et al., (2021) detected speaks of different emphases from students and researchers.

In the paper, the question is asked if Danish psychology students are closer to fulfilling the Humboldtian ideal of free and critical research rather than researchers. In our book quite the other opposite was found. Students want to learn practical skills and usable knowledge that will help them in their future working environment (Nitsche et al., 2023). They see a need to study to be competitive on the job market, so they want to obtain skills rather than theoretical knowledge. In group discussions among Austrian students, the participants do not seem to have a big fondness for the Humboldtian ideal, but rather a resentful mindset towards neoliberal ideas that seem omnipresent in their university life. For them, the constant quantification of their achievements in order to be comparable is bothersome. Austrian students from the group discussions feel the need to study but find themselves in study programs they perceive as too theoretical. The question they ask themselves is what the point of studying is and why it seems like a thing someone is obliged to do after finishing high school. Austrian state universities have no student fees, which is a big difference to the US for example, where students have to get into debt for higher education. So, there is a chance for many Austrians to pursue a university degree. This freedom seems to be more of a burden for young Austrians than anything else. The pressure to perform is most certainly high.

Something that must be mentioned when talking about Master theses are grades. At the end, every thesis will get a grade. Offredi (2023) is looking at grades from a

critical point of view. Are grades even appropriate, when life after university will tell who is most capable at their later job? There is so much at fault with the current system, the cognitive bias to a uniformity across institutions and faculties. Could new grading methods without scores lead to a better learning environment? Grades were not mentioned in the paper, but after all the goal of writing a thesis is to pass and maybe also get a good grade. Students surely write their theses with the outcome in mind which is getting a positive grade in order to finish their studies. This thought probably influences their choice of topic and how they progress with it.

Szulevicz et al. and the authors of our book are revealing deeply rooted problems in what university and higher education have become. The question we asked in the book and the authors of the paper ask implicitly is, where does university head in this century? The paper criticises the educational policy, whose aim is mainly to pass students through the educational system as quickly as possible. These policies are a result of neoliberalism entering higher education in the last decades. Universities have long strived for the truth and passing it on to the next generation of students. Neoliberalistic ideas have fundamentally changed this idea, so it seems (Geberth & Woller, 2023). The acquisition of knowledge now serves external interests of the market and investors, who sponsor research topics that they find interesting. This divides research topics into favourable topics, that get research grants and fund job positions, and other topics, who are often fundamental research, that do not get monetary support and therefore are not as desirable to promote for universities. This division is rather worrisome, as the market decides, which projects are worthy to be taken into account. Scientists with a lot of expertise have to strive for the acknowledgement of a paying “customer”. This was surely not what Humboldt had in mind for the future of universities.

Humboldt’s ideal, that a researcher should “always treat science as a problem not yet completely solved and therefore always remain in researching” (Humboldt, 1964, p.256) seems more like an idealist ideal of days long gone than a mindset of modern researchers. University staff is hung up in formalities, bureaucracy and quality assurance, that there seems to be less and less time an energy to fulfil Humboldt’s ideas. Based on Confucius’ “the journey is the reward”, doing research should be the reward for researchers rather than published results of individual studies. The problem is that there is no funding behind doing research, only for published results. And because universities need the funding for creating research projects, this becomes a dilemma.

So maybe now might be the time to change something about the current university system, shake off the “old ways” and try something new. Benetka & Mihalits (2023a, b) take us on a journey of what it means to have a new (private) university accredited in Austria. It is not about changing the whole system but trying something different on a smaller scale. In their example, a new psychology programme was created, that differed to some extent heavily from the long-established programmes of the main (state funded) universities. In the 21st century, one might think that new ways are greeted with enthusiasm and interest, but this was not the case. As stated before, research grants are more likely to be given only to established and renowned universities, so the process of building a thriving research institution was a great challenge. Benetka & Mihalits (2023a, b) quickly found out that projects with niche topics are a rewarding way to establish a new research institution in quite a short amount of time

and with little resources. Thinking back to Humboldt's ideal of doing research for the sake of being curious, this is an interesting stand. Looking at topics and research methods that are usually overlooked by mainstream research is nearer to Humboldt's spirit than promoting research just for the sake of being funded and then published. The Danish students of Szulevicz et al., (2021) also have no funding and might be looking at niche topics, although we do not know much about the topics of the theses. Students do not need to worry about the pressure to being published or the fulfilling of working contracts, so they have more freedom of research topics than researchers. Some students affiliate to existing research projects, where this freedom is limited. We do not know the prevalent mode of Master projects in Denmark, but the trend towards niche topics and research methods suggests that freedom in research is a core value that should be much more enforced not only in students' theses, but rather in mainstream research.

Szulevicz et al., (2021, p. 14) are concerned in their conclusion, that "quality in higher education has become a standardized outcome measure completely emptied of meaningful content". Quality in modern university settings seems to be more about producing graduates and publications than thoughtful research. Where it seems that the quality of a university was in the past measured through outstanding innovation, long lines of tradition and reputation of honourable scholars, today's quality measurement differs greatly. External funding seems to be the most used tool for declaring the "worth" of a research institution. With external money, renowned researchers can be hired, expensive research projects are funded, and the outcome of those projects is then better published in higher ranking journals. It seems, that it's all about the money.

University is changing fast, maybe faster than ever. It is headed towards more neo-liberalism and less Humboldtian ideal. More bureaucracy often means less time and energy for quality research. Students are more seen like human capital, that should proceed quickly and smoothly through courses, get the degree and exit university swiftly. It remains to be seen, which path will be more successful – the old ways or the new ones.

Declarations

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