

BY WAY OF CONCLUSION

The University at the Crossroads to a Sustainable Future

Much like the 11th Glion Colloquium in 2017, during the 12th Colloquium there was less emphasis on the themes that are familiar among university leaders like financial sustainability, research opportunities, rankings and internationalization. To use a phrase from the concluding remarks of the 11th Colloquium, the “long shadow” of all the political events in Europe and the United States since 2016 “that had been cast across the world” was still palpable. Of course, also during this colloquium the contributions addressed themes that are important and urgent to universities, but throughout the discussions there was a clear sense of the rapidly changing world around us and the question of how universities could adapt to the new reality. It seems that the world as a global village is being replaced by separate political blocks that are fighting trade wars, and in which the days of growing student mobility and increasing internationalization are over.

Reflecting on all the contributions to this colloquium, it appeared that they could be grouped into three clusters dealing with the Global, the Local and the Future, respectively. Following this subdivision, going from the global to the future, we summarize below some of our thoughts on the rapidly changing context in which universities probably need to operate over the coming years, followed by a number of suggestions how universities could collaborate successfully on global and local levels in order to face the challenges of the future.

HOW HOPE FADED

The final two decades of the previous millennium showed a staggering change and ended full of hope. Worldwide political relationships including those between the superpowers were less strained than ever before, and the Iron Curtain ceased to exist. The idea that the world is a global village rapidly became true due to a surprising acceleration of mobility and connectivity. The mobile phone, a novelty in the 1980s, gained ground with incredible speed. The most remote places on earth became connected and, through that, part of the world's events. The even more surprising development of IT opened up a completely new world, which in this millennium continues to surprise.

Due to all these developments, the university, about 800 years old at the end of the previous millennium, received new momentum, not in the last place from the revolutionizing impact of digitization. In addition, student mobility increased, eventually leading to massive streams of students, in particular from Asia studying in the West. Internationalization led to an unprecedented exchange between scholars and scientists from all over the world. Looking back, these decades were almost like a new Renaissance, showing the birth of a global knowledge ecosystem in which digitization was as important as printing had been 600 years earlier. Rightfully, this period is now considered to be the beginning of the fourth industrial revolution.

How strong is the contrast between these final decades of the previous millennium and the first two of the present one! This millennium started with the launch of the first university rankings, enhancing the competition between universities and potentially threatening cooperation. It also became evident that mass education, at first glance a resounding success of universities since the 1970s, had led to the worldwide rise of a middle class that more and more diverged from a lower class that felt left behind. This became painfully clear during the second decade of this millennium, in the aftermath of the financial crisis of 2008-2011. The lower class in particular was seriously affected whereas it turned out that the higher educated part of the population still had more opportunities on the global labour market. This divide between haves and have-nots coinciding with the level of education is patently clear in the conditions in which people are forced to live. Today, even in a rich country like the US, the average regional difference between minimum and maximum life expectancies is increasing. It is only recently that we started to realize that this growing social gap is one of the fundamental reasons behind the polarized political landscape, especially in Europe and North America.

The financial crisis also revealed one weakness of globalization in the sense that a crisis in one part of the world is more rapidly felt elsewhere. As a reaction, protectionist and populist views surfaced and rapidly became

mainstream in politics. Whereas at the end of the previous millennium leaders all over the world had pledged to open political and trading systems, the trade war between the US on the one hand, and Europe and China on the other, which started at the end of 2018, tells an altogether different tale and shows how profoundly the world has changed.

So far, all these changes can be regarded as part of the movement of a pendulum, or the result of action and reaction, in the sense that we can be hopeful that conditions rapidly restore to “normal”. Because, in spite of the negative developments, one still has to conclude that over the past decades the world has become a better place, in which the state of welfare is higher than ever, and safety has increased for many, whereas overall violence decreased.

However, the second decade of our millennium showed one strongly disturbing sign that threatens to take all hope away. It was for the first time since World War II that we saw such massive migrant streams: 70.7 million people were forcibly displaced worldwide in 2019, while 25.9 million people were living as refugees. Part of this is the result of conflicts, but what is frightening is that more and more migrant streams are induced by climate change and natural disasters. In 2018 the UN General Assembly almost unanimously recognized that “climate, environmental degradation and natural disasters increasingly interact with the drivers of refugee movement”. The availability of water as an elementary resource is endangered, and the number of hot spots which are too hot and too dry, or too cold and wet, is rapidly increasing. The conclusion seems unavoidable that the unprecedented improvements in health care and the connected growth of the world’s population, in combination with equally unprecedented technological development, have led to a situation in which we have reached the boundaries of the system.

In itself this already poses a huge challenge to the world community. But matters are compounded by the lack of effective leadership that the superpowers, or for that matter national governments, display. Where, in the aftermath of World War II, leaders took effective steps to enhance collaboration and forge world leadership in the context of the new “united nations”, we now observe the disintegration of global leadership and decreasing effectiveness of national leadership. It is as if traditional leadership as we have experienced it over the past millennium is not as effective in the new one. The superpowers are weakened and not individually able to take the lead or settle issues. There are increasingly louder suggestions that national governments are failing to deal with the new challenges, and that we have entered a phase that is characterized by a fundamental questioning of multilateralism. Instead, nations are more and more focusing on their own interests. It is clear that the world is waiting for new groupings of decision-makers, able to cut across national interests and act on the global level needed to face global challenges.

AT THE CROSSROADS TO A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE

Universities are among the institutions that are able to transcend national boundaries and interests, and are, by their very nature, multilateralist. Without making concessions to excellence and independence, universities could take leadership by forming consortia, collaborating with other universities, industry and other parties, like cities and regions. Working together, they could formulate universal goals in line with the United Nations Development Goals, and, by collaborating with industries, cities and regions, they can translate this collaboration into regional impact. However, this requires bold steps and demands a new type of leadership that is not afraid to change course in order to give the university the central place in society it deserves, but, most of all, by doing so gives new hope to young people for a better custodianship of this world and its future generations.

Reflecting on all the contributions to the colloquium, we think that universities could and should play an active and visible role in laying the foundation for a sustainable society. They could do that by pursuing the following goals:

1. Preparing young people for the future

In the first Glion Declaration (1998) it was clearly stated that “teaching is a moral vocation, involving not just the transfer of technical information, however sophisticated, but also the balanced development of the whole person”. Therefore, in addition to transferring knowledge, the emphasis of teaching should also be on cultivating a keen eye for the needs of society, developing a feeling of responsibility for the future, and the development of ethical norms of what is desirable in view of a more equitable society in which resources are fairly shared. Universities should actively prepare their students for the future and impress on them the need for leadership and responsibility, which follow from the privilege of having enjoyed higher education.

2. Being a laboratory for new leadership

Classically, the core task of a university is the custodianship of knowledge in the widest sense. By nature, this involves training young people for their future roles. Often the greatest emphasis is on scientific training, whereas the formational aspects are overlooked. As much as about knowledge, university training is about crafting a lifestyle characterized by the ability to identify and solve problems, to ask relevant questions and question problematic reasoning. At the same time, training for the future also involves teaching how to keep open a keen eye for what is going on in society and what responsible citizenship entails. More than ever before, students should be trained for leadership that involves all of the above-mentioned qualities.

This cannot be done really successfully in traditional education, involving a rather passive role for the students listening to the teacher. This calls for challenged-based or problem-driven teaching, during which “soft skills” can be transferred much more effectively.

3. Providing relevant knowledge to society

It is essential that universities are autonomous and independent in setting their research and teaching agendas. However, that does not imply that the university is an ivory tower. On the contrary, the university should recognize its social responsibility by delivering knowledge that is essential for the solution of the problems we are facing today and in the near future. The university should do so impartially, positioning itself on the crossroads of fundamental research and large societal problems, and teaching students in the same vein. The agenda setting of the university should preferably take into account the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.

4. Contributing to bridging the social divide

Universities should be aware of the societal gap that is growing rapidly, and which to a large extent is connected to having enjoyed higher education or not. The higher educated have much better opportunities in the global labour market and look towards the future with confidence. The flipside of this is that worldwide the less educated part of the population is lagging behind because of their lesser potential in the rapidly changing labour market and they are therefore more vulnerable to the negative effects of economic change. The responsibility of being an institute of higher education is not only to take care of one’s own students, but also to reach out to the less educated parts of society. Lifelong Learning is essential in this respect, a task in which universities could and should play a pivotal role.

5. Setting the example for a sustainable future

To be convincing in assuming leadership and custodianship in the widest sense, it is essential that universities create an environment which reflects this. In other words: universities should put the money where their mouth is. Where possible, the university campus should reflect the ambition to create a sustainable environment in terms of saving energy and greening the campus in a variety of ways. And debates on seemingly lesser questions like (not) serving meat in the university restaurant are valuable experiences as a university community. This is all because the campus and campus life should not only be about what the present generation of university leaders and students find nice, comfortable and pleasant, but as much about letting students

experience lifestyles which are fit for a future in which a much more modest and sharing lifestyle is imperative.

Furthermore, we think that university leaders are uniquely placed to give the university a key position in society by realizing the following:

6. Taking the lead

In addition to research and teaching, since the 1990s universities have focused on services to society. In this ongoing process of stepping out of the ivory tower, universities should strive to lead in a world that evidently is trying to find new leadership structures. Where traditional governmental leadership is failing, new groupings take the lead or meet at, for instance, the World Economic Forum. Similarly, networks of large cities or consortia of regions try to shift the balance of power to their advantage. This involves more than lobbying: more and more it entails taking steps towards securing a sustainable and prosperous future where national governments fail to take such steps. It is essential that universities take the lead in this process, not only in the area of higher education, but also in a wider sense as institutions that can bring knowledge and wisdom to the debate. In order to be visible and be heard, universities should join forces and consciously develop a strategy of investing in an agenda of collaboration more than investing in rankings and competition.

7. Being bold and visible

University leaders are charged with the duty to keep an extremely diverse community together, a community that is, moreover, composed of highly individualistic thinkers. Serving this heterogenous community often means that boldness or outspokenness pleases one part, but antagonizes another. Therefore, university leaders are by nature careful and relatively conservative. However, what these times call for is boldness in the vision that universities should lead and be visible, in spite of the possible protests from established scholars claiming that it is only “the quality of research” that counts. In this context, it is crucial to listen to the voices of the students and younger members of the scientific community: it is their future which is at stake.

8. Strengthening international university networks

Universities are used to collaborating in an international context: multilateralism is at the very foundation of free exchange of ideas and scientific progress. However, most university networks are now focusing on lobbying for funding and position, sometimes also on improving research and teaching.

What is needed, however, is a concerted effort of universities to collaborate for a better future aiming at, for instance, the realization of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. Together with partners from industry and NGOs, universities could be powerful players in turning the tide of challenges and contribute together in using knowledge to solve the problems of the future.

9. Implementing a decision-making support system

It is essential that international organizations are connected to the latest knowledge, technology and evidence as produced by scientific institutions. To this end, universities could form hubs of multilateral science diplomacy, because only global networks of leading research institutions can harness the breadth of interdisciplinary evidence, knowledge and perspectives that are needed to tackle the complex global issues and multifaceted societal challenges. Moreover, it is only through highly visible collaborations like these that sufficient players from the private and philanthropic sector can be engaged to make the necessary impact.

10. Becoming once again a place for hope

In spite of the many disturbing developments, we are still living in a time in which unprecedented steps are taken in gaining more prosperity for many. In spite of the numerous local conflicts and political tensions, we are still living in times with unprecedented low levels of violence. In spite of the huge challenges ahead of us, we are still living in times when knowledge and wisdom can make the difference. In addition to being places for training young people for the future, universities can be places where young people are also filled with hope and idealism, which are much more effective weapons to fight the demons of the future than anything else.

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