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In defence of European universities: Scholars and activists, unite!¹

Hannu Nieminen

Abstract

In the last couple of decades, European universities have undergone several major upheavals. These include a policy of harmonizing university degree programmes (the Bologna Process); attempts to streamline and coordinate university governance structures, to transform the standards for universities' public funding; and so on. Together with other pronounced societal transformations, the roles and identities of European academic scholars have experienced significant challenges.

Both scholars and policymakers largely agree that in the last 20 years European higher education policy has turned from policy based on democracy and culture towards policy driven by market-based ideals. Although there is a broad consensus that this major policy shift has occurred, there is less agreement over its reasons and consequences.

If we really want our universities not only to defend their crucial capacity but also to expand it to better meet the major challenges of our times – climate change, immigration, inequality, terrorism, renewed Cold War – we must find a way to create an alliance between scholars with different academic identities and normative orientations.

Keywords: university reform, university policy, normativity, scholarly identities

1 An early version of this article was published in Nieminen, Hannu & Keijo Rahkonen (Eds.) (2016) *What are Universities For? On the Current State and the Future of Universities*. Faculty of Social Sciences, Helsinki: University of Helsinki

In the last couple of decades, European universities have undergone several major upheavals. These include a policy of harmonizing university degree programmes (the Bologna Process); attempts to streamline and coordinate university governance structures, to transform the standards for universities' public funding; and so on. Together with other pronounced societal transformations, the roles and identities of European academic scholars have experienced significant challenges.

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In this article, I discuss three potential explanations for this policy turn: structure, ideology and contingency. Furthermore, I offer a perspective connecting all three. The article will conclude by analysing six different normative approaches that characterise scholarly attitudes towards university policy today.

1. Why the turn in university policy has occurred: three explanations

In broad terms, there are three main explanations for the policy turn; these include broad structural change in our societies, ideological change and contingent factors. In what follows I explore these explanations a little further.

1.1 Structural change

Shifts in European university policy reflect deeper changes in modern Western societies. Particularly in small countries like Finland, university institutions have played a central role in national development – not only in science and culture, but also in social, political and economic life. Universities have been instrumental in nation-building, the production of knowledge, the formation of cultural identity, the promoting of national science policies etc.

The structural explanation suggests that the national mission of universities has largely expired for both political and economic reasons. European integration has meant that issues previously defined and solved on the national level are now discussed and decided in European Union bodies. From this viewpoint, national universities are no longer sufficiently adapted to the goals of knowledge production and identity formation. In a similar manner, the globalization of the economy and increasing global competition has led governments to cut public funding to

universities. This has forced universities to participate in an uneven fight for financing from non-traditional sources – student fees, commercial ventures, industry endowments etc. Because of their small national economies, as well as cultural factors, compared to major universities in the UK, France, Germany or the US, universities in small European countries are less competitive in this global market.

Regarding the democratisation of knowledge and university access, this shift has been assessed from two different perspectives. According to some scholars, the policy changes exemplified by, among others, the Bologna Process and attempts to harmonize governance structures have led to the expansion of democracy through the dismantling of narrow paternalistic national frameworks. Today, information and knowledge are shared globally without national restrictions, and international and global networks, promoting new kinds of scientific and academic innovations, increasingly replace the old, national cultural and scientific structures (Hénard, Diamond and Roseveare 2012; EC 2015a)¹

However, critics offer another perspective, suggesting that this shift amounts to the commercialization of knowledge production and, as a result, to the enclosure of common domains of academic information and knowledge. This means that the best possible information and knowledge are not publicly available, and public discussion, necessary for healthy democracy, suffers. Higher education becomes a privilege of the wealthy and is detached from its previous national, regional and local background (Golding 2016; Freedman 2017; Lorenz 2006).

1.2 Ideological change

The explanation for this policy shift based on change in ideas and attitudes springs from a belief that the majority of people are tired of a paternalistic state that uses public money inefficiently and without real accountability. In this approach, public education is compared to any other public service or utility, such as water supply, electricity, communications etc. Public educational and scientific institutions were necessary when national reconstruction required mass education and national control of resources and science; at that time, educational institutions served the consolidation of a national market economy. However, today, public educational institutions— like all other public services and utilities— are seen as hindrances to the efficient development of markets and private businesses.

This has led to a fundamental reconsideration of the role of universities. Traditional universities were regarded as conservative and backward-looking, representing an old, elitist and nationalistic world view, against a tide of increasing cultural pluralism and liberation. As public monopolies were dismantled in other sectors of society, the aim was to also dismantle them in science and academic

education. It was believed that opening up higher education and universities to competition would bring about efficiency and innovation and help get rid of old, redundant academic practices and branches of academia, especially in the humanities and social sciences (such as rare languages and cultures, philosophy, social theory etc.) (Guardian, 2010; *ib.*, 2013; THE, 2015.)

This has resulted in three kinds of development. First, there was an emphasis on creating ‘lower’ level higher education institutions, such as Universities of Applied Sciences (previously called Polytechnics). These were designed to respond to industry needs for new practical skills. However, these institutions have not answered the demands for a more independent and theoretically oriented workforce needed in digitized work environments. Second, there was a proliferation of private universities in many European countries that promised to offer an alternative to the anachronist public universities and an education designed to meet industrial needs. Third, public universities tried to respond to these challenges by restructuring their *modus operandi*, following the dictate of New Public Management and emphasising the role of ‘hard’ sciences in their strategies in order to increase external research funding. In answer to increasing international competition for students, universities started to design their degrees according to market trends and to profit from increasing student fees.

Critics have remarked, however, that there is contradictory evidence as to whether the privatization and marketization of universities have made them more innovative and efficient. Naturally, this depends on how innovativeness and efficiency are defined and measured: if indicators are only financial and technical, or if social innovations and social sustainability are equally included in measurement (see EC, 2015b). The weakening of the social sciences and humanities has led universities losing these critical faculties, crucial for resisting increasing extra-academic pressures from politicians and industries. One additional disturbing factor is that the emphasis on competition and privatization necessarily leads to fragmentation of the policy field, hiding the big picture. This means that even some OECD countries have experienced a downward spiral in both the quality and quantity of higher education (Nieminen, 2016).

1.3 Contingent factors

A contingency explanation for this policy trend relies on an understanding that change is not linear but rather the result of the interaction of several parallel factors occurring simultaneously. The assumption is that a ‘window of opportunity’ – in the form of situational political compromise – allowed these factors to be realised under situational conditions. The end result is a compromise where intentions do

not materialise as planned but are rather shaped by prevailing circumstances. We can talk about externalities, unintended consequences: the implications of decisions and choices cannot be fully predicted, as the original aims and foreseen consequences are replaced by situational compromises, the effects of which are only seen once change has occurred.

This is exemplified by the history of the former Polytechnics that were ‘up-graded’ to universities in several European countries, starting from 1980 and continuing until today. A non-intended outcome is that now the universities are, in practice, increasingly divided into two levels of institutions: ‘research intensive’ versus ‘teaching’ universities. At the same time, the qualification of academic degrees and their comparison have become increasingly difficult, as the standards – because of increasing competition and ‘profiling actions’ – seem to be increasingly uneven, both nationally and between universities.

The more complex European societies become as the result of globalization and societal differentiation, the more difficult it will be to reconcile the aims and purposes of different actors and to foresee the implications of public policy choices. Rational consideration between alternatives has less and less explanatory power than before. From this perspective, explanations for changes in university policy are not derived from long historical processes but from shorter term conditions. The triggers are identified from different factors: incidental political trade-offs between major parties, the personal characteristics of decision-makers, the unplanned accumulation of many small, separate choices etc.

When an opportunity for decision-making occurs or, in other words, when the window of opportunity opens, it is essential that choices are made quickly, utilizing the conditions that exist at that particular moment. This seems to have been the case when the Finnish government decided to cut university funding by hundreds of millions of euros in 2015 (UWN 2015). The risk is that these conditions will afterwards appear less than optimal, that the information used to justify the choice will be proved false, that the commitment of decision-makers was weak, that the decisions were inadequate and the outcome was a failure. The problem is that after decisions are made, they are difficult to reverse; this requires the opening of a new window of opportunity, and a new opening under similar conditions is unlikely to take place.

The strength of the contingency explanation is its intent to locate the moment decision-making takes place and the different factors that influence it. Its weaknesses include the disregard of power relations and the long-standing processes behind their formation – in the case of universities, the historical connection between human welfare and higher education. Contingent factors may impact on what form decisions and choices take and the situations in which decisions are made, but choices are always framed and conditioned by wider societal, economic and political power relations.

2. A connecting perspective

As seems obvious by now, none of these explanatory models alone is able to explain the changes in European university policy. However, each contains interesting and seemingly valid elements.

The strength of the structural explanation is that it helps us to compare the changes in higher education policy to developments in other areas and sectors. Along with wider societal changes, the role and significance of science and higher education are also transformed. In this context, the traditional role of universities in constructing and consolidating national identities weakens. Previously, university policy aimed to protect and endorse the university as a national institution promoting national culture and democracy; today, this focus is replaced by economic ideals and values. This development can be seen in different forms across all European countries.

The weakness of the structural explanation, however, is that its explanatory power does not extend to the social and cultural consequences of these policy changes. This is exemplified by the two opposing interpretations of its effects presented above; structural changes can be assessed as either part of the widening of democracy or its narrowing.

The strength of the ideological explanation is that it helps to clarify the justification of neo-liberal university policy, promoted from the 1980s onwards. Previous science and higher education policy was seen to suffocate and restrict citizens' freedom of choice. Citizens wanted to get rid of the state's tutelage, and the freedom offered by the market provided a solution to this. The strength of the appeal of this market-led approach is demonstrated by the fact that it was embraced in nearly all European countries between the 1980s and the 2000s.

The weakness of the ideological explanation is that it does not account for why this change took place when it did, why it was rooted only in neo-liberal ideology and not, for example, Marxism or neo-conservatism, and why it occurred in similar forms in different parts of Europe. The structural explanation can illuminate this: in the 1970s and '80s, changes occurred in the structures of European societies – in the economy, social relations, politics – that promoted or 'invited' neo-liberal solutions, including in the sphere of science and higher education.

The strength of the contingency explanation is its ability to interpret the motives and negotiation processes behind individual decisions. As an example, we can consider the major lay-offs in Finnish universities in the spring of 2016; over 750 people were laid off in the University of Helsinki alone (YLE, 2015). The background to this includes the results of the parliamentary elections in spring 2015, which led to the formation of a right-wing parliament; and the Finnish economic crisis, which led to the implementation of a large-scale austerity programme resulting in large-scale cuts across all sectors of public spending. One of the worst-hit

was education, especially universities. The University of Helsinki, which is the only Finnish university among the best 100 in the global university rankings, faces a loss of funding of 106 million euros per annum by 2020. Several years ago, reforms to the Finnish university system had already begun with the aim of making it more competitive and effective in both education and research. The key words that university reformers and modernisers constantly repeat are ‘profiling’ and ‘prioritizing’. For the university leadership, government policy seems to have opened a window of opportunity, allowing for a double strategy. First, university leadership has challenged the government by announcing major lay-offs in the hope that the government will back down from spending cuts. Second, the leadership can also promote their own agenda and utilise the opportunity in order to centralise their power by imposing major structural reforms – closing down departments, merging faculties etc. – that have been resisted by university personnel until now.

Although the contingency model can help to explain single cases and the reasons behind them, which are often contingent and non-predictable, it neglects wider economic and political frameworks. This creates the conditions that determine which outcomes are possible at different historical moments and which are not. Despite the individual factors on which each specific policy change depends, the changes to university policy in different European countries are to a large degree comparable (EUObserver, 2010).

3. The challenge of normativity: research perspectives

The study of university policy is necessarily normative. Its starting point is the conviction that science and higher education are essential for the functioning of democracy and general human well-being, and that democratic, social and cultural values are key to the increasing economic and financial interests of universities today. At the same time, it should be said that within the scientific community there are different conceptions of what democracy means and how the balance between scientific and humanistic values and economic interests should be defined and maintained.

It follows that in the study of university policy, there are different opinions regarding the mode of assessing and responding to recent changes to policies concerning higher education and science. Roughly put, we can distinguish six normative approaches, reflecting different scholarly identities:

Democratic nostalgia: This approach demands a return to welfaristic university policy. Many scholars see scientific knowledge and higher education as public goods, which should be freely and publicly available. This is why public authority – the government – should carry the primary responsibility for science and higher education by safeguarding the autonomy of universities and guaranteeing free ed-

ucation on all levels. Many supporters of this approach are influenced by Jürgen Habermas's critical social theory.

Postmodern distance: Power is everywhere, and the task of critical academics is to dismantle its different manifestations. Largely influenced by Michel Foucault's concept of power, the followers of this approach analyse the discourses around university policy and aim to make power visible. Rather than focus on policy proposals or plans of action, they seek to provide instruments for deconstructing prevailing power relations.

Radical enthusiasm: Digitization and new information and communication technology (ICT) offer unprecedented opportunities for scientific research and higher education, breaking down traditional academic barriers. This approach is often influenced by Manuel Castells's theory of the information society. Digital ICT is supposed to fundamentally transform societal relations in the realms of the economy, politics and culture. This means that major reforms are necessary for traditional social institutions, including universities; they are invited to reform their functional logics to act as spearheads of digital change.

Critical activism: The duty of academic scholarship is to assist civic movements aiming to make all knowledge and information free through open access and the public domain. The starting point for this approach is a conviction that current university policy is restricting people's right to knowledge and higher education. Scholars' responsibility is therefore to support movements aimed at the democratisation of university policy.

Reformist expertise: The task of academics is to assist and advise decision-makers and public servants in formulating policies concerning universities and higher education. By participating in the planning and implementation of university policy, academics can influence policy content and the forms of its implementation. The expertise of academic scholars is often utilised on a national level and in many international organizations (e.g. OECD, EU, UNESCO) to promote extra-academic political aims and agendas.

Scientific objectivism: Scholars should only engage in the observation of measurable facts and finding theoretical explanations behind them or connecting them. The mission of scientists is not to propose value judgements or to present recommendations for action but to maintain scientific neutrality. The role of academic scholars is therefore not to make policy proposals or to participate in extra-academic policy activism. Because university policy concerns value judgements, it is therefore outside scientific expertise.

The approaches described above are ideal types, and in practice most scholars find their academic identity in more than one category. It would not be fair or even possible to order the approaches by preference as they are all justified from their

own premises. Each individual researcher has her own personal points of interest and societal views that inform her approach to realising her perceived role in relation to university policy.

4. Conclusion

As stated above, it is difficult to pin down one overall explanation for the major policy changes that European universities have faced in recent couple of decades. We studied three potential approaches: structural, ideological and contingency explanations, all having their own merits. However, in isolation, no single one can advise us how to protect European universities from being turned into mere technocratic, commercially oriented innovation centres, void of their original humanist and social critical ethos. In order to go deeper and establish more solid ground for guarding the critical academic heritage, we must expand our area of examination to wider historical and societal contexts, following, for example, Michael Burawoy's critical analysis of the US experiences vis-à-vis university policies (Burawoy, 2005).

Additionally, if we really want our universities not only to defend their crucial capacity but to expand it to better meet the big challenges of our times – climate change, immigration, inequality, terrorism, renewed Cold War – we must find a way to create an alliance between scholars having different academic identities and normative orientations. All the profiles described above – from a democratic nostalgic to a reformist expert, from a postmodernist to a critical activist – are needed to safeguard a better future for European universities.

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Biography

Hannu Nieminen is Dean of the Faculty of Social Sciences and Professor of Media and Communications Policy, University of Helsinki. He received his PhD in 1996 from the University of Westminster, London. He has published widely on issues related to media and democracy, theories of the public sphere, and communication policy and regulation. He is a long-standing member of the Euromedia Research Group. Since 2012 he has served as an Expert in Public Service for the Administrative Council of Yle, Finland's national public service broadcasting company.

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