

THE CHALLENGES OF THE EUROPEAN BACHELOR'S DEGREE

Samuel Abrahám | Editorial

The COVID-19 pandemic and the costs of the associated lockdowns have marked the political, social and cultural life of Europe and the wider world. The problems of political radicalization, economic crisis, climate change and the disparity between rich and poor existed before the pandemic, but the synergic effect of these challenges now makes them even more threatening. Despite relief, thanks to the vaccines and the coordinated EU financial strategy, the outlook for recovery and stability remains uncertain. The educational sector was particularly hard-hit. Indeed, online education demonstrated the negative mental and cognitive impact on students and teachers and confirmed the importance of human interaction and socialization.

What, then, is the position, strategy and role of higher education in dealing with the current predicaments? Should the Ivory Tower, while facing the outside world, turn into a fortress, as it has often done in the past, oblivious to the peril outside, or open up and be active and generate prognoses and instigate action? And, with respect to their internal structure and priorities, should universities be solely hubs of academic reflection and research – or generators of vocational training, providing industrial societies with the type of education that assures graduates of good job prospects? These are crucial questions for policy makers and administrators. Equally important is how the structure and function of undergraduate and graduate programs should differentiate their purposes. The bachelor's degree should focus on general academic disciplines and academic and soft skills and students should then specialize. By contrast, narrow-focused specialization and vocational training would remain the priority of postgraduate and doctoral programs. Unfortunately, European politicians and administrators have not so far reflected or acted upon this critical issue of higher education. This would require redefinition of the position and aim of undergraduate education. For that purpose, the most suitable model to improve and reform the bachelor's degree would be the principles and methods of liberal arts and science education. This old European concept – *Artes Liberales* – has made a comeback in a few countries thanks to the division of university studies into bachelor's and master's degrees initiated through the Bologna Agreement, signed in 1999.

The Holy Grail of Shanghai Ranking

Universities encompass the best minds and are responsible for education and research as well as the prospects of the younger generation globally. No one questions the fact that, in the long term, the future of our societies depends on them. The paradox is that their usefulness or value differs from a short- and a long-term perspective. And politicians, driven by opinion and media attention, often pay only lip service to long-term issues.



Bologna

Besides, in a world driven by financial markets, any investment demands an instant return. In such a world of instant gratification, university education, especially in the social sciences and humanities, does not offer immediate benefits. Academics also do not have much political influence and are not directly involved in the immediate treatment of the ills of our societies. Thus, while higher education is costly and demands more and more funds from a limited state budget, politicians prioritize other, often more influential or urgent needs and sectors. And so the education sector is constantly under pressure, even when conditions are stable and societies prosperous.

The response by all prestigious universities to the problem of short-term legitimacy and limited resources is to focus primarily on research, publications and grants. These are factors providing precious points in the Shanghai Ranking Index, the Holy Grail of all big research universities obsessed with their ranking! Under such conditions, prominent scientists and postgraduate as well as doctoral students, naturally, have all the priority. On the contrary, undergraduates are viewed often as a necessary burden, their teaching a tedious repetition of basic material that is far from the cutting-edge knowledge discussed at prestigious conferences and published in research journals. It intrudes even into the academic language, where scholars talk about 'research opportunities' and 'teaching burdens'. Besides, the Shanghai Ranking cares little about what and how the undergraduate learns. Not because it is unimportant or simple to achieve, but because it is very difficult to measure and monitor. Let's face it: almost no grant and research project obtained by universities depends on the quality of teaching or the well-being of undergraduates.

By contrast, these same 18-21-year-olds are the most important for the liberal arts education model. The reason is that this is a short period in human life when an

individual, under proper guidance, is able to make the right choices about his or her future path or profession. Also, it is the most formative age of an individual, when they should be provided with the maximum attention and assistance. In addition, students and societies in general have to consider the practical, cost-saving aspects of education. Liberal arts graduates, thanks to their skills, breadth and depth of knowledge, as well as one or two subjects' specialization, are ready not only for graduate studies but also for employment. Many global companies and international agencies highly value the soft skills, critical thinking and flexibility of those who have studied liberal arts.

Academic Freedom and Values

Universities today, as in the past, not unlike the monasteries of the Middle Ages, provide protection and a calm environment for individuals and groups to work and study together. Almost 1,500 university disciplines jointly preserve the past and generate new knowledge. This is a crucial and unique task that no other institution can do. In addition, the university environment must be protected from political interference and the social-media-driven social trends and cultural fads of the day. Alfred North Whitehead defined a precondition for academic freedom: "The initial discipline of imagination in its period of youthful vigour requires that there be no responsibility for immediate action."

The recurring question of the legitimacy and utility of higher education has and will become more and more pertinent and urgent. So, how does this current need for self-justification relate to undergraduate education, in general, and liberal arts, in particular? The starting point for us educators must be two questions. First, how does education, and particularly undergraduate education, prepare the younger generation for a world in constant flux? And second, what has been left in the modern university to inculcate students with moral and ethical values and outlook, the attributes so integral in the past in both *Artes Liberales* as well as the noble German tradition of *Bildung*? These questions and reflections are the focus of this issue of K&K.

The ECOLAS Manifesto and What Undergraduates Deserve

The issue starts with a manifesto issued by the European Consortium of Liberal Arts and Sciences (ECOLAS). This network, based in Bratislava, connects programs and institutions that use the principles and methods of modern liberal arts. The manifesto voices alarm about the state of undergraduate education in Europe, whose potential has not been realized despite the passage of more than two decades since the signing of the Bologna Agreement. The rest of this issue offers articles by prominent European and American educators as well as some students who outline the current status of education and history of liberal arts. The ECOLAS Manifesto and the published texts present arguments and explanations for why the liberal arts model is suitable for improving and reforming undergraduate education, not only in Slovakia but throughout Europe. We hope and believe that this volume of *Kritika* will spark a debate among educators, politicians and journalists around Europe who might be proud of the postgraduate studies and academic research being conducted at universities in their countries. Yet the same prestigious universities owe to the generation of 18-21-year-olds the bachelor's education they deserve, an education that will prepare them for the challenges of the 21st century. Besides, as Stanley Katz argues: "Undergraduate education often serves as the last and the best chance post-secondary students have to broaden their intellectual horizons and to prepare for the great demands that society will place on them."

MANIFEST ECOLAS A KRÍZA BAKALÁRSKEHO VZDELÁVANIA V EURÓPE

Samuel Abrahám | Úvodník

Pandémia zapríčinená covidom-19 a náklady spojené z *lockdownom* mali dopad na politický, spoločenský a kultúrny život v Európe a vo svete. Politický extrémizmus, ekonomická kríza, klimatické zmeny, priepasť medzi bohatými a chudobnými existovali aj pred pandémiou, avšak po nej, synergicky prepojené, hrozia viac ako predtým. Napriek rýchlemu vývoju vakcín a masívnej finančnej pomoci v rámci EÚ, sú vyhliadky na obnovu a stabilitu neisté. Vzdelávací systém v tomto období bol zvlášť postihnutý. Výučba *online* preukázala negatívny dopad na psychické zdravie študentov a učiteľov aj na jej kvalitu, a potvrdila, aká dôležitá je socializácia a osobná prítomnosť v škole.

Aké sú teda stratégie a úlohy vysokoškolského vzdelávania pri riešení súčasných spoločensko-ekonomických problémov? Majú sa univerzity pri konfrontácii so svetom uzavrieť do seba, izolovať sa od spoločnosti, tak ako sa to často stalo v minulosti alebo sa majú otvoriť a svojím poznaním byť aktívne nápomocné? A čo sa týka vnútorného systému a priorit, mali by sa univerzity sústrediť na akademické skúmanie alebo by mali poskytovať hlavne odborné vzdelanie, ktoré zaručí absolventom kvalitné zamestnanie vo výskume, v priemysle a v iných spoločenských sférach? To sú zásadné otázky pre každé ministerstvo školstva a vedenia univerzít. Rovnako dôležité sú aj štruktúry štúdia, kde by sa predgraduálne a postgraduálne programy mali sústrediť na rozdielne aspekty vzdelávania. Bakalárske štúdium by malo obsahovať všeobecné akademické predmety a akademické zručnosti a len postupnú špecializáciu. Naproti tomu špecializované a odborné vzdelávanie by zostalo vyhradené tak ako doteraz pre magisterské a doktorandské štúdium. Bohužiaľ, doteraz európski politici a lídri vysokých škôl neskúmali a neriešili tento dôležitý aspekt univerzitného vzdelávania. To by si však vyžadovalo prehodnotenie a ciele bakalárskeho štúdia. Na túto zásadnú reformu sa dajú najlepšie využiť princípy a spôsoby výučby Liberálnych umení. Tento pôvodne európsky model – *Artes Liberales* – sa v Európe obnovil vďaka Bolonskej deklarácii z roku 1999, ktorá, okrem iného, vysokoškolské štúdium rozdelila na bakalárske a magisterské stupeň.

Šanghajský index ako svätý grál

Na univerzitách po celom svete pôsobia špičkoví vedci a myslitelia, ktorí sú zodpovední za vzdelávanie, výskum a v ich rukách je budúcnosť mladej generácie. Nik nepochybuje, že z dlhodobého hľadiska každá spoločnosť závisí od ich úspešného pôsobenia. Paradoxne, optika je rozdielna, ak sa pozeráme na užitočnosť a hodnotu univerzít z dlhodobého a z krátkodobého hľadiska. Politici, upriamení na prieskumy verejnej mienky a pozornosť médií, často berú dlhodobé trendy len formálne. Napokon svet závislý od finančných trhov očakáva od každej investície okamžitý prospech. V takom svete univerzitné vzdelávanie a hlavne sociálne a humanitné vedy neponúkajú okamžitý osov. Akademici zároveň