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In search of the lost prestige of universities?

Discussion on universities invariably focuses on science and research. This speech will not address funds or cost cutting, reflect on the political landscape or analyse the comments of government ministers on science policy. I will not make lists or rankings or call for demonstrations or manifestos. Rather, I wish to consider the educational mission of universities and the role of the alma mater as a community of values. My question is: How have universities – in our case, the University of Helsinki – survived and remained attractive over the centuries? The attractiveness of universities – namely, their loyalty to fundamental academic principles – is why we defend them and their ideas of edification and scholarship more powerfully today than in a long time. We must therefore consider the following: What exactly is a university? To whom do universities belong? Who speaks in the name of universities?

The European university as a global success story

Universities are Europe's leading export; every continent or country now offers some form of higher education similar to that provided at universities. The Catholic Church and universities are some of the oldest institutions in our culture. Universities came into existence through the separation of secular and ecclesiastical knowledge, which led to the need to understand the world around us through research and teaching. Thanks to their resilience, universities have often attracted the attention of both secular and ecclesiastical authorities, many of whom sought to establish new universities or to leave their mark on existing institutions, and a few of whom succeeded in these endeavours.

States and political elites have expressed a keen interest in refining higher education. The 19th century saw a major turning point when European universities were assigned extensive national obligations that extended beyond their walls; for several decades, universities were enlisted in the service of patriotic ideologies and "correct" national policies. Many countries experienced a golden age of universities during this period. After the Second World War, Western universities were tasked with delivering research and knowledge about the welfare state and enriching related social capital. The latest targets of universities relate to the demands of the market economy: universities

must now mass produce efficient and “democratic” citizens, European professionals for the information society.

Universities evoke emotions, and each generation of policymakers aims to reform higher education. But universities should be the targets not only of reform, but also of reverence. Few institutions have retained their vitality for more than a millennium. Here in Finland, the University of Helsinki is undoubtedly our oldest institution of cultural heritage. Universities are generally regarded as scientific institutions, but we must not overlook their cultural and educational heritage or disregard the symbols and deep significance of “academia”, “scholarship” and “education” in our society. Universities can be places and mental landscapes where the material meets the immaterial and which therefore contribute to both our immaterial and material cultural heritage.

Universities represent both change and permanence: the steady flow of students and teachers epitomises movement, while the framework of research and teaching denotes stability. It is worth considering which of these two dimensions – change or tradition – researchers, teachers, other staff and students are connected to. Discussion about universities often expresses the ethos of innovation, change and critical thinking. The same applies to attitudes in our society. The administrative and degree reforms of the past four decades have left little space for reflection on the identity and cultural heritage of universities. The history of academic institutions stretches back further than that of any European state or political or cultural system, save the Catholic Church.

When we create something new, we must also reflect on tradition, as it permeates the academic world, whether we like it to or not. Universities are also sustained by their thirst for knowledge and their educational mission, which is why questions regarding the content of knowledge and research and the educational goals of studying are always relevant. Such questions require an understanding of history and a vision of the future. The universities of Paris and Bologna in the 11th and 12th centuries already embodied the basic elements of an academic institution; since then, lectures, debates and the production and testing of new knowledge remain at the heart of academic teaching. This foundation determines whether universities flourish or fail. It takes more than money, political will, administration, staff, facilities or buildings to make a university.

The material and immaterial academic tradition

The material tradition of all European universities is connected to space and place. Seats of higher education have been established in city centres (the continental tradition) or as separate colleges and campuses in their vicinity (the Anglo-Saxon tradition). Many universities share similar stories of

their establishment. The oldest universities in Europe enjoyed special privileges, statutes and rules governing expenditures dispensed by secular or ecclesiastical authorities. They also benefitted from a share of the annual income of the Crown or the Church and could levy taxes. Gradually, universities began to invest in fixed assets, such as buildings, facilities, equipment and libraries. Universities were organised as corporations, which enabled them to develop extensive administrative autonomy and a collegial and governing community.

Universities as independent corporations have come to characterise their home cities and provide them with an academic presence. Through the centuries, the evolution of this cultural and educational heritage as well as the identity of members of university communities have been based on this sense of academic pride and the prestige associated with universities. In terms of cultural geography, universities represent the power of place and constitute an environment which benefits from the significant added value provided by its *own* cultural treasures, buildings, properties, archives, collections and objects as well as its traditions and stories. Universities are sites of cultural-historical and even political memory (*lieu de mémoire*) and are thus a permanent part of local and national social capital. What would, say, Helsinki or Turku be like without their buildings and facilities of higher education and the people who work and study there?

But preserving this material heritage is expensive. Naturally, understanding and fostering the immaterial culture of universities, including traditional academic celebrations and ceremonies as well as awareness of the important figures in each university's history, such as Nobel Prize winners and other celebrated individuals, costs less. This invisible cultural heritage is present in many forms of student life as well as the culture of get-togethers and other activities, including music, singing and drinking – in other words, the traditions associated with academic celebrations, events and speeches. This immaterial heritage also includes academic working methods, the “discourse of freedom” and the ethics of responsibility, morality and work discipline related to studies and research as well as academic assessment principles and the narratives that contribute to the identity of each discipline. Fostering this immaterial cultural heritage requires not so much funds, but awareness of one's special features and pride in them. Both material and immaterial heritages influence the culture of universities and, at best, add value to the identity and social capital of members of university communities. Both can strengthen commitment to work and thus provide a valuable competitive advantage.

When the top universities in the world (Oxford, Cambridge, the Ivy League universities, Uppsala, Heidelberg) list their strengths, they emphasise their cultural traditions. An illustrious past confers

prestige, which supports the academic spirit or the transmission of tacit knowledge by the academic world. In addition to curricula and degree plans, academic education imparts tacit information which is vital for the development of an individual's professional identity. Michael Polanyi, a philosopher and social scientist, originally coined the term "tacit knowledge", which, along with tradition and "spirit", are all interconnected. All three of them involve a strong ethos, an awareness of the values and norms of the institution, which in turn support shared opinions of what it considers important, necessary and useful. Tacit knowledge is not necessarily imparted through language. More often, it is invisible and intimate, experiential, of the "spirit", or *das Geist*. Academic education imparts information as well as notions that shape the learner's personal experience. Understanding and supporting tacit knowledge is essential, as it energises and generates joy, but can also prevent or at least inhibit change.

The most important "narrative" or piece of tacit knowledge describes how the university during the 19th century grew to become the primary expression of the Finnish nation and its spiritual and cultural atmosphere. The university created the sense of citizenship ("*kansalaismieli*", Matti Klinge) and the need to promote the common good through academic knowledge. The foundation of the university's special educational mission was laid out in the Universities Act of 1923: "*Yliopiston tehtävänä on edistää vapaata tutkimusta ja tieteellistä sivistystä Suomessa sekä kehittää sen nuorisoa kykeneväksi palvelemaan isänmaata.*" ("It is the duty of the university to promote free research and academic education in Finland as well as to enable its youth to serve their homeland.") The wording of the new Act conformed to older statutes, although the founding principles of the Academy of Turku, established in 1640, already described the mission regarding education and the fostering of youth. J. V. Snellman who became the authority on the ideal of academic education, believed university studies were the basis of understanding and questioning tradition with the goal of independent scientific work and autonomous thought. Education was not restricted to rote learning, but instead focused on the ability to participate in the development of society, the citizen's duty to work for the good of one's nation, homeland and society.

The Shanghai ranking or the Helsinki ranking?

When we speak about research universities or the university as an institution, we use a narrow perspective. Universities are facing increasing demands for more publications, more efficient operations and more competition. Nordic universities, founded on the principles of public education and edification, have had to undergo financial and structural reforms as well as to vie for success on international ranking lists of universities. These ranking lists are considered important in the world

of higher education, but Finnish universities struggle to compete with better funded top universities. Besides, these rankings cover only one-tenth of the world's universities. Even so, Finland ranks high in lists that measure national competitiveness and social safety.

The top universities in the world succeed because they are able to transform their local successful concept into a global brand. How can we combine social safety and the narrative of “tacit knowledge” in Finnish universities? What could be the narrative of a Finnish university? In the 19th century, Finnish universities, after refining the Germanic ideal of edification to better suit their needs, then educated public servants, scientists, politicians and members of the intellectual elite. Often a single person represented all these characteristics. Universities were needed to generate positive nationalism as well as the local policies, expertise in national and welfare politics and social capital needed to support it. The University of Helsinki has many layers: imparting the cultural tradition of education has always been key, while the concept of the modern research university emerged only in the late 19th century.

Although the question of the goals of teaching and research contains within it a central tension, in terms of public benefit, the Finnish university has always been tied to the state and its educational needs. This narrative persists, even though contemporary political debate may suggest otherwise. Remaining competitive requires knowledge of how to refine and convey the images relating to our universities globally. I would focus on the uniqueness of our student culture. Our student organisations, and especially our wonderful tradition of student nations and unions, have produced culture and citizenship, politics and ideals and spread them to neighbouring cities. This is a Finnish speciality and a strength that we should highlight as a competitive edge in our image. We are among the top universities of the world in terms of equal education for young people – remember that literacy studies and the PISA rankings also pertain to higher education. The dense and magnificent academic cultural traditions of Finnish universities, with their customs, spaces and political methods, are presented much too casually when we talk about our university or academic institutions.

The history of Finland continues to be a narrative of education and the desire of an educated populace to improve society. This development has been enabled by the Finnish culture of student organisations, a culture that is unique in the world. Generating equal opportunities in a country such as Finland has benefitted everyone and has been the primary duty of its universities; this way, the best talent reserves have been put to good use. We should establish our own “Helsinki ranking” alongside the Shanghai ranking, which would evaluate universities based on how active their

students are. Universities from Finland and other Nordic countries would top the list. If the ranking criteria could appropriately measure the educational duties of universities, we would be in the very top echelons of the world as a national educational institution. Our model for a democratic university could even be exported!

Our University needs causes for joy, shared experiences and a sense of community. Now is the time to celebrate. Let us seize the opportunity and enjoy being together. This sense of community is what inspires the best new innovations and the freshest ideas.

Enjoy this academic celebration!