The Antiquated University

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EDITOR

Today, not a few university rectors are conscious of their inadequacy to deal with the complex situation of higher education. I join the group, but my courage to put some educational thoughts on paper derives from the fact that I am kept on my rectorial toes by the impact of a young, dynamic university. I hope to be able to share my worries with the vanishing race of non-gowned university members who have as yet escaped the serious malady of staff conservatism. Indeed, once attacked, the victim seems incurable.

I wish to make it clear at the outset that I doubt whether rectors will be influential in the crisis brought upon their universities by the disciples of the philosophy of social relevance. These adepts are concerned with the conflict between two concepts, the one where the university is fulfilling a spiritually autonomous, creative and critical function by the search for truth, the other where the university is serving society by constantly reacting to its demands for means of survival. It seems to me, however, that the relevance antagonism may be viewed from a different angle, that is, between the preparedness of the university to act towards the distant goal of truth, or to act toward the immediate aim of survival. Though it may seem paradoxical to identify the search for means of survival of mankind with a short-term goal, this becomes clear when recognizing as the driving force the anxiety of the individual concerning his own and his children’s existence. The search for truth then appears to be a higher form of spiritual endeavor, aimed at molding society into a more distant ideal.

Whatever the merit of the attitudes, the antagonistic forces appear to relentlessly determine the course of the universities in many countries. Indeed in various universities, the heroes of social relevance have already, at least temporarily, decided the battle, not only by the achievement of student participation, but also by virtue of biologic aging. This inescapably leads to the occupation of ruling positions by those who were already affected when still on the student side of the fence. This is certainly a process from which society may benefit. On the other hand, much damage has been done by curtailing research and transmission of cultural heritage, and in some universities the havoc has gone so far as to be irreversible. The best that one can hope for is that the relevance exaggeration will be balanced by a swing back in the considerations of the students and younger staff themselves. I feel that in this respect, at least on a short-term view, the course of the university can be only little, if at all, influenced by opinionated rectors.

One subject that the universities are probably not capable of managing, and I think should not touch, is the guidance of the applicants in their choice of career. Choice of study direction will be determined mainly by youth ideals and by the post-study professional market. If one wishes to prevent unemployment and frustration, the graduate job market should be important as a study choice regulator for the applicant. The universities, however, cannot bear the brunt of the responsibility for a long-range

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I deem it imperative now to pay the utmost attention to a variety of problems concerning higher education, the solution of which we may help bring about, either individually or jointly. In the following I shall consider some antiquated attributes of many present-day universities, specifically degrees, examinations, admission, ranks, all of which have become targets for racing competitions with declining intellectual integrity.

**The Degree Race**

No doubt having an honorable history, university degrees have now become, for the most part, admission tickets to position and salary, and, deplorably, have lost much of their intellectual validity. It has become difficult to define the degrees of bachelor, master and Ph.D. and certainly the requirements for their attainment vary largely, not only between different universities, but even between faculties and departments in one and the same university. It seems as if the degrees have come to represent merely the completion of periods spent at a university, for the bachelor in most cases a minimum of three years, for the master an additional minimum of two years and for the Ph.D., an undetermined third period with a minimum of two to three years. The activity spent in these periods is loosely regulated and could be somehow described for the bachelor degree as a period of learning, whether in general subjects or already directed to a profession, for the master of more advanced learning, partly centered around strongly guided research, and for the Ph.D. mainly of deeper and hopefully more autonomous research.

With the mass invasion into higher education, the degrees now appear to have lost much of their original exalted sense. The study for the bachelor degree has now become simply an extension of learning at high school, often with the same, questionable, backward class-room methods. The research involved in the achievement of the master's degree for the most part has become, and probably has been for a long time, a rather unimportant means of the production of a usually unoriginal thesis, rarely worth reading, and at best providing a filling for dusty departmental shelves. Indeed, in various faculties the master's degree is becoming a sideline for non-talented bachelors, the bright ones jumping directly to the Ph.D. The Ph.D. is still, in many universities, a laudable achievement, considered as such by society, although as a title in itself it has lost much of its value in view of the uncertainty concerning the candidate's own contribution, and of the variation in the mentor's quality and devotion. Indeed, if one really wishes to know the quality of the Ph.D. laureate, inquiries should be made concerning the department and the mentor, the thesis read and personal information obtained. There seems to be little chance that the degree quality will improve, since the masses press for admission and speedy graduation, and the university budgets lag behind.

What should be done?

**The Bachelor Degree**

In view of the legitimate desire of the modern citizen to extend his high school education, of the needs of the rapidly technologically developing automatizing society and of the threat of future unemployment for the uneducated, I propose that the study for the bachelor's degree, or any other name one wishes it to be crowned with, become a part of secondary education, ie integrated into high school. The advantage of this step for higher university education would be the unburdening of the universities from the mass admission and the logistically impossible first year's mass education, keeping the universities awake to and capable of research, and educating an intelligent elite, so much needed by the world under any system of state management.

The problems involved in such a shift seem enormous, but not invincible. I recommend the following five measures to be taken.

Firstly, the establishment of new criteria for the passing of a pupil within secondary education from the present to the newly added period. This would be a good opportunity to abolish the state matriculation examination, the mnemotechnic preparation for which annuls the present final year's educational value and produces a mass examination neurosis. Pass or fail grading might be sufficient, judged according to a system involving maximally objective methods in the evaluation of knowledge and of the ability to think. Those who do not pass may leave school with a certificate recording the number of classes successfully completed, enabling them to try again at a later date.

Second, the teaching staff for the higher secondary school should be thoroughly university-trained and affiliated to a regional university.

Third, the present high schools should be extended and new schools built.

Fourth, army service could be postponed until a later age, or fulfilled in intervals between the studies, the pass securing school reentrance on completion of duty.
Last, professional lines of study should be adequately provided in the extended secondary phase. Extension of the high school program to include the bachelor studies will forcefully pose the problem of quality. High schools, all over the world, lag behind in modern teaching. Their main problem is the maintenance of a satisfactory teaching level in the face of the rapid changes in the subject matter imposed by society, and by the students in particular. One way out seems to link the high schools to universities on a regional basis, ensuring supervision and interaction.

True, many hold that it is advantageous to have the undergraduate studies, i.e., up to the bachelor's degree, within the university curriculum. It is argued that the undergraduate requires teaching by the higher ranking academic staff, and that the latter can possibly more easily select the candidate for graduate studies. Still, these arguments lose much of their strength in view of the large undergraduate classes with the consequent scarcity of time devoted by the higher ranking teacher to the undergraduate student. Moreover, with the establishment of the “open university” an increase in distance between teacher and undergraduate is inevitable.

The Master and Ph.D. degrees

I propose to abolish them. Instead, each pupil would, when leaving the university at any stage, receive a certificate describing all courses and research completed. Certain structures of course schemes would have to be adhered to, and time limits might be enforced, but these are details to be worked out. Instead of according significance to academic degrees of a dubious nature and questionable value, employers will effectively judge the academically educated citizen from his “log book,” and not in the least according to which university or department were the candidate's host.

The Admission Race

Whereas previously admission was often limited to those faculties whose teaching requires expensive laboratory space and equipment, selection has recently pervaded the more “spiritual divisions” of many universities, mainly due to the demands, from students and teachers alike, for an adequate student-teacher ratio. It is no secret, and now indeed a common view, that the procedures of selection are uncertain. Consider, for instance, the questionable value of matriculation examinations, at a time when the youngster is often in a state of blissful incompetence, just ending a possible outdated high school. Should his future be determined by a few hours' performance which for many is undertaken in high, unbearable tension? Take further the often badly composed admission examinations and the subjective interview evaluations. How many are rejected who are better than those accepted? Admission has become a neurotic, frustrating race with an unpredictable outcome. When, on the other hand, as is now done by other universities, all applicants are admitted, and the masses are sieved down at the end of the first university year, then again the selection validity becomes questionable in view of the disadvantages of the high student-teacher ratio and space-equipment crowding.

Now when the bachelor studies will be integrated into the secondary teaching phase, the admission pressure on the universities will decrease considerably. Still, if selection will be required after the then extended secondary education because of limitation of university staff, space and budget, it should be as objective and reasonable as possible. By reasonable selection I mean that one should abolish the grading systems by which a student would be accepted with a mark of 81.3, another being rejected with 81.2. With any system there could be a minimum grading above which the candidate would be accepted in any event, a minimum grading above which the candidate would be considered and, if not in the former category, subjected to lottery. If pass, fail, excellent—grading is used, this might serve accordingly.

The Examination Race

The main fallacy of examinations, as still carried out in various universities, seems to be the lack of objective criteria. This lack appears to be due to two factors—the gross inequality of the demands in different institutions and even in different departments within the same institution, and the subjectivity of judgment. Compare, for instance, a grade given in different universities by a language department or by a mathematics department, or even the grades given by different language departments, or for that matter by modern and classic history divisions within one university. Not only do the questions put or the types of composition requested differ enormously, but the judgment by the respective examiners, especially in oral examinations, also is greatly variable. One way to approach some degree of objectivity seems to be multiple choice examination composed by central inter-institutional bodies, as already activated for medical examinations in Sweden. This, of course, will mainly indicate the extent and depth of knowledge. Compositions which reflect additional properties of the
student's mind and attainments, including doctorate theses if they persist, should also be centrally proposed and judged by inter-institutional committees. Certainly, number grades seem to be outdated, and a maximum of three grades—fail, pass, excellent, would be adequate. Furthermore, examinations should be mostly held, if at all, on completion of individual courses, though possibly covering course combinations.

THE RANK RACE

Academic titles today are confusing, often senseless, if not ridiculous. Try to identify and compare the titles and the differences in the criteria for appointment and promotion. The issue is still more confused by the varying tenure regulations, a burden which nobody knows how to handle, and which transforms the university into a welfare state, ruled in part by aging academicians of declining creativity. Either one appoints young brilliant scientists and teachers to high academic positions, thus already determining the deterioration of the institution, or at best of a specific branch of it, within a few decades, or one tries to postpone higher appointments to a later age, then causing dissatisfaction among the vital youngsters.

In certain Israeli universities the academic ranks are four, beginning with lecturer, through senior lecturer, associate professor to full professor. The appointment to lecturer is easy but rather meaningless regarding quality, since now its only criterion is the possession of a Ph.D. The senior lecturership is incomprehensive since it requires some variable, undefined "original" research productivity. The associate professorship is somewhat clearer, requiring international recognition of the research. The full professorship, except in those cases where continuing brilliant creativity is nationally and internationally appreciated, is mostly an inevitable outcome of the associate professorship. How rarely are the references, national as well as international, really valuable? How little is teaching, ability and devotion taken into account, but even more disturbing, how does one judge teaching ability? Probably one should ask the colleagues and the students and evaluate the achievements of the students. How clever, though malicious, was the Literature Nobel prize-winner Agnon when in his posthumously published book he designated the full professor as "finished professor" (Hebrew transcribed into Latin "Professor Gamur"). Changes are being made now, for instance, in certain universities in Europe, where it has been proposed to have only the ranks of professors and assistants.

It seems to me that it would be advantageous to abolish the academic ranks altogether and use only the connotation of university staff member. One might possibly keep extant the title of professor for all those who are considered to be leaders in their field, both in teaching and research. Furthermore, salaries should not be rank-bound; why should a young hardworking staff member be starved? Allowances could be made for performance in administration.

Tenure, as it is now, that is securing a position until advanced age, should be abolished. It should certainly not be inherent in the position of "staff member" (see above), and, if the professional title will continue to be used, tenure should be given for limited periods of time, let us say five years, following which it should be subject to renewal or rejection, according to whatever criteria of research productivity and teaching performance can be reasonably applied. Nonrenewal of position should allow a sufficient time for rearrangement of the rejected academician in society. Apropos, reevaluation of qualities should be a rule, not only for university staff, but also for secondary and elementary school teachers, as well as for the so-called "free" professions of physicians, lawyers and others.

In essence, then, what I propose is to relegate the bachelor studies to the secondary phase of education, that is to have the "universities" limited to "graduate" studies, to put admission and examinations on an objective basis, to affiliate the high schools, then including the bachelor phase, to universities on a regional basis, to abolish academic degrees and ranks (or at least to diminish their numbers), and to abolish tenure or to make it subject to renewal at intervals.

Probably nothing in these proposals is original; the sources must have been stored in my subconscious. Most probably, also, only few of these proposals will be realized in the near future, certainly not in the period of my rectorship. Hopefully, my offspring will enjoy some of it.

There remains the problem of the "depersonalization" of teaching, that is, the decline in "learning" from a "live" teacher as opposed to the increase in the "cold" procedures, utilizing video-tapes, television, computers, programmed books and correspondence. Can the live contact ever be replaced by the "medium"? What type of graduate will result—excellent, able, efficient, rational, but refrigerated? This seems to me by far the most challenging problem in education today, and of far-reaching consequence for the future of the universities. I have no reasoned answer, only an intuitive one—in favor of live contact.