FRAMING CHALLENGES IN HIGHER EDUCATION：

BRIDGING THE GAP
BETWEEN
RUSSIA, CHINA AND EUROPE

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Framing challenges in higher education: bridging the gap between Russia, China and Europe

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Edited by

Dan Wang   Xiaoxin Chen

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FOREWORD

In recent decades university teaching has become international. A significant number of students study abroad for at least one semester, and many have both a domestic and an international degree. This development at universities is a reflection of science and the economy as a whole, which are today global and highly dynamic. University teaching has to respond to these developments too, since universities as a free space for thinking and research should also prepare students for diverse societal tasks and their future positions in the economy. This goal is not only achieved through contemporary study content, as appropriate study structures and flexible university teaching are also necessary. However, exactly which forms of studying and teaching are required and successful also depends on the general conditions and traditions in different countries. The aim of the project "Enhancing Teaching Practice in Higher Education in Russia and China" (ENTEP), in which five European, four Russian and three Chinese universities are involved, is to discuss these differences, as well as to develop modern approaches to study reforms and didactical innovations at universities.

The Project is focused on building cooperation and the exchange of good teaching practices among European, Russian and Chinese universities. Therefore, to discuss the traditions and innovations in teaching practices at the participating universities in the different contexts of their countries, and to internationalize and harmonize teaching practices in the European Union, Russian Federation and PR China, a series of workshops, seminars and conferences have been organised. Outcomes such as a study manual, study guide, journal papers and conference proceedings are available on the project's website: https://entep-tudresden.de/.

"Framing challenges in higher education: bridging the gap between Russia, China and Europe" at the University of Sanya in Hainan (19.11.–23.11.2019) was the second international conference of the ENTEP

project. The proceedings edited by the conference organisers include a wide range of topics. Papers are related to foreign language education, multimedial didactics, interdisciplinarity, blended learning, e-learning and cognitive science, and they deal with the role these approaches play in different sciences and studies, i.e. humanities, sciences, engineering, psychology, pedagogy and others. Furthermore, general questions are addressed, such as the ethics of teaching in higher education.

With such a large number of topics, participants, universities and countries of origin, it is clear that the conference proceedings cannot offer a uniform programme of higher education didactics, but rather present a large variety of possible approaches, opini'ons and didactic proposals, each reflecting the view of the individual authors, and therefore not agreeing in all cases. However, the task of the conference, whose title formulates the goal of "bridging the gap", was also precisely to make different positions known and considered.

My thanks go to the editors of this volume for the careful compilation of the contributions. I would also like to express my hope that the volume will stimulate further discussions on higher education didactics in China, Russia and Europe.

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THE CHANGING ROLE OF ACADEMIC TEACHERS IN THE KNOWLEDGE SOCIETY

Abstract: In the Knowledge Societies, Higher Education has to reconcile its traditional role of educating the elite with the challenges of promoting employability and social cohesion. This changing mission influences the academic teachers, who have to shift from their role of "instructor" and content-transmitter towards a student-centred teaching approach, assuming the role of a "facilitator". This chapter discussed the set of skills that teachers are supposed to achieve in order to face with these new societal expectations.

Keywords: Knowledge Society, Higher Education, teachers, student-centered teaching, facilitators

Introduction

Today, "academic teachers are confronted by increasingly complex challenges" (Figel, 2005, p. 7) because they educate in complex societies and meet students with increasingly uneven resources, skills, socio-cultural end ethnic backgrounds (Crul et al., 2012).

Meanwhile, the discourse of the "Knowledge Society" implies a learning

society as the pace of knowledge creation and adoption is so fast that learning can no longer be limited to the attendance of education systems.

The traditional definition of education like "a form of learning in which the knowledge, skills, and habits of a group of people are transferred from one generation to the next through teaching, training, or researching" can no longer serve for the modern society. Some scholars state that modern education is not only a delivery system of knowledge, skills and information but the key to sparkle one's thoughts, inspiration, transversal competences (Ferrari, A., Cachia, R., & Punie, Y., 2009; Calvani ,2011).

Therefore, education is today expected to be a lifelong process in the human life that should also be structured lifewide as it is expected to be a combination of formal education coupled with the individual planning deriving from self-directed formal, non-formal, and informal educational endeavors (Bekerman, 2006). Although the paradigm's change from education to lifelong learning seems to charge students the main role in structuring his/her learning path, which should not only respect the requests of formal education, higher education (HE) plays a core role in the development of an active approach towards learning.

At the same time, significant changes in European HE systems have challenged universities' traditional identity as selective institutions whose role was to introduce an elite group of students into higher professions and ways of thinking. Under these new circumstances, universities still struggle to identify their higher mission in time of vocational mass HE. Some scholars argue that university stakeholders, and universities themselves are worried about their students' employability, neglecting their traditional focus on citizenship and social critique (Beck, 2008). In order to promote a new debate and to sensitize the institutions, the European research promote a lot of "capacity building" projects and actions targeted to students with specific aims. In particular, in view of

- increase of the possibilities of internship, curricular and post graduate;

- development of additional support actions for carrying out periods abroad (Erasmus, Overseas and other forms of mobility);

- implementation of transversal training activities on Soft&social skills (eg: Dedicated lectures, Service Learning, International cooperation, participation in international contest, etc.);

- promotion of multilinguism and interculturality.;

- support for interdisciplinary activities by identifying "minor" pathways, both curricular and extracurricular, which can be included in the diploma supplement.

Based on a literature's review of several European scholars' research, the aims of this chapter are to present and analyze both the changes that have taken place in European Higher Education's institution as a consequence of the discourses on Knowledge Society (section 1) and the repercussion that this emphasis on knowledge have had on Higher Education's teacher professionalism (section 2). The chapter ends with some concluding remarks on the results of the previous two sections (section 3).

1. Changes in Higher Education's Mission

The discourse about the demands and implications of, but also the opportunities emerging from the Knowledge Society or Knowledge-based economy plays a deep influence on the current debate in educational research and policy. The main reason surrounding this widespread interest lays on the equation of more/better education with more social cohesion and more economic growth as suggested first in the Lisbon Declaration (European Union, 2000) and ten years later in the Europe 2020 Strategy, (European Commission, 2010). This last constitutes a partnership between the EU and its Member States aiming at promoting smart, sustainable and inclusive growth that will improve the competitiveness of the EU while maintaining its social market economy model and improving significantly its resource efficiency. Five interrelated targets in the areas of employment, research and development, climate change and energy, fight against poverty and social exclusion, and education represent the core of this ambitious strategy.

However, despite formally embracing this optimistic strategy, European government educational policies have chosen two opposite ways in order to react to the global financial crisis that started in September 2008 with the collapse of Lehman Brothers. At times of recession, they have adopted either austerity measures (Shattock, 2010), cutting the funding to education or, alternatively, they have expected higher education to play a counter-cyclical role, expanding it as a

way to address economic downturn (Douglass, 2010). In both cases, the past ten years have witnessed significant reforms in European HE's systems, for what concerns both research and teaching approaches.

This implies a huge change also for the societal expectations about the role of universities. Traditionally, they were elite, research-based institutions whose role was to reproduce an intellectual class. Nowadays, this expectation has shifted to a more vocational, mass educational focus, with universities playing a pivotal role in the development of professional, "white collar employees" (Olssen, 2005). This move towards vocationalism, internationalization and mass education has attracted students from a variety of ethnic and educational backgrounds, who are enrolling in far greater numbers. Academic staff opinions on this phenomenon assumes a whole range of positions between two extremes.

On the one extreme, the increasing diversity of the student cohort is perceived in terms of 'crisis' (Kirkpatrick et al. 2002, p. 74) and is mainly focused on student lacking skills. The supporters of this view argue that because of declining government's investments in school systems, a large number of both national and international students approaches their university degree without the skills needed to engage competently in their chosen career. According to Gallagher et al. (1996), academic teachers did not perceive students' learning difficulties as a reflection of their teaching practice and complained about 'too many students' with 'too wide a range of abilities' creating a 'problem' for universities (p. 24).

On the other extreme, are those academics who argue that teaching should change in order to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse students' cohort. This position is expressed by the 'student-centered' learning approach (Prosser et al., 1999), arguing that university teaching should be adapted to student ability rather than the other way around (Biggs 2003, p. 3–5).

The focus on graduate skills is nowadays part of a bigger and still unresolved debate about the final goal of HE and how to educate citizen who are both employable and able to contribute to the wellbeing of their society. In the discourse on Knowledge Society, unskilled graduates constitute a double failure: firstly, in terms of employability and, secondly, in terms of active citizenship. This is because, in contemporary societies, the ability to master knowledge, rather than be

mastered by it, is the mark of both a skilled knowledge worker, and a good citizen.

In order to truly master knowledge, the emphasis on what and how it is taught in HE should shift from the traditional focus on 'content' to a new one highlighting the 'process': what graduates can do with knowledge: Being able to understand, attach meaning and interpret knowledge through the development of intellectual skills like problem-solving, logical thinking and information gathering has ramifications for learners as graduates, but also as active citizens capable of understanding and challenging the social and political world for the public good (Barrow, 2004).

As argued by Heath, there is 'a fundamental incompatibility facing university teachers involved with the education of students/citizens/future workers where education is increasingly geared for the workplace in a complex, global, technological society' (1999, p. 1). Such critics mirrors the 'enlightenment' view about the role of HE: the pursuit of higher knowledge, and the development of good citizens who can challenge the dominant paradigm (Barrow 2004).

Reflecting this view, Tomlinson affirms that 'It is an obligation to provide a supportive education environment, which educates students to live in society rather than simply equipping them to become pliable peons in the global market place' (2006, p. 57).

Two broad issues steam from these criticisms. First, that HE institutions should aims at graduates who are critical, autonomous citizens. Second, that they should produce graduates who are self-reflexive professionals with a high sense of vocation and social justice offering teaching process including higher order activities such as analysis, critical thinking and ethical behaviour. Graduates who are both able creators and manipulators of knowledge, as well as capable of informed judgement are also potentially good citizens. If the mission of universities has changed, academic teachers are expected to change accordingly their way of teaching.

2. Changes in HE's teacher professionalism

In the educational debates of the last twenty years, much attention has been given to the quality of teachers, who are identified as the most important factor influencing the quality of education (Robertson, 1996: Abbott, 1988). As a result,

much attention is given to policies with respect to teacher quality. Although the jurisdiction of the European Commission is limited in the area of education, the Commission has given considerable importance to the quality of teachers, thus stimulating national governments to invest in the improvement of teacher quality, for example by exchanging policies and practices across Europe (Snoek, Uzerli & Schratz, 2008).

In this vein, the 'Common European Principles for Teacher Competences and Qualifications' (EU Commission, 2010) clears the new trends in teacher education and teacher's professionalism, which stem from discourses and major features of the Knowledge Society. In the document, the key competences teachers are expected to achieve are clustered under three macro-categories (ibid. p. 3–4):

1.   Work with others: working with students as individuals, supporting them to develop into active members of society, supporting cooperative competences and activities, which enhance the collective intelligence of learners, and collaborating with colleagues to promote their own professionalism.

2. Work with knowledge, technology, and information: operating with several kinds of knowledge, being able to access, process, reflect on and transmit knowledge, using ICT tools and insights.

3. Work with and in society: preparing students to be socially responsible and reinforcing intercultural respect and understanding. Teachers need to be aware of what contributes to social cohesion or, on the other hand, exclusion in society, focusing on the ethical dimensions of learning and networking with other educational and societal stakeholders.

Furthermore, teachers have the task to inspire motivation in their students in order to help them to develop an autonomous learning biography realizing that learning, as an ability and challenge, is a lifelong process that does not end with HE and is not limited to the formal education's environments. This implies facilitating and enhancing self-directed (meta-cognitive) learning skills (learning how to learn) and attitudes by establishing a learning setting that recognizes individual learner differences, and is favorable to an effective facilitator-learner relationship (Scott et al., 1996). Accordingly, teachers require constant updates about subject knowledge and need to be open to using new didactics and tools. Furthermore, in contemporary HE' institutions, homogeneous middle-class

students are not anymore the rule. Therefore, teachers have to be ready to acquire knowledge about broader social realms, including the concrete life worlds of contemporary young people (Lima & Guimares, 2011; EU Commission, 2010), adopting in their teaching praxis an approach that is intercultural in its broader sense. This implies to reflect on the multifaceted needs of all their students, discovering who these young people are, and understanding the reasons behind their actions and behaviors, which may be cultural rather than purely individual (Crul et al., 2012). In multicultural European societies, the importance of pro-active social and communicative skills has to be taught and learnt, enabling students to dialogically deconstruct stereotypes and prejudices that threaten social cohesion.

Here, it is of the upmost importance to transmit an attitude of reflexivity that will enhance students' chances to learn how to shape and reshape their learning biographies, adapting their educational paths to changes in the labor market, looking for new opportunities and challenges, and taking autonomous decisions about their academic abilities and expectations (Diepstraten et al., 2006; Cuconato, 2011). This implies that teachers themselves should adopt a reflexive approach in their profession in order to be aware of the implicit attitudes, beliefs, and knowledge that guide their daily activity with the aim of constantly shaping and reshaping their practice, thereby adapting it to changing students' needs. As Diamond and Mullen argue in their reflections on the professional development of post-modern educators, 'Teachers can each learn to be scholars of their own consciousness and experts in the remodeling of their experiencing of the experience of teaching' (Diamond & Mullen, 1999. p. 123).

Currently, university and teaching staff need to develop sustainable networks within and outside the academic environment in order to master their tasks. University – and the HE's teacher in his/her classroom – is no longer a closed universe but potentially an open space for combining knowledge and expertise from several and different sources and resources and cooperating with non-academic professionals, teacher training colleges, municipalities, and local labor markets for in-service, which helps students to prepare either for their academic career and future professions.

Summarizing, not only student but also teacher themselves in their profession are

expected to become those 'challenging, innovative and lifelong learners' (Coolahan, 2002, p. 14) who are highly needed in the contemporary Knowledge Societies.

3. Some concluding remarks

From the revision of the literature on the field of HE, it emerges that specifically during the last decades the creation of knowledge and generation of innovation have become the primary objectives of Knowledge Society (Beerkens, 2008). Since universities are regarded as the main knowledge producers, they are expected to master the challenges Knowledge Society poses on them. In consequence, while pursuing such objectives, universities will have to incorporate reforms that support its development (Neubauer, 2012), contributing both to general economic development and social wellbeing.This implies implementation of visions', missions' and teaching approach's revision.

Under these circumstances, teachers are expected to shift from their traditional instructing role of "knowledge owners" and "knowledge givers" to that of "facilitators". This deep shift implies that a facilitator needs a totally different set of skills than that of a teacher. However, which are the main differences between the two roles?

First, whereas a teacher mostly gives to passive students a frontal lesson on his/her subject matter, a facilitator activates a learning process leading the learners to get to their own understanding of the content. In this way, the focus shift from the instructor and the content towards the learner.

Second, a teacher tells, a facilitator asks. While the first lectures from the front, a facilitator supports from the back. A teacher answers according to a set curriculum, a facilitator creates guidelines and designs a supporting learning environment for the learners to derive their own conclusions, challenging their critical thinking and therefore giving them the ownership of the problem and solution process. The critical goal is to support the learner in becoming an effective thinker. However, this goal implies that academic teachers are open to become themselves self-reflective professionals.

In order to conclude, the challenge of the facilitator it' maybe the same challenge of the contemporary pedagogy, namely "more problems to be posed, more areas of thematization to be entrusted to the theorization (cognitive, ethical, political,

affective, aesthetic, etc.). For pedagogy, in short, more challenges to be defined. But perhaps – this is my hypothesis and my working proposal – a single reasonable "utopia" that can allow us all to work together for the formation of those people who are our young people" (Colicchi, 2008, p. 24).

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