

INTERVIEW WITH PAUL KONRAD LIESSMANN

In your essay, you introduced the skeptical view of reforming a European higher education. Could you summarize, why the Bologna process is so destructive?

I am not criticizing the idea of a European higher education with better opportunities of academic mobility and cooperation. What I am criticizing is the attempt to attain this goal by way of formal alignment with enormous bureaucratic effort while at the same time interpreting higher education solely as vocational training. These circumstances harm the diversity of education as much as the liberties of teaching and learning. Further, it is becoming apparent that the goals the Bologna process set itself are made unattainable by the very way the process is being implemented: Mobility is decreasing, durations of study are increasing, the curricula are overloaded and the Bachelor graduates are difficult to place on the labor market.

One of the concrete points you have been criticizing is necessity of scientist's mobility. You have been arguing by Kant's example – he had lived in Königsberg and had not written anything for ten years. Do you mean it as an exaggeration or is it meant seriously? In the past, the experience of students and teachers gained abroad was perceived positively – independently of Bologna process. Is Kant, incidentally, nothing but rarity?

The example of Immanuel Kant is obviously an ironic exaggeration. What I am getting at here is not only his lack of mobility, but the criteria in general that are used to evaluate academic achievement today. The example of Kant is an exception, but serves to demonstrate that excellent academic work cannot necessarily be evaluated at hand of quantitative criteria like the frequent change of universities or the number of publications. These are important considerations, but they must not be overestimated. Research quality can also be hampered by the pressure to publish or always be on the move.

The education is – according to your opinion – increasingly fragmented and particularized. Educational institutions do not educate independently thinking individuals, but irresponsible ones without their own thinking. How can this situation be changed?

This unfortunate development can in my opinion only be corrected by taking seriously the students' freedom and responsibility. Education is a process that every individual has to discover for him- or herself. While I recognize the importance of a fully organized, good vocational training, this is also about the education of people who can make their own judgments, take on social responsibility and recognize implications beyond their own, limited professional field. I believe that more flexible study regulations, more choices and freedom in the requirements will be as important in order to achieve such an education as

the inclusion of general basics of philosophy, philosophy of science and political ethics on a high level in the curricula for every course of study.

What do universities symbolize nowadays? Has the idea of education changed in recent time?

As far as I can tell, education has undergone a fundamental change in the course of the last years and decades. Currently, education is all about the attainment of degrees and qualifications in order to stay in the competition. The humanistic concept of education as an idea of the development and maturing of a person into a personality has been forgotten – as has the idea that universities also ought to be hot spots of social development, where decisive questions of our time are impartially and critically studied, discussed and researched.

Why do the quantification and the evaluation increasingly affect science and research? Especially humanities – regarding to their character – suffer from the quantification...

Academic work obviously has to be evaluated. However, one must not forget that the academic system itself is the best evaluative method: Theories, hypotheses and ideas are published and taken up, criticized and developed by the scientific community. Further, one ought to keep in mind that the natural sciences and the humanities represent completely different cultures of knowledge, which have also developed different forms of discourse and evaluation. I dislike the way everything is being lumped together here when evaluation methods that have proved themselves in one culture of knowledge are simply applied to all others as well. Books, anthologies and monographs are still central organs in the humanities, hence the purely quantitative and bibliometrical methods that emerged out of the journal culture of the natural sciences simply do not suffice. Strong pressure of evaluation furthermore favors the main stream, mediocrity and conformist thinking, while real originality and creativity are not recognized in this system, and are often even hindered. I dare say that in the long term, the current forms of quantitative evaluation will not foster excellence, but mediocrity in research in the humanities. The decisive steps forward will have to be taken by outsiders who do not need to conform to the academic world – as was the case, by the way, already in the 19th century: Think of Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, as well as Einstein.

Which way an independent scientist might exist in this system?

Within the system, independent thinking will become a rare good. But it will, of course, still exist: wherever there are strong research personalities who do not succumb to the pressure of evaluation or the question of the usability of their findings. This becomes possible in places where it is recognized that mental productivity and creativity cannot be churned out like that and where the trust

in the inquisitiveness of talented young academics means that they are given a chance even if they do not publish 10 articles a year in high-ranking journals.

What is the relationship among freedom and science? How dramatically the power and the prestige affect this relationship?

It must not be forgotten that the development of the European academic tradition began with the idea of the freedom of thought. Whenever there have been attempts to limit that freedom – for religious, political or economic reasons – it has harmed the sciences. The search for the truth cannot be limited or forced into pre-defined goals. If the fatal idea to foster only applied research does gain the upper hand in Europe, it would in the long term mean the end of the European academic and university idea. It is this idea, however, that has brought this continent almost everything it has attained: the enlightenment, reason, technology, human rights, the concept of political freedom, the idea of a humane world with a reasonably rational order.

In your essay, you judge founding of the excellence centers for science and education as a negative step? What are the main reasons for your critic?

There is nothing to be said against excellent schools and universities. Quite the opposite: one ought to strive to give as many people as possible the opportunity of an excellent education – especially if one takes seriously all the talk of a knowledge society. What I find doubtful in the concept of centers of excellence and elite universities is that that is obviously not the desired goal. Rather, a large number of young people are to be fobbed off with a second-rate education (the „mass subjects“) while only a few will have the opportunity to conduct „serious“ research. Secondly, numerous sociological studies show that such institutions very quickly attain the function of establishing social elites, who form relatively closed societies that reproduce themselves without the corresponding achievements. Thirdly, I am in principle increasingly skeptical of the idea of elite: Especially the economic and financial crisis of recent times is based also on the ignorance and presumption of those elites that have been educated at the best universities in the world. In order to meet the current and future problems of our continent, it will probably be much more important to educate many people well and comprehensively rather than putting a lot of money into elite who will fail again at the next opportunity.

What type of critic reviews on your book do you hear most frequently?

What is your general view of the future of education in Europe?

I was surprised at the amount of positive feedback I received and still do receive on my book "Teorie Nevzdělanosti". Criticisms include that I sometimes use polemic exaggeration and that I follow too closely the humanist educational ideal of Wilhelm von Humboldt. This latter criticism is not entirely appropriate: I do use Humboldt as a contrasting example in order to provide a better

diagnosis of the present situation, but I do not see him as a solution for all problems even if I do like many of his ideas. This includes the idea of the University as a place for the unity of teaching and research as well as his idea that education is at the end of the day not just a basic human right but a basic human need. As regards the future: I was encouraged by the last meeting of European ministers of education in Vienna and Budapest in March 2010. Much of what I and others have criticized about the Bologna process was taken up and some ideas were drafted which can lead the right way into a European area of higher education. These include simplification of studying and researching at different places without the bureaucratic frame, a balanced relation of vocational training and a general education in sciences and humanities as well as the intention to heed different education traditions and cultures of knowledge. The aim of an education, especially in the European perspective, should be that the outcome is responsible, free, judicious humans rather than conformist qualified human capital. The European achievement, which must be the basis of a future Europe, is nothing else than this idea of a responsible and enlightened citizen, as formulated by the immobile and non-publishing Immanuel Kant.

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