

UNIVERSITY AND COMMUNITY: A RECKONING?

Leslie A. PAL

Leslie A. PAL

Dean, College of Public Policy,
Hamad Bin Khalifa University, Doha, Qatar
E-mail: lepal@hbku.edu.qa
ORCID ID: 0000-0002-3906-6846

Abstract

The modern university still retains, at its core, its medieval inspiration—a *studium generale* of scholars and students. But its nature has changed considerably, as have the communities it serves. Modern universities are driven by research and have taken on training and partnerships as additional responsibilities. They serve the local economy and local community but are engaged with communities of industry, donors, national economic planners, government, and global scholarly networks. With the bundling of often contradictory functions, and the constellation of communities, perhaps universities are trying to do too many things for too many stakeholders.

Keywords: university, community, partnerships, medieval, research, ranking.

1. Introduction

Any serious discussion of the university-community relationship should be clear about the meaning of the two terms, their logic, and the constraints and opportunities that arise thereby. Most of the discussion in this article will be about the evolving (some would say metastasizing) concept of ‘community’, but let’s begin with the concept of ‘university’. It is a distinct European institution, developed in the medieval period (1200s and solidifying in the 1400s). As Cobban puts it:

‘(...) stripped of the all the adjuncts which have accumulated over the centuries, the inflated administrative machinery, the financial, building and other concerns which so detract from the primary academic purpose, the modern university is, in essence, the lineal descendant of the medieval *studium generale*. For the most part, teachers and students still function in group associations, the acquisition of a degree is still the practical end product of a competitive system whose criteria and standards are those of the teaching guild, and the ceremonial and terminology are strongly evocative of the medieval past’ (Cobban, 1975, pp. 35–36).

The medieval model of the university is far removed from what today we would call knowledge production or research (this came more distinctively from the German university model in the 19th century). These functions have been added to institutions that still deliver teaching and learning toward the acquisition of accredited degrees—the three- or four-year Bachelors, the one- or two-year Masters, and ultimately the PhD. Faculty are recruited for the mastery of their fields, expected to teach and increasingly to do research and contribute to both knowledge generation and knowledge translation/application, and in return are granted the privilege of tenure. Promotion through the ranks of the professoriate is rigorous, slow, peer-calibrated, and hinges on research contributions through peer-reviewed publications. An additional peculiarity of universities as institutions is that they strive to be self-governing or self-managing institutions, drawing their managers (directors, deans, provosts, presidents) from among faculty, and expecting ordinary faculty members to contribute some of their time to participating in university governance through committees and other offices.

This is the simplest model of the university, and the oldest ones in Europe literally exemplify it in their architecture, their classes, their daily rhythms, and their berobed ceremonies. The modern university, of course, is now much more than this, though it cannot be a ‘university’ without these core functions, without degrees and the apparatus of teaching and the regulatory regimes which that apparatus spawns, both in the validation of teachers and of students. Though each university (and of course programs within them) varies in the specific combination of additional functions and responsibilities, the following is a list of the most important.

2. The University

2.1. Research

In the medieval university, ‘the intellectual energies of both teachers and students were mainly concerned with the imparting and reception of given data and not with research as now understood’ (Cobban, 1975, p. 215). Today, research is the prime directive for faculty and their institutions. The sly truth—despite the rhetoric to the contrary—is that teaching is of secondary importance to faculty promotion and tenure, or to university reputations and international rankings. Many faculty performance schemes weigh research and publications at 50%, and in promotion it actually counts higher. Notably, ‘research productivity’ is measured through publications in conventional, peer-reviewed journals, and in the last 20 years a massive metrification has taken place (Hillebrandt and Huber, 2020), courtesy of digitalization, where journals are ranked according to impact factors, and scholars are tagged with their h-index and citation counts. In the STEM disciplines, there are also expectations of patents and intellectual property, and even of establishing start-ups and other entrepreneurial ventures. Universities are ranked in various ways as well, from the QS World University Rankings, to the Shanghai Academic Ranking of World Universities.

The pressure of research has forced changes in university organizational architecture—Vice-Presidents of Research, supported by an apparatus of research offices and grants administration officers. The classical university faculties and departments have been supplemented by research institutes and centers, sometimes staffed (perhaps as secondments) by ranked faculty, sometimes by contract researchers, or some combination. Graduate students are increasingly part of this research enterprise, wherein their degree programs consist now only in part of classes and lectures, and in larger part in working on research or labs on major projects led by faculty and funded by grants. Doctoral students are increasingly expected to be publishing while in program, and even Masters students are encouraged to publish their work in some fashion.

Why all this pressure on research rather than teaching? Over the last fifty years, universities have increasingly been harnessed to national economic development programs, in developing countries in the service of national development strategies, and in the developed countries in service of the knowledge economy. An additional layer is the conventional assumption that social problems now cannot be solved without research into their root causes and complex consequences. Universities are not the sole knowledge producers or research entities in modern states (more on this below), but they retain the status of the only institutions in society that can do ‘basic’ research. This distinction between ‘basic’ and ‘applied’ research is itself problematic (Stokes, 1997), but is the rationale for the massive funding that governments channel to their university sectors for health, engineering, hard sciences, and—less lavishly—humanities and social sciences. The European Union, as evidenced in the Draghi report on competitiveness, sees universities as policy instruments in the race for innovation and commercialization (Draghi, 2024, pp. 24–25).

2.2. Training

The medieval model of the university assumed that the acquisition of the degree was the acquisition, once and mostly for all, of the knowledge embedded in its program of study. One became an engineer or a doctor with the requisite degree, and was henceforth equipped for that profession. In the last forty years the degree is now seen more as a foundation than a pinnacle, and universities are increasingly expected to provide non-degree training programs on specific topics rather than fields of knowledge. Most universities have seen the establishment of Executive Education centers or extension programs, drawing on the university faculty to provide modules or courses as part of certificate programs. While often separately remunerated, in most cases this sort of training does not count for promotion or annual review purposes, and faculty are usually reluctant to put too much of their time into it, unless separately compensated or part of their contract.

In the field specifically of the administrative sciences, and the training of public officials, there are additional incentives. Training contracts can bring in substantial revenues to the sponsoring departments (even after the Executive Education Centre and the university take their cut), making up in some cases for soft or declining enrolments. The training can also build and reinforce relationships with the public sector, and align with the service orientation of the modern university (more on this below). Another interesting factor has been the growth of stand-alone training programs on capacity building in developing countries mounted by foundations, international organizations, or NGOs. After the fall of the Soviet Union, this developed into a global consulting market that often drew heavily on university personnel for their training staff (Pal, 2019; Pritchett, 2013).

2.3. Partnerships

The medieval university made no pretense of community engagement as we understand it today, though by the 15th century there was an emerging sense of service, at least to elites (Cobban, 1975, p. 237). We will discuss the enlarged concept of ‘community’ below, but for the moment we can just highlight the emerging importance of partnerships for the modern universities. This has several roots. One is—and this contradicts to some extent the point above about universities having a privileged role in the production of basic research—epistemological. Universities have a comparative advantage in theoretical knowledge and basic research (reflected in degrees), but much of the world operates on *praxis*, on practical, situationally grounded knowledge possessed by practitioners. Students as well as faculty need exposure to practical knowledge, and can best do this in partnership with organizations and actors outside of the university.

There is also a practical purpose to partnerships—employment. Universities produce graduates who expect to get well-paying jobs and careers related to their degrees. Student investment in their education, and universities cannot be indifferent to the employment prospects of their graduates. In rapidly changing labor markets, universities need to know which skills are in demand and which are in decline, and can best get that information from private sector partners.

Then there is the social mission of universities, expected to contribute to the betterment of their societies and even the world. They can only do this if they become more permeable, if they engage with civil society groups and government agencies, if they support social development through their expertise and their research. For prospective partners, there are instrumental reasons for engaging with universities—harvesting and applying expertise (often at lower cost than hiring consultants), getting at students in their formative years as future elites, but they can also benefit from the reflected prestige of their university partner.

Research, training, and partnerships have been added to the core of the university model, usually summarized under the banner of ‘community engagement’. And so the question of university and community relationship invites us to think a little more deeply about the community—or the communities—with which the modern university is expected to engage.

3. The Community

3.1. Local economy and community

Universities are obviously embedded institutions—they exist in real space, in towns, cities and regions. Even small universities have a local economic impact, from employment and services, and the larger ones have a considerable effect on their local and regional economies. Given that they are tax-funded institutions, there is a reasonable expectation that they will be responsive to local needs. And so, the modern university is expected by default, simply through its existence and its advancement and growth, to contribute to the local economy. ‘Town’ has a clear material interest in ‘gown’.

Beyond this economic impact, however, universities are also expected to foster education and serve the wider community (local and regional) through various services. Musical concerts, high-school visits, summer programs even for elementary schools, free or very low-cost consulting for community-based NGOs, legal aid services, community lecture series, incubators for local entrepreneurs—the list is endless. University boards usually include one or two members of the local community to cement the relationship.

3.2. Industry, donors, and regional/national economy

This is a complicated category, but embraces a variety of economic actors and interests that have long shaped the modern university. Industry in general, and sectors of industry specifically (e.g., computer engineering or pharmaceuticals) have a strong interest in funding programs, schools, or basic research that will ultimately be to their benefit. Whole faculties like social work, nursing, education, or business have been grafted onto the traditional array of liberal arts, humanities, and basic sciences. Even the social sciences are a product of the post-World War II period’s assumption that the challenges of modern, complex societies can only be addressed through science and research. Why not simply set up separate, stand-alone schools or programs in each of these areas, rather than lodge them

into universities? The answer is the assumption that research is required in each of these areas, and that research will feed instruction and teaching of coming professional cohorts. As well, the university has the monopoly of the degree credential, which is still (for now) considered superior to more ordinary certificates or diplomas.

There is no need to dwell on the effect that this need to connect to economic sectors and industries has had on universities. There are constant calls for closer connections, better ways to reflect the rapidly changing needs of industry into new programs and research priorities. The donor class is an expression of this as well—most donors have wealth generated through some sort of successful capitalistic endeavor, and for many universities (perhaps more in North America) the pursuit of donors to lend their names (and their wealth) to programs, schools, buildings is relentless.

However, beyond specific industries and specific individual donors there lies a broader agenda for the modern university, and that is to contribute to the national (and regional) market economy of which they are a part. This of course is the familiar refrain of the knowledge economy, post-industrialism, and post-carbon. The trinitarian defining feature of this type of economy is research, innovation, and entrepreneurship. If the archetype of the medieval university was the repetitive instruction and absorption of ‘classics’, the DNA of the modern university is the restless quest for new knowledge (through research), which can only be encouraged by innovative and disruptive attitudes, eventually translated and applied by student/faculty entrepreneurs in collaboration with industry and enterprise. The community here therefore is the wider market economy itself, and universities are expected now to contribute to the transition to, and emergence of, this new type of economy. The expression will be different in different national and regional contexts, but it is clear that the modern university is seen as an essential tool for economic development. The hand that wields the tool is the government.

3.3. Government

The medieval university was a creature of the struggle between ecclesiastical (*Sacerdotium*) and temporal, state (*Imperium*) powers. While some modern universities retain vestigial connection to their religious origins (e.g., Notre Dame in the US; Leuven in Belgium), the temporal power has triumphed. With rare exceptions, the basic operations of most universities are funded by governments either wholly or in part (tuition fees account for a small percentage). Governments charter most universities, can influence their governance, and through arcane and increasingly finely calibrated operational funding schemes, can influence programming and even content.

The primary way in which governments influence universities, and become part of their ‘community’, is through research funding, though this is complemented by and sometimes eclipsed by industry funding in specific sectors. Research conveys prestige (more on this below), and research monies support faculty as well as students and expensive infrastructure (e.g., labs). Faculty are incentivized for tenure and promotion to do research and publish the results. And the funding amounts—either directly through government or more typically through arms-length funding agencies—are enormous. Horizon Europe, with

its Euro 93 billion funding, is a leading example. As a result, governments can nudge or shove universities more or less in any direction they wish, whether it be for specific areas of research, or for institutional reform like the creation of ‘European Universities Alliances’ (more than 560 higher education institutions gathered into 64 European University Alliances).

3.4. Global

The term ‘university’ has commonly been associated with the idea of universal knowledge, but in fact the medieval term *universitas* only meant a body of persons with a common interest and independent legal status. However, there was the feature of the *ius ubique docendi*, which while it varied in practice, grew to mean that the holder of a degree conferred by a *studium generale* (university) could teach at any other *studium generale* without requiring further examination (Cobban, 1975, p. 26). Here we have the kernel of an idea of universality, or what today we can term globality or a global community reference. This connection to a global community has several dimensions.

For faculty, it means a universal or global metric of performance. The metrification of scholarship has been driven by digital technologies that encompass every publication, every citation to every publication, and hence that standing of every scholar (h-index) and ranking of every journal (Q1, Q2, etc.). Coupled with the funding clout of governments and the insistence that this funding is an ‘investment’ and consequently should show ‘impact’, the modern university faculty member is judged against a universal and quantified benchmark. In the last decades the academic hiring market has become global as well, with applicants expected to have completed higher degrees in Europe or North America, and present their CVs with the appropriate quantifications (h-index, impact factors, etc.).

Universities also become part of a global community through accreditation of programs. This is a feature primarily of professional programs in medicine, law, engineering, but also of the administrative sciences. The expectation in these fields is that graduates must have core competencies in order to practice their professions, and this accreditation of university programs is complemented by professional accreditation of individuals once they seek to practice. In the administrative sciences (public administration and public policy) there are few instances of subsequent professional licensing, but the movement towards national but more importantly, international accreditation, has proceeded significantly in the past twenty years. Organizations like EAPPA, NAPSAA, and ICAPA offer accreditation around the world to qualifying programs, and purport to apply ‘universal competencies’ and other standard requirements in operations and administration (though acknowledging local divergence).

Universities themselves are expected to be ‘global’ in two other senses. First, just as faculty are ranked and programs accredited, so are universities. Institutions are ranked globally, as noted above. While the rankings purport to measure teaching as well as research, the most important metric is research productivity. University administrators pore over the research metrics the way market analysts follow the fluctuations in the S&P stock index. Universities can also seek accreditation as a means of establishing global credibility

—examples are the US agencies like WASC (Western Association of Schools and Colleges). Second, universities are increasingly expected to produce graduates who are equipped for ‘global challenges’, either in the sense of operating in global markets (this pertains more to business students, but seeps into other disciplines as well) or in being in some sense ‘global citizens’.

4. Conclusions

In 2022, a Google search of ‘what is wrong with higher education?’ yielded 1.3 billion results (Halabieh *et al.*, 2022). The list of complaints is long and varied, but perhaps at the heart of the unease is the bundling of often contradictory functions into one institution, and the demand that it serves the objectives of almost every ‘community’, from national competitiveness to social justice. A reckoning and reorganization are most probably on the horizon, especially if these internal contradictions are amplified by the impact of AI on learning and knowledge transmission, and the decline of the ‘degree’ as the optimal credential.

References:

1. Cobban, A.B., *The Medieval Universities: Their Development and Organization*, London: Methuen and Co. Ltd., 1975.
2. Draghi, M., *The Future of European Competitiveness*, 2024, [Online] available at https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/97e481fd-2dc3-412d-be4c-f152a8232961_en?file name=The%20future%20of%20European%20competitiveness%20_%20A%20competitive ness%20strategy%20for%20Europe.pdf, accessed on November 5, 2024.
3. Halabieh, H., Hawkins, S., Bernstein, A.E., Lewkowict, S., Unaldi Kamel, B., Fleming, L. and Levitin, D., ‘The Future of Higher Education: Identifying Current Educational Problems and Proposed Solutions’, 2022, *Education Sciences*, vol. 12, no. 12, art. no. 888.
4. Hillebrandt, M. and Huber, M., ‘Editorial: Quantifying Higher Education: Governing Universities and Academics by Numbers’, 2020, *Politics and Governance*, vol. 8, no. 2, pp. 1–5.
5. Pal, L.A., ‘Reforming Governance in Muslim-Majority States: Promoting Values or Protecting Stability?’, in Pal, L.A. and Tok, M.E. (eds.), *Global Governance and Muslim Organizations*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019, pp. 45–82.
6. Pritchett, L., ‘The World Bank and Public Sector Management: What Next?’, 2013, *International Review of Administrative Sciences*, vol. 79, no. 3, pp. 413–419.
7. Stokes, D.E., *Pasteur’s Quadrant: Basic Science and Technological Innovation*, Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 1997.