

The Network for Excellence in Higher Education (NEHE)

Foundation Document

The case for a new type of “excellence” in higher education

Many countries and universities nowadays are proclaiming excellence as the ultimate goal to be attained. Excellence, which is the main focus here, essentially refers to a pronounced elitism: the idea is to place as high as possible in international rankings by hiring the best professors – based on their number of research publications – or even Nobel prize winners or others with prestigious prizes to their credit, in order to then attract the best students. This results in a sort of selected matching up, reserved for the select few, which leads to two classes of universities: those close to the top in international rankings, such as those of Shanghai or the Times Higher Education, and the rest.

This “elitist excellence” henceforth has to be supplemented by another that is now “social and societal.” Social, in the sense that excellence should not be reserved for a small number of professors and students, much to the contrary; and societal, in so far as university studies end up providing students with the skills and knowledge they need to be key and conscientious agents in solving the major problems that our society currently faces. This type of excellence serves to provide students with “education and training that will teach them, and through them others, to respect the great harmonies of their natural environment and of life itself,” as stated in the Magna Charta Universitatum signed on 18 September 1988 by a number of rectors of European universities. Lastly, in this pursuit of excellence, one of the missions (and certainly not the least) of teachers and researchers is to elucidate major contemporary problems for society at large.

But how can this new type of excellence be achieved? First, by adopting a multi-dimensional approach. Excellence deals not only with university research objectives, but also with their instructional vocation and, thirdly, with service to the community. The European Commission’s U-Multirank classification is thus of interest in light of

those 3 factors. Next is the notion that excellence means acknowledging certain values that must be defended on behalf of the common interest. This calling constitutes part of the realm of higher education in Europe. The Louvain Declaration (2009) makes this point very explicitly but, in reality, it often tends to take a back seat relative to the goals of economic development and adequate preparation for employment. Emphasis must likewise be given to the concept of the curriculum, an integrated set of course programmes, pathways to learning and instruction, in the interest of the students. One must also, in this search for social and societal excellence, recognise that innovation is a determinant means, even if not the only one. Finally, we must implement those tools that serve to measure progress made in pursuing excellence as we have defined it, in order to encourage, motivate and, in the last instance, assess the results of such efforts.

As one can see, there are two very different visions of excellence. Pushed to the extreme, the first is as risk of producing a type of higher education that is largely utilitarian and of creating pointless competition between universities. It is also based on a notion as yet unproven: that the best teachers are those with the most publications. In this context, it is highly tempting to devote more resources to the universities with the best “performance,” to the detriment of the rest. One may wonder, moreover, about the viability of aiming to provide access to higher education for 50% of an age group while bearing this notion of elitist excellence in mind. These two objectives are obviously incompatible.

Social and societal excellence is something else altogether. It aims to provide all students, without exception, with the means to achieve their own level of excellence, which cannot help but be of benefit to the collective well-being. It forces teachers and researchers to focus not on their careers and their publications, but on the quality of their teaching. The quality of instruction will certainly be dependent of the quality of research, but research conducted solely for its own ends risks being far removed from teaching. This new type of excellence also enables us to train students – and future citizens – who are more responsible in terms of advancing the common good and social co-existence, and who are more committed to solving the problems of tomorrow’s society, rather than being merely preoccupied with obtaining a diploma just so as to get the best paying job possible. And lastly, in the long term, it enables those countries that embrace it to better overcome their problems and to take part in a new era of higher education that is more open to everyone and to the world at hand.