The University of Tomorrow: Challenging the Status Quo!

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Debating Development

Shakin' up the Ivory Tower

Imagining the university as the subject of social transformation

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Introduction

Throughout this development debate course, we were prompted to engage with contemporary societal issues and critically reflect on our expectations from the university regarding social transformation. The concept of the Ivory Tower emerged as a metaphor describing academia positioned atop a tower, observing and researching everything below. This perspective, looking down, often overlooks introspection into how and why universities function in a particular way. While academia thoroughly examines various aspects of societies, people, and histories, it tends to neglect self-analysis— questioning the nature of the university, research, academia, education systems, and syllabuses.

In this paper, we focused on three topics that resonated most with our group. When discussing the changes universities should make for a more impactful social role, the diversity of our group is crucial. Comprising both male and female students from different countries (Italy, Morocco, and Belgium), various ethnic origins, and different faiths (Muslim, Atheist and Catholic), we believe our paper provides a comprehensive perspective. However, we acknowledge that growing up in a Western society has inevitably led to the internalization of certain thought systems. One limitation may be our insufficient recognition of the connection between mind and nature in academic discourse.

Academic Productivity vs. Educational Integrity: Reimagining University Priorities

Universities offer a range of services, including higher education and the promotion of research and progress in science. Regrettably, today's universities are characterized by academic over-publication that doesn't leave much space for future generations' education.

Indeed, the university has always been perceived as the intellectual pioneer in our quest to understand the world around us. To provide answers to society's burning questions and boost development, the university has conducted its diligent research and offered eye-opening revelations to the public. So too, does modern society look to its universities to provide answers to prominent questions regarding health, technology, the climate crisis etc. Unfortunately, the pursuit of scientific curiosity is being replaced by a managerial mindset of 'marketable' and 'efficient' scientific output. Measuring academic success by the number of publications or citations turns the ideal university into a paper mill, prioritizing quantity over the quality of papers. Therefore, academics are incentivised to publish as soon as possible instead of when they have something noteworthy to share with society. Having an actual real-life impact on your field with one ground-breaking paper is less valuable than publishing half-finished work every couple of months. As a result, the sheer number of repetitive publications obscure the view of truly meaningful ones. Much like Charles Darwin never reading Mendel's unprecedented work in genetics and therefore never truly understanding the motor of evolution, the pioneering researchers today might be missing out on ground-breaking collaborations because they simply cannot find the needle in the haystack.

Furthermore, Taylor et al. (2006) provides interesting insights on the *"significant negative impact"* teaching and service commitments have on the 'productivity' of academic staff as they produce less papers and are therefore cited less (H-index). Because promotion and 'rank' in the university are highly determined by the productivity of staff, these duties are seen as inferior to research.

In line with Halffman and Radder (2015) we argue that the measures of a successful career in academia must be reimagined and diversified to provide true meaning to society in the information age. Research should be published when ready, papers should be written when academics have something noteworthy to share. Not just when their evaluation looms around the corner or they need a promotion. It follows that if we consider the passing of knowledge, output of degrees, pass-rate of students etc. as essential roles of the university, teaching and service commitments should be viewed as equally important to the number of publications. Unfortunately, in today's academic climate, teaching and service carry an *"opportunity cost"* with them for academics.

Following this trend, we see that lecturers received alarmingly little formal teacher training - or in many cases - none whatsoever. According to Fertig (2012) & Hiemstra and S. McCaffery (2012) *"The majority of the professors claimed to have learned to teach by trial and error and by emulating their favourite teachers' approaches and tactics."* Fertig (2012) recalls colleagues *"being told not to spend much time on their teaching because that could get in the way of their research programs"*. The question therefore arises if students receive value teaching for their expensive tuition. Parallel to society, students also represent a crucial stakeholder of the university. Our future generations in high schools are taught, challenged, and encouraged by teachers who received extensive pedagogical training, are constantly kept up to date of their field and critically assessed in the way they guide their students to adulthood. But as soon as these students reach the age of eighteen, their teachers are replaced with people who are told to minimize their efforts in the lecture halls, received no pedagogical training whatsoever and are not to focus on their student's education.

Overall, we firmly believe that these subjects are unmistakably linked to one-another. Doing away with inter-university competition would result in less pressure to publish, therefore decreasing the need for universities to favour their most cited researchers. Hence, teaching could be seen as equally valuable or 'productive' as research. Giving lecturers formal teaching training would become a valid investment into the staff's development and the quality of classes would go up, followed by an increase of student success rates. If staff is only rewarded based on the number of papers they produce, students suffer a less valuable education and in the long run, the advancement of science is hampered. In other terms, defending science and universities as common assets requires a shift in perspective, emphasizing shared growth through sharing knowledge, defending the purpose of academic pursuits, and steering away from purely economic motivations. Another possibility to overturn this system is the need for large-scale organization. We can reform the rigid top-down system from the bottom, from within, if we collectively resist. We envision the formation of unions that mirror the administration, who are diverse, inclusive, progressive, quality-focused, not afraid to speak, and oriented towards the common good.

The reputation of universities as a brand is also affecting academia, as Schinkel (2023) writes about a survey by Erasmus University Amsterdam. University administrators want the academic environment to be an integral part of contemporary order, addressing current societal challenges. However, when there is no space for critical or activist students, the university does exactly the opposite: it ignores the fact that the knowledge we produce is inseparable from the struggle for our lives. We encourage universities to, if they really want to stand behind their socially engaged slogans, leave room for student protests and take them seriously. Higher education systems should attract activist students, not scare them away. We argue, together with Schinkell, that now, buzzwords do not really threaten the university using them: it is just a canvas behind which the conservative institution can hide in peace.

University, a space for everyone

Discrimination and racism are still a problem that universities face today. Students and staff are still discriminated based on race, gender, or both. The current Israel-Palestine conflict sheds light on how racism is still very present in universities. We are convinced that these topics should be critically discussed. Although the University of Antwerp organized an informative session on Israel-Palestine where questions could be asked, it remained very safe and informative: facts were listed without daring to draw conclusions from them. The rector of UAntwerpen has not taken a stance and is convinced that this neutrality is the best solution (Van Goethem, 2023). UAntwerpen is not alone in this, the stance most universities are taking in the Israel-Palestine conflict is silence in the name of intellectual objectivity. However, now is not the moment for academic neutrality since it disguises tolerance of the worst human rights violations. Universities teach us about genocide etc, but those same universities are now silent on Gaza. This proves that, despite their branding, universities are in fact not serious about decolonization and real diversity.

The Israel-Palestine conflict does show us how strong student resistance can be: especially in the UK we have witnessed a lot of student awareness-raising. Even during our own class on the 21st of November, students had the courage to speak up for Palestine. They distributed roses, carrying the names of Palestinian victims. They asked the speakers to read their names out loud, urging the university to act. We very much encourage this: students should use their voice to express solidarity with each other and especially with discriminated groups.

Regrettably, discrimination and racism reinforce the existence of disparities and inequalities within the university. As a matter of facts, Breeze and Leigh (2022) highlight a paradox where claims of inclusivity often mask the perpetuation of elitism. Rather than embodying its true meaning, inclusion becomes a tool to enhance institutional reputation. Breeze states that this fake pursuit of inclusion obstructs the real structural transformation that is needed.

Breeze and Leigh (2022) also note that queer individuals are often over-researched in flagship funded research projects whereas they are never in charge, nor see any money. To reach full inclusion they state that radical change is necessary and urge universities to be dismantled, centring queer lives and needs. The current structure, dominated by heteronormativity, structures sociability, getting a job and access to resources within the university and should be overthrown.

Research conducted by Banda Chitsamatanga (2023) emphasizes that the meaning of LGBTQ+ should be unpacked to reach a holistic understanding. In order to do so, we need to include queer issues into our curriculum, not only to equip students with effective ways to defend themselves from victimization and bullying but also to redefine universities as a safe space where consideration, change and constant reform is the norm. She argues that critical pedagogy is essential to question the construction of knowledge, its legitimacy, and its celebration by dominant groups.

Furthermore, Morantes-Africano (2023) adds a dimension of personal growth suggesting that individuals can challenge their preconceived ideas given through their upbringing by deliberately exposing themselves to gender and sexual diversity. To unlearn these heteronormative standards, we must realize that education plays a crucial role. Teachers must be out and proud and take a stance against inequalities affecting minorities. This not only promotes pride in one's identity but also in confronting systems of oppression, where topics like this are ought shameful and must remain in the closet. "*The more cultural discourse there is, alongside visibility, media representation, proximity to LGBTQ+*

teachers, students, and allies as role models, the more we can nurture acceptance and understanding of difference" (Morantes-Africano, 2023, p. 252). In other words, we must 'queer our habitus' and by doing so we must recognise that queerness already exists.

We believe that it is time for the administration to be reformed in accordance with the diversity present at the university. Each faction should be represented according to the school's population. Every voice needs to be heard, and one cannot speak for others if they do not understand their experiences and limitations. In this way, the curriculum can be enriched by incorporating issues such as queer problems in lesson topics, aiming for full inclusion and recognizing their presence and dignity. Rigid patterns of knowledge need to be broken, and aspects like gender and sexual diversity should be normalized. Sharp et al. (2022) emphasize that research is mostly conducted by heterosexual researchers, while we believe that research conducted by the ingroup would provide better insights and favour the right people in terms of compensation and leadership.

Unmasking Coloniality in Academia: Extractivism, Disobedience, and Decolonial Struggles

Most western universities still have colonial entanglement through space and time. And that is because the research we produce in said western universities results and travels within the colonial setting and political entanglements such as research availability and grant allocation. The research in question, from those universities, in social sciences studies implicitly aims to commodify the pain and suffering of those who have been colonised. Methodology and methods carry the codes of colonisation and imperialism. The clear depiction of hypocrisy of the West when it comes to decolonization, especially when it comes to Israel-Palestine conflict or the BLM movement for example and the long existing (colonial) research that is highlighting the "universal" definition of peace/human rights as will be mentioned below.

Another problem to take into consideration when speaking about decolonization of universities is extractivism. The term "extractivism" in academia refers to practices that exploit marginalized or less powerful communities, often without reciprocity or benefiting them (Grosfoguel, 2019). It refers mainly to the idea of stealing knowledge from Global South cultures, putting them in a western cultural environment, without mentioning in the publishing the fact that the ideas were taken from local traditions or communities. Furthermore, most of the times academics distort values and ideas without respecting the minorities' perspectives. We echo Dey's call for a departure from mere universalism to embrace genuine diversity, particularly respecting indigenous knowledge systems. Those whose knowledge is extracted need to be aware of their rights in order to resist such practices (Dey, 2022).

We believe that the problem of extractivism is closely linked to the over-publication of papers and articles by scholars. The academic environment requires scholars to publish an inadequate number of publications for scientific journals if they want to be competitive in the "university market". For this reason, most of researchers have been exploiting rural communities, and use their knowledge to remain in the academic sector. As the author Grosfoguel suggested "*The problem is when one culture destroys another, appropriating its contributions in the process and leaving no trace of the peoples who produce them*" (Grosfoguel, 2019, p. 12). The problem is not taking and understanding better local and rural traditions and community, but not giving them adequate rights, keeping them outside the university environment. In this way researchers, publishers but also universities keep all the money from the publication, without giving local communities rights over them. Both the terms; colonisation and extractivism, go hand in hand when we discuss the decolonization process that universities must go through. As extractivism stems from colonialism is the first place.

Additionally, there is the importance of epistemic or pedagogical disobedience that Daley and Murrey (2022) discussed, where educators, students and activists work to unlearn colonial logics for futures beyond capitalist models. They argue that we need a new language to be able to decolonize university since knowledge is not isolated of existing powers. New, critical, decolonized syllabuses are needed in every domain (Murrey, 2019). Too many people are convinced that academia is already decolonized, which it is not. To make a real change, it will take more than superficial efforts which just replicate colonialism. We need to stay committed to projects of decolonization, while still being critical to appropriation. In her article they mention Ubuntu as an alternative concept of progress or development.

There are ways to improve the attempts towards decolonization such as defiant scholarships which can be defined as the; "*active scholarly practice that seeks to work against and outside of colonial grammars and prevailing registers*" (Daley & Murrey, 2022). Rooted in the concept of epistemic disobedience, this approach aims to uncouple academia and research from the shackles of colonial knowledge. The idea is that defiance can be "*a tool to dismantle coloniality in African geographies, as well as to contribute to ruptures of and within the colonial 'uni-versity*' (Daley & Murrey, 2022). This defiance is the term used to critique Westernized institutions of higher education for being based on European canons, foundations, and modes. The solution of defiant scholarship is supposed to be situated within decolonial struggles and the prospects of transformative academic futures, including that of the 'pluriversity' (Boidin et al., 2012), meaning; "*the active rupture of Eurocentric canons through excluded, dangerous and marginalised epistemes*" (Daley & Murrey, 2022). Furthermore, participating in the debating development sessions we understood that to fight extractivism in academia goodwill and good behaviour are not enough. "*If we want to fight extractivism, we first must change our relationships, our conduct, basing them on reciprocity, respect, and plurality*" (Moreno Cely Adriana, 2023). A good solution could be extrapolated from the Ubuntu Philosophy, that underlines the importance of the communities and the respect for others. Céleste wrote her bachelor thesis on the added value ubuntu could bring to the universalisation of human rights. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights hides notions of power, domination, and colonialism as it is largely leaving collective, socio-economic rights out, favoring Western countries (Kaplan, 2018). Professors in many different disciplines cite or teach about human rights as a universal, overarching concept. Therefore, all university professors have a responsibility to raise the issue of Western imperialism that shines through in human rights, and to engage in debate with their students on what perspectives they feel are missing from the current human rights framework.

When attempting these practices of decolonisation, it is normal to experience decolonial discomfort. Resulting in feelings of disconnection, insecurity, and shame (Sheik, 2020). It will be uncomfortable as it will make you reflect on everything we know in academia. This is achieved through first recognizing the disadvantage of having a geopolitical position in western institutions and how to deal with the discomfort that comes along with it (Sheik, 2020). Assistant Professor and Doctor Zuleika Bibi Sheik explained this through her own experiences stating that even if she were to change her methods of teaching and way of learning was put in question and had to adhere to a certain standard set by the board of education, putting her career at risk. The decolonial discomfort additionally applies to countries/institutions with a colonial background as they must practice epistemic vulnerability which means that they must be open to be shaped by others and that the ignorance needs to be broken down.

Conclusion

In conclusion, our group resonates deeply with the challenges of academic over-productivity, discrimination, and colonial ties in universities. The struggle to balance productivity and educational integrity calls for reforms, including redefining success, investing in teaching training, and fostering inclusivity through large-scale organizational changes like forming unions. The ongoing racism in universities, highlighted by the Israel-Palestine conflict, urges us to participate in student resistance and demand radical changes to dismantle heteronormativity and prioritize true inclusion. The disturbing scale of colonial ties in Western universities prompts a call for genuine decolonization, involving epistemic disobedience, defiant scholarship, and embracing discomfort. We advocate for adopting the Ubuntu philosophy to foster reciprocal, respectful academic relationships and encourage the university to step out of its comfort zone for transformative change. True change begins internally, and we assert that the time to initiate that change is now.

Recognition of group member's contributions

Baeten Anse (referred to as A.B.)
Boussery Andreas (referred to as B.A.)
El Harrak Samadi Hajar (referred to as S.H.)
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Trotter Pietro (referred to as T.P.)

A.B., B.A., S.H., M.C. and T.P. conceived and planned the essay. A.B., B.A., S.H., M.C. and T.P. contributed to writing the essay. T.P. and S.H. ensured that the text was shortened and thus achieved all objectives while also adding subtitles. S.H. made sure to correct any overseen typing or grammatical errors while providing the right format. S.H. wrote the introduction. T.P. created the vision board. B.A. and M.C. made the video concerning the vision board. A.B. and M.C. wrote the conclusion. A.B. added references in accordance with the 7th edition of the APA Style. A.B. wrote the recognition of the group members' contributions. During this project A.B., B.A., S.H., M.C. and T.P. agreed on internal deadlines and adhered to them.

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