

COMMENTS ON PROFESSOR KEN BAIN'S LECTURE: DO WE LEARN ANYTHING AT UNIVERSITY?

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From a similar perspective to that adopted by Professor Bain in respect of university and the diverse and multiple phenomena that occur therein, we will examine the parameters that I consider worth highlighting.

First of all we must establish a common definition of university on which to base ourselves. By way of example, Agustín Basave Fernández, of the Centre for Humanistic Studies of the Autonomous University of Nueva León, Mexico, defines it as “the corporation of students and lecturers who for the purposes of research and teaching undertake the contemplation of the truth, the organic unity of knowledge, the fulfilment of personal vocations and the training of professionals necessary in order to achieve the common good”ⁱⁱ.

Meanwhile, the DIEC defines the University as “an educational institution made up of various centres where the advanced study of diverse branches of knowledge takes place and the corresponding qualifications are awarded”ⁱⁱⁱ. It is not my aim to make an exhaustive analysis of these two definitions; I simply consider them to be complimentary in general terms.

It is clear that university is one of the possible options open to students today for continuing their training. The problem is that there is a significant jump between university education and the type of education received up to that point. This is when those students who remain motivated or who aspire to a specific job realise that a large amount of the knowledge that they have acquired is not as useful as they had been led to believe.

University must provide useful knowledge that is applicable on a day-by-day basis; real knowledge that will be required during the professional development of those who decide to enter, i.e. students.

University is an institution of unarguable importance in most of the world's societies. It is considered the source of the creation and dissemination of knowledge from one generation to the next in order to match the required professional profiles and needs of a given time.

That is why the focus should be on students' capacity for acquiring knowledge, retaining it and applying it in the various situations and contexts in which they may find themselves. However, in addition to this, university must ensure that on completing their studies, students are not only equipped to apply their studies professionally but also that their personal and social maturity has developed enough to achieve the real success of university, i.e. placing qualified, capable and self-sufficient individuals on the job market.

This is where the main problem arises. University ignores all the personal and developmental aspects of its students. The fact is that everybody enters university according to the final grades

achieved in standard exams sat by thousands of students. We do not live in a homogenous society, so what is the point of measuring all students by the same yardstick? We have not all had the same experiences, or even similar experiences, and it is both logical and positive that we are all different. University entrance exams should therefore also be different.

We cannot expect good quality teaching for groups that typically contain 80-90 students. Not all 80 students in a group/class can be taught in the same way; likewise it is impossible to expect everybody to achieve the highest grades in exams.

Why? I believe that there are several reasons. The first and most important is the expectation that all students should reach the same goal and in the same way. Not everybody reaches the same destination in the same way; some will travel by car, others by plane and others by boat, depending on an individual's characteristics. Some will go faster, others slower, crossing the finishing line at different times. This is logical, is it not?

But there are other reasons. It seems to me that university must represent a continuation of the regulated learning process of students. At present there is a huge breakdown where not even the minimum required standards are achieved. The solution is not to lower the bar but rather to provide all children, young people and adults with common minimum standards. The best ways to achieve this must be explored, ensuring that 100% of the population reaches an optimum educational standard that is not restricted to those entering university. Upon reaching university, students should already know about the world in which they live. They should be critical and self-sufficient; a textual analysis should not seem so difficult. University must harness all this prior knowledge in line with the scaffolding theory, whereby all previously assimilated structures adapt to newly acquired knowledge. Knowledge is perfected by progressing from nought to one and from one to two. We cannot attempt to jump from nought to two because we then end up in the present situation, where year after year the same content has to be repeated because students do not understand, retain or remember knowledge and are therefore incapable of applying it in a range of possible situations.

Here is the crux of the matter. Students do not retain, remember or know how to apply information, which must therefore be repeated year after year. Being a student myself I can vouch that this is true. However, not only students are to blame since we are just the result of the interaction of the established system with a certain amount of social context and self-sufficiency. An examination of the academic failure rates of different countries bears this out.

Do you truly believe that the current system promotes the positive acquisition of knowledge? Or are students and teaching staff alike simply concerned with passing exams? Do you really believe, generally speaking, that passing exams is proportional to the amount of knowledge acquired? Do you really believe that achieving good grades makes people better prepared for dealing with life and their future professions than achieving bad grades? If we take another look at students' personal experiences and characteristics we find that the grades obtained are often in fact secondary or irrelevant.

As Mr. Bain has rightly stated, the American evaluation system has evolved in terms of grading from “pass and fail” to “A, B, C, D and E”, later adding “+” and “-“. This provides a much broader spectrum of options, making it much easier to pinpoint a student's exact level at a given moment.

Logically, in most cases (and we hope that the situation now changes thanks to the European Space for Higher Education), these results come from an exam in which (in the best of cases) 10% of the final grade is evaluated according to the student's attitude, participation and attendance.

But do you think that the established system is really objective? I apologise for repeating myself but, as in the case of university entrance exams, the exams sat during university degrees simply evaluate the memory levels of students regarding a specific topic. It is very rare for exams to be open in nature, designed to encourage reasoning, the expression of one's own experiences in respect of the specific topic and the resolution of conflicts through a theoretical approach that is both well-grounded and based on one's personal viewpoint.

Students are not interested in memorising. What we want is to acquire resources to employ when we need information. We wish to be literate in terms of new technologies, culture and society. We believe that the fairest evaluation system is one that takes into account our individual peculiarities and history. It must safeguard the minimum standards required by teaching staff but in an open and clear way, facilitating the search for the necessary resources to resolve the presented conflict. We do not want exams based on rewriting class notes but rather an assignment that poses a more interesting challenge than memorising a book full of notes, which although very interesting is rather uninspiring. Under the current system we all complain about students cheating in exams. I am not defending such practices but I find them perfectly understandable. To combat cheating, separating students on the day of the exam is insufficient. The exam concept must be reformulated in such a way that smuggling crib notes into exams seems both unappealing and pointless.

Furthermore, and once again echoing Mr. Bain's sentiments, it is the teacher's job to establish content. The student's job is to listen actively in order to develop. Yet we would be wrong to state that these roles are unalterable. Everybody is responsible for ensuring that the learning process is seen as attractive and not just something necessary for one's professional future, which may be the case at the moment. We must ensure that students are active agents in their own development and that educational training is not passive but rather involves feedback from students to teaching staff.

We must reach a point where students do not have an attitude to passing exams that can be summed up by “great, one less subject to study” but rather that they see it as gaining knowledge. The subject matter must be given enough importance for students to feel that it would be a pity not to study it further.

Yet the current situation is logical. Today's society does not want people with knowledge but rather young inexperienced people with qualifications. Everything is becoming professionalised

in such a way that it is unusual to come across the type of situation that I remember being told about when I was young, when there were trade apprentices who were mentored at work by an expert. How else is one supposed to learn? Whenever possible, degree courses should be studied practically 100% hand in hand with the profession that they lead to, ensuring that students are in constant contact with the profession that they are studying for. Practical work should be a basic requirement in any degree course. Theoretical sessions should be used simply to complement and support practical work and real experience. It should not be the other way round, as it is at the moment, since this leads to Kafkaesque situations such as in the case of driving schools in Catalonia, where the teachers themselves admit that they are teaching you how to pass the exam but that you really learn to drive later on, once you have your driving licence and you are on your own. This is not what we want.

Last of all, structuring university systems to include the active participation of students represents the extent to which students are being accommodated in order to feel comfortable about the whole process. Student parties are not the only thing that we should remember about our university days. Instead, we should feel that the entire university belongs to us, that we can work towards fulfilling our own needs there and towards improving it. This is how university would really show that it is working towards a participative and democratic management model in which students not only come to study and complete a degree but also to participate in the process of constructing the university itself. Although this is perfectly feasible in legal terms, its implementation is by no means straightforward. This is due to both a lack of motivation on the part of students and to the facilities made available to them. Having read the above, perhaps it is now possible to understand that the disaffection towards university found amongst large numbers of students is due to the significant reluctance to make them real participants in all the processes that affect them, both in terms of the internal politics of the university and in lecture halls.

ⁱ Basave Fernández del Valle, Agustín. *Ser y quehacer de la Universidad. Estructura y misión de la Universidad vocacional*. Centre for Humanistic Studies of the Autonomous University of Nuevo León, Mexico, 1971, p. 56.

ⁱⁱ Diccionari de la llengua catalana of the Institut d'Estudis Catalans. Second edition.