



# Today's academic values

by Ivan Leban



Professor Ivan Leban of the University of Ljubljana in Slovenia expresses his concerns about current reforms in higher education <sup>1</sup>

## Higher education in Slovenia

A Slovenian chemist by profession, I have taught chemistry and crystallography at the University of Ljubljana for 36 years. Influenced by my own international experience as a PhD student in the United Kingdom back in 1973, I have been greatly involved in the implementation of Bologna reforms at my university.

The higher education system in Slovenia consists of only four state universities and some other small higher education institutions. Only the University of Ljubljana is a complete and national university, with art academies and studies in medicine and veterinary science. The University has a total of 26 faculties with more than 100 undergraduate programmes and roughly the same at the graduate level. Out of the approximately 360 PhD degrees in Slovenia, 320 are conferred at the Ljubljana University each year. Within the Slovenian population of around two million, more than 80% of

the student body are now continuing their studies at an institution of higher education. It is inevitable that the implementation of the Bologna declaration will take place fully in Slovenia, as it is enforced by our Law of Higher Education (2004).

## The role of the university

In this respect, I am sceptical to some degree about the global higher education movement and reforms. Under the Bologna declaration, universities became obliged to perform the activities, which they had already been doing traditionally, such as the mobility of students and teachers, accreditation and evaluation, diploma supplements, transparency of teaching and research, and bilateral cooperation. It seemed that, for the first time, politicians dared to state clearly that the universities and higher education as a whole had to be subordinated to the labour market – effectively, to those who provided the capital. It is also the first time during the nearly 900-year history of

universities that a large union of states has conspired against the institution of the university.

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## Independence from political authority

As we know, “the western-type university was born in the 11th century, mainly in northern Italy and England, because there were people who wanted to teach and acquire knowledge without royal or ecclesiastical control and influence. Their concept was really successful and the universities founded a little later in Paris, Prague, Uppsala, Vienna and elsewhere have decisively changed the cultural and political face of Europe. When Wilhelm von Humboldt championed the unity of teaching and research in the early 19th century, he put a finishing touch to one of the proudest achievements of our civilisation.”<sup>2</sup> As the existence of the universities is now heavily



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dependent on vested capital, there are also some doubts about the academic statement in the *Magna Charta Universitatum* (signed by 388 European rectors in 1988 in Bologna) which states: “In order to meet the needs of the world around it, university research and teaching must be morally and intellectually independent of all political authority and economic power”.

Which scenario will unfold in my country? Four-year studies will eventually be shortened to the common European three years, and academic studies will be changed to more vocational ones. Increasingly, fees will have to be paid for the second cycle of university studies, but also the students who finish the first cycle after three years will be forced to pay fees, namely for lifelong learning.

#### Education as a public good?

Being influenced by capital, the glossary of the Bologna reform is now full of terms known from industrial production, such

as best practice, excellence, competitiveness, and sustainable development. I am also afraid that the academic vocabulary will soon contain the words: franchising, outsourcing and off shoring, and that degrees will be obtained at retail prices. Some of these words have even become buzzwords in the Bologna process.

**Are the students really a ‘raw material’ and ‘human capital’ who become ‘value added’ when they complete their degree?**

At this point we have to ask ourselves: Are the students really a ‘raw material’ and ‘human capital’ who become ‘value added’ when they complete the ‘educational process’ with their degree? And what is really happening to traditional academic values? In the 2003 Berlin Communiqué, it is written: “Ministers (responsible for higher education) reaffirm the importance of the social dimension of the Bologna Process. The need to increase

competitiveness must be balanced with the objective of improving the social characteristics of the European Higher Education Area, aiming at strengthening social cohesion and reducing social and gender inequalities both at national and at European level. In that context, Ministers reaffirm their position that higher education is a public good and a public responsibility. They emphasise that in international academic cooperation and exchanges, academic values should prevail.” The wording ‘education as public good (free access, no tuition fees, etc)’ did not appear again, neither in the Bergen Communiqué of 2005, nor in the London Communiqué of 2007.

#### Academic values

Let us ask again, what is really happening to academic values? This is all connected to the role of universities in society. Needless to say, academic values and human rights are not really explicitly mentioned in the papers of the European Union regarding universities. However,



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we (students and academics) should constantly stress the importance of academic values such as freedom of thought, free access, equality and collaboration. To support this, I cite the serious omission which was made by politicians in the 2003 Berlin Communiqué in the last paragraph on degree structure: “Ministers stress their commitment to making higher education equally accessible to all, on the basis of capacity, by every appropriate means.”

This sentence was lifted, *verbatim*, from the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, UN resolution, from 1966, article 13, part 2(c) which says: “The States Parties recognise that, with a view to achieving the full realisation of this right: higher education shall be made equally accessible to all, on the basis of capacity, by every appropriate means, *and in particular by the progressive introduction of free education*”. Here “progressive introduction of free education” means that while states must prioritise the provision of free primary education, they also have an obligation to take concrete steps towards achieving free secondary and higher education. Since the “social dimension of the Bologna process” as mentioned in the Berlin Communiqué is supposed to incorporate these “concrete steps”, I am really concerned that the last part of the sentence (as italicised above) was omitted from the text of the Berlin Communiqué.

#### Labour-market approach

Furthermore, I am convinced that the Bologna declaration stands in contradiction to the abovementioned International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. The Bologna declaration promotes European citizens’ employability and the international competitiveness of the European higher

education system. In other words, educate primarily for the European labour market, rather than considering that “the education has to be directed to the full development of the human personality, to the sense of its dignity, and that education will strengthen the respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. The education shall enable all persons to participate effectively in a free society, promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations and all racial, ethnic or religious groups, and further to promote the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace”. Instead of moving towards free higher education, the Bologna process introduces tuition fees and private universities into our study system, and Slovenia is no exception.

**The role of universities is to educate people, to provide students with general, universal knowledge, to create an autonomous human being**

#### Reform for reform’s sake

Some of my other concerns are about the ideas of employability, career-oriented study and diploma supplements. I am sure that there are experts in Europe who can analyse the educational systems and then gradually exchange any negative aspects for better options. But, the Bologna process reminds me of socialist-type reforms: reform for reform’s sake. We implemented them in the former Yugoslavia, one after another: we had credit points in 1948, two-tiered systems up to 1996 and career-oriented education for employability later. Yet all of these experiments failed. Now, Europe is somehow copying these failed Yugoslav approaches.

#### Do not mend what is not broken

The role of universities is to educate people, to provide students with general,

universal knowledge, to create an autonomous human being – a free thinker. They are not meant to simply educate people for the labour market. I agree with the proverb: ‘Do not mend what is not broken’. There are many examples of excellent universities in Europe and let us use good ‘European practice’ to improve the negative aspects. This is simply my personal view on some aspects of the current reforms in higher education and I would be glad if some of you who read these lines would also consider them. I am not asking for action – just that you think about them. ■

<sup>1</sup> This article was influenced by the presentation: *Can the university survive the Bologna process?*

by Professor Jože Mencinger, Rector of the University of Ljubljana, Slovenia, and an essay by Professor Rastko Močnik, University of Ljubljana, entitled *Bologna conspiracy* published in the weekly Slovenian journal *Mladina*, Ljubljana, 24 May 2004. Preferred reading also includes the critical writings by Professor G Schatz in the book: *Jeff’s view on science and scientists* (Elsevier, 2006).

<sup>2</sup> see R Močnik paper.

<sup>3</sup> see F Schatz’s book.



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