

Methods of Bringing the Present to the University

The war in Ukraine is a terrible event. But one of its effects could be part of the development of a university through organizational learning. In this practical small paper, I want to draw the attention on the risk of a university to become stuck in old trails, and methods for the university to avoid it by exploiting the staff and the student's exposure to today's reality.

Universities are old, inert and viscous organizations

Universities tend partly to live in the past. While this inert and viscous character have the advantage to create stable conditions for systematic scientific knowledge, it has its drawbacks by making the university less aligned with today's present.

The university contains a staff that were educated in the dominating knowledge by that time, which were old even then, and have become even more old.

The staff tend to be organized in faculties structured according to an old knowledge division into specific academic subjects. These subjects create borders that stimulates cooperation within the faculties but hinders and even suppress cooperation over the borders. New subjects are sometimes established, but only after hard fights with a lot of power games.

Teacher's research, especially the empirically oriented research, could partly counteract the risk of living in the past since they collect and reflect on present data. But even research is old, since it uses established, and therefore old theories and concepts to construct research problems and to analyse the data. Especially deductive research is subject to the inertia risk, while systematic inductive research has to abstract from observations of today's reality, thus being subject to empirical influence of the present. In my field, business administration, we know that the invention of the multi-divisional organizational form, that today is so dominating, where developed in US around 1920. But the scientific knowledge, i.e., the conceptualising of the form through a systematic description appeared 1962 by Alfred Chandler in the book 'Strategy and Structure'. Thus, it took 40 years before reality became scientifically established.

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Universities need always to counteract the necessary inertia by bringing today's present into the university. There are several methods a university can use in order to reduce the dark consequences of its inertia. In this paper I will only focus on the humans that are present at the university and the situation that the war has created.

The staff as informants

The staff have always been the major source of the university's 'present awareness', i.e., processed information about the present society. The staff is exposed to the present through different activities, such as visits at conferences in order to present their research, teaching at other universities and visiting other organization in order to conduct research. However, according to my personal experience, these occasions of being present in another 'present' than the home university are seldom used in order to systematically collect and process information that later are presented

at the home university. While there could be hopes of dissemination of impressions and observations to people at the home university, there is very seldom a system of dissemination at the university, which imply that the observations, the impressions, and insights gained from the outside reach the staff of the university in a random way, if ever.

Today, Ukrainian universities have more possibilities of 'present awareness'. Due to the war, Ukrainian universities have a teacher diaspora. Part of the staff are living in Romania, Hungary, Germany, Sweden, and other places. They perform their duties towards their university through on-line teaching and meetings. Indeed, it is terrible and sad. Yet, the teacher diaspora could be exploited for 'present awareness', and thereby to contribute to university development.

Those teachers living abroad could visit nearby universities, make observations and interviews at these universities, which they analyse and make a report to the home university. They could create personal and institutional links between the universities, arrange joint research seminars through internet, but also create meetings between administrators, so administrative techniques and experiences could be shared.

The teacher diaspora could, as in the case of PUA, with its focus on language and business, be used to visit their academic subject's praxis environment. Business teachers could visit corporations, interpreters and translators could visit printing houses and professional translator corporations. Normally these organizations could be expected to be hesitant to devote time for visitors, but today, with the strong European solidarity towards Ukraine, they could be expected to be more positive and inviting.

Thus, while a teacher diaspora is a very bad consequence of the war, it could be exploited as a resource for 'present awareness' in order to develop the university.

The students as informants

Students present at the campus are an important oxygenator of the academic environment, bring their 'present' to the university. With the war, they are unfortunately less present. On the other hand, many of them are like many teachers, in a student diaspora, located outside Ukraine. Therefore, they can be asked to perform a similar task as the teachers, to visit a nearby university and to make observations and interviews, maybe even create linkages to the home university. Probably they need some guidance from the home university, implying that the home university need to have a kind of system of management of the students that are abroad. The students abroad need to be recommended which university to visit, to be given guidance how to observe the other university's teaching methods and their program structures. Each student, or a group of students, if they are at the same location, then gives back a small report to the home university, which compiles the reports into a concise report. This report is distributed to all teachers, in order to create the possibility of all teachers to increase their 'present awareness'.

After the war this system of students as informants can still be used. Many students go to study abroad for a semester or two. According to my experience this is mainly done for the development of the student. This is, however, an opportunity of present awareness for the university that is lost. All students that are studying abroad should be considered as a resource for the university to be used as informants.

Alumni students as informants

Alumni students have left the university and are now present in the society, performing different tasks, being at different positions and gaining a lot of information about the present that could be of use by the university. In that respect they can constitute a resource for the university. Very often alumni students have a loyalty to the Alma mater that can be used in order to gain information. They could be asked to respond on surveys where they are asked to report on what their education gave to them that has been useful for them, and what it didn't give to them, and what they experience in their working life that could be important for the university to know and to be used by the teaching staff in order to reflect on the teaching content today.

Alumni students could be asked to have seminars, on-line or preferable at campus, with both students and teachers where they describe their work and how their education is related to their present work. These seminars could motivate students and help teachers to reflect on the syllabus.

Other informants

My personal experience is that society contains many individuals, not only alumni, that are prepared to give of their experience to universities. It is viewed as a duty towards science and to the development of society. Many individuals experience it as an honour to be asked to come to the university. Thus, universities have a potential resource that is not, according to my experience, exploited to its limits. Today, with the solidarity that many outside Ukraine have to Ukraine due to the war, it could be a resource to exploit through on-line seminars today and, after the war, with on-campus seminar.

Conclusion

The war in Ukraine is a terrible event. However, it creates opportunities to gain information and thereby expose the university to higher levels of 'present awareness' through its teacher and student diaspora, and to use the resource that the solidarity towards Ukraine represent, today and tomorrow.

Коллін Свен-Олоф. Методи осучаснення університетів.

У статті обговорюється, як війна в Україні може стати для університетів стимулом для формування освітніх інновацій. Стверджується, що університети часто є застарілими та ригідними установами, що покладаються на старі знання та чинять опір змінам. Подолання цієї проблеми розглянуто в площині використання викладачами та студентами поточної реальності як джерела для накопичення організаційного досвіду та творчості. Для модернізації та активізації навчального процесу пропонуються такі методи як: створення міждисциплінарних команд, заохочення до індуктивних досліджень та залучення зовнішніх стейкхолдерів. Робиться висновок про те, що війна в Україні є викликом, але водночас і шансом для університетів стати більш актуальними та динамічними.

Ключові слова: емпіричне дослідження, індуктивне дослідження, інновації в університетській освіті, накопичення організаційного досвіду, війна в Україні.

Collin Sven-Olof Yrjö. Methods of Bringing the Present to the University.

The paper discusses how the war in Ukraine can bring some learning and innovative opportunities for universities. It argues that universities are often outdated and rigid institutions that rely on old knowledge and resist change. It suggests that universities can overcome this problem by using the staff and the students' exposure to the current reality as a source of learning and creativity. It proposes some methods for the university to foster the educational process by creating interdisciplinary teams, encouraging inductive research, and involving external stakeholders. It concludes that the war in Ukraine is a challenge, but also a chance for the university to become more relevant and dynamic.

Key words: empirical research, inductive research, organizational learning, university innovation, war in Ukraine.