

The Public University and Market Hegemony - International trends and implications for the future of the University of Malta*



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THE GLOBAL MARKET has placed the public university in a situation where it is forced to reconcile the logic of profit and social service. Caught as it is between forces which often pull in opposite directions, the University of Malta is also burdened with certain endemic problems: smallness of scale, insularity and chronic vulnerability which hinder its rate of development. The international trends in this field indicate that hopes for a better future lie only in a radical transformation of the University of Malta into a site of both academic quality and profitability.

The commodification of the educational process by the World Trade Organization, the proliferation of private educational institutions, the erosion of public funds for tertiary education and the process of devolution of responsibility for fund management and entrepreneurship – all these have edged the public university into a market, both local and foreign, in which the logic of profit and financial viability sometimes tends to dominate the discourse of quality tertiary education.

The logic of the market has swept the public university into an ocean of uncertainty and unpredictability. The very discourse of accessibility, public service, academic autonomy and intellectual independence is being transformed into a predominantly managerial discourse of accountability, competitiveness, efficiency, relevance and flexibility. The principles of social justice and democracy are being bartered for an economic 'realpolitik'. The public university is no longer itself determining the tertiary education agenda.

Real and concrete work opportunities have significantly changed the profile of many public universities. Work and the hope that certification will ensure financial gain are loading the dice in favour of professional courses. In fact the massive increase in enrolment in the public university is positively correlated to the expansion of faculties, departments and institutes which offer courses that are directly related to work. Academia has indubitably become more functional. The root cells of tertiary education are mutating in order to respond to the exigencies of market forces. This is creating a situation in which a number of institutions which offer basic traditional qualifications have either closed shop or become much more low profile.

The market is also exercising a determining influence on research. In many countries, the expansion of tertiary education coupled with the politics of neo-liberalism has led to public universities being expected to supplement funding by the state. For these institutions, research is an important source of their very existence. On the open market of research, researchers freely explore local, national and transnational spaces. In this process they form teams and research communities which

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sell knowledge and skills to institutions that in turn finance this research – industry, trans-national corporations, public institutions, international projects. Thus viable research is up for sale on the open market. In fact, according to the hegemonic logic of the market, researchers are regarded as the clients of remote patrons: the independence of research is being re-moulded in the forge of the financing process.

The logic of the market has led several private entities to compete with public institutions for the allocation of funds for research. International trends indicate that private institutions are constantly increasing their share of the cake, so much so that many researchers are migrating from public sites to private research institutions. In the Anglo-Saxon world, more than in continental Europe, public universities have succeeded in emerging from the shadows of bureaucracy and restructuring their operations. This means that researchers not only abandon the public sphere but also migrate from continental Europe, to the detriment of the economic and social development of the old continent. European research projects, such as FP6, are meant to stop this drain of researchers and to increase the presence of quality researchers from all corners of the world. The impact of such projects still has to be seen – and measured! In the meantime, US, British and Australian universities in particular, are still attracting huge numbers of graduates who want to engage in specialized research, thus profiting from research funds, winning prestigious research awards and extending their operations.

The transformation of the world of research into a competitive market has led to applied research being given a privileged status. This fact is impoverishing even further all those faculties whose learning and research constitute niches of rudimentary investigation rather than temples of applied knowledge. Wherever market forces exert a determining influence on institutions, the existence of certain faculties is neither automatic nor guaranteed. Erosion of quality, impoverished existence and downright closure are the three prices some faculties are having to pay in the name of economic viability.

The discourse of research infrastructure very much resembles tourism discourse. Just as the tourist market distinguishes between quality tourism and bucket-and-spade tourism, so also the market of tertiary education differentiates between quality academic destinations and others which are deemed cheaper and peripheral. Lack of investment in laboratories, in libraries both general and specialized, in information technology and in human resources is also responsible for the continuing marginalization of certain public universities. By contrast, centres of academic excellence are constantly prospering even within economies characterized by an economic slow-down. Blessed with a quality infrastructure, these centres have continued to win millions of pounds in research projects because they managed to attract quality researchers, some of international repute, as well as graduate students with a marked research potential. Publications in renowned journals, the reading of research papers at prestigious conferences and the winning of international research awards have continued to set the seal on the status of these universities as cathedrals in the research market.

The logic of the market imposes a system of auditing on organizations. This auditing system no longer permits institutions of tertiary education to hide behind a smokescreen of false pretences and absence of information. In the future, the academic world is going to be better explained, more transparent. Both academics and students will know better where they are going and what they will find there – much better than they do now. The invisible ceiling of prestige is and will continue separating five-star institutions from those with a lesser grading. The potential for quality research

will continue to function as the major benchmark of status and prestige. The foreseeable scenario, based on what already obtains in various parts of the world, is one in which universities with a weak human and material infrastructure will lose the right of doctoral certification in certain fields of research. Others will have to rely increasingly on bigger universities in order to retain their certification. These seismic shocks have already begun and will continue to afflict those institutions that have not awoken from the comfortable slumber of insularity and provincialism.

In the world of globalization where technology distinguishes countries with highly developed economies from those with under-developed ones, investment in information technology is the prime indicator of the development of tertiary education. Many state universities, including those operating in small markets, have continued extending their operations by means of a strong and constant investment in information technology. This investment has led to an expansion of the geographical spaces of these institutions, enhanced success, ensured lifelong education, created a network of learning communities, problematized the old comforts of a pedagogy built on the transmission of knowledge, and saved several faculties from extinction. Universities with a vision transcending the present have realized that an extension of their operations depends largely on continued professional development, career development and a return to the world of work. So-called mature students make up a big segment of the economics of a university. Universities that understood the importance of a considerable investment in information technology have formulated a clear policy on this subject, specific strategies for continuous training and investment in infrastructure, and a detailed calendar for the different phases of implementation. The use of a completely virtual or a mixed site offers a golden opportunity to these institutions that wish to strengthen their strategic position as centres of academic excellence. Universities that embarked on this route did not need to invest in researchers of world renown. Instead, they opted for an investment in state-of-the-art technology infrastructure, in academics endowed with a techno-positive attitude and mentality, and in a system of continuous support.

Massive enrolment in the public university has led many to think that the liberal principle of equality of opportunity for all is actually being implemented. The results of a study commissioned by the OECD, commonly known as the PISA project, show very clearly that the discourse of equity and accessibility does not begin on the threshold of a tertiary education institution. In other words, educational systems designed on the principle of equity offer a scholastic itinerary that promotes the individual's self-esteem, enhances the will to learn and contributes to the acquisition of a whole profile or range of skills and attitudes that support and inspire the individual all along the educational journey. That there is a link between basic educational structures and accessibility to tertiary education becomes evident in educational contexts where children are streamed according to the false principle of ability. For those who have eyes and want to see, it is clear that educational systems that stream early on in the process tend to exclude rather than include people from tertiary education. Low self-esteem and bottom-line educational expectations – phenomena closely linked to early streaming – are keeping many people away from university and from other institutions of tertiary education. In many parts of the world, managerial discourse about financial sustainability has led to the discussion about the introduction of university fees and other forms of financing. It is a well known fact that the introduction of university fees has meant that a number of students hailing from certain social backgrounds are being excluded or are dropping out of tertiary education. Mature students are among the categories most negatively affected by the introduction of fees.

Human mobility – a major symptom of globalization – raises a number of questions regarding culture. Many feared that the adoption of the logic of the market by the public university might lead to cultural hegemony and standardization of tertiary education. Empirical studies show us that cultural homogeneity is the fruit of a xenophobic imagination rather than an actual cultural phenomenon. While real and virtual mobility introduces both students and academics to aspects of dominant cultures, foreign cultural experiences are interpreted in different and unforeseeable ways. Academic mobility, deliberately temporary, creates spaces at university where cultural diasporas are grafted on local cultural experiences in ways that are both asymmetric and heterogeneous. The return of the academic and the student to the local starting point of cultural experience means cross-pollination and transformation of national boundaries that nowadays are no longer static. The result of this cross-pollination is a public university that resembles a melting pot of dynamically interacting identities rather than photocopies of one hegemonic identity.

International trends and debates about the present and future of the public university offer us several starting points for discussion within the local Maltese context. The present situation shows us a tertiary educational institution with numerous areas of vulnerability: academic infrastructure, ongoing investment, technology and human resources. This situation not only prevents us from having a vision and plans for the future but also keeps us bogged down in a present characterized by fear and low morale – a situation that has a paralyzing rather than an inspiring influence.

There is no doubt that, in the present situation, the University of Malta can neither develop into a centre of excellence nor into foci of quality research. Well-informed predictions indicate that this stagnation will get us stuck at the lowest levels of the international academic classification. In the near future, independent external auditing is expected to inform the international community about our position. In a world which makes no exceptions, we will have to pay a stiff price for lack of investment and quality restructuring. Profitable research and studies at doctoral level will not be attracted to a site where the library has dried up of funds, where laboratories and workshops have basic deficiencies and where academics are having to make ends meet. Nor should we expect to participate prominently in large-scale prestigious research when our university is pawning what remains of its family silver.

The present situation should mobilize the whole nation. The University of Malta is not a lost cause. We should all agree that the University is an institution with strategic value for the development of our country. We should all be convinced that the University can work at a profit. Many should stop looking on academics as a class of pampered, comfort-loving people. Prejudice has to stop if real dialogue between the social partners is ever to begin.

Before embarking on collective restructuring, we have first of all to reach an agreement that social justice is an impregnable value. Thus any attempt to hinder accessibility in the name of financial viability should be put aside. Being the cradle of democracy, the university cannot be seduced by the platonic temptation that some are born to lead and others to serve. We have to accept the fact that democracy is impoverished if participation in university education is allowed to depend on the social background or paying power of the individual.

Financial exigencies should not dictate the very existence of faculties. The commitment to critical thinking is rooted in educational sites where people do not dance to commerce's tune. Traditional arts and social sciences provide the necessary tools for a country to prosper in its democratic culture. In a university context, it is these spheres of learning that can potentially protect society from domination by the market. Thus it is very dangerous that these areas of knowledge should be callously thrown on the dissection table.

While on the one hand we should do our utmost to ensure that Maltese society does not become market dominated, the University of Malta has, on the other hand, to compete in a market economy. The university can only compete successfully if it sets off from a position of strength. This it can do if, together with the social partners, it identifies a number of centres of excellence which can potentially attract research, quality graduate students and local and international investment. These centres would need a massive initial outlay. We cannot put the academic cart before the financial horse. Without the necessary financial investment, these centres will either not function at all or will function in a neo-colonial relationship with universities endowed with funds. Our university must be in a position where it sets down the agenda, rather than picking up the crumbs of research.

Teaching is another way of attracting local and foreign revenue. In this respect the best way is to opt for a mixed educational environment – one which links virtual experience with the concrete. There are many at university who have the vision necessary for the successful implementation of this project. The barriers of lack of funds and the fear of information technology as an intermediary channel of learning are preventing these people from making their contribution to the accomplishment of this great project. We need to prop up this pedagogical vision with the necessary support if we wish to extend our operations without having to build another university campus.

In a context where the operations of the private sector in tertiary education are on the increase, the state has to make up its mind about what type of relationship it wants vis-à-vis the public university. While we can never expect university to generate its own finances, we can and do expect university to be profitable in certain areas. For this to happen, the university must be given the relative flexibility in order to compete on the open economic market. International trends allow no shadow of a doubt about the importance of real autonomy for the development of the public university.

The University of Malta has reached the crossroads. In a context where the country lacks the competitive edge in production and manufacture, research and tertiary education offer concrete possibilities for prosperity in an environment characterized by the values of solidarity, democracy and social justice.

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