

Higher Education in the Age of Populism: Public Good and Civic Engagement

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Abstract

The last few years have been a rude awakening for higher education. Rising frustration with the unequal distribution of globalization's benefits and growing disparities between urban centers and their rural hinterlands has given way to the age of populism. Universities have become caught up in this polarizing battle, too often seen as centers of privilege and elites disengaged from the publics that host and fund them, rather than upholding the public good. Today's challenges mean the university cannot sit on the sidelines—nor can its students. There is a lot at stake. Is civic engagement the path to regaining public trust?

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The past few years have been a rude awakening for higher education. The Brexit vote in the United Kingdom, the election of Donald Trump as US president, changes in government in Hungary, Poland, Italy, and Brazil—to name just a few, along with policy and legislative changes in these and other countries, have highlighted growing tensions between higher education and the communities that host them. Colleges that prided themselves on working across borders of country and culture now find themselves dealing with governments and communities campaigning to keep out “foreigners.”

Education and geography, overlaid with race, ethnicity, and gender, were key factors contributing to people's viewpoints in the US election, and early polling for 2020 suggests the greatest tension is between college-educated white women and non-college-educated white men. Education level was also decisive in the UK Brexit vote. So is mobility, or rather the lack thereof. People less likely to have left their hometowns are more likely to be concerned about societal and economic changes. As people flock to the cities, so has political and economic power, leaving behind growing disparities in opportunities.

For people in developed countries and my generation, the underlying belief was that each generation would be better off than the previous one; progress was a birthright. But this is changing. As more people participate in higher education, universities are becoming more hierarchically organized, and access and life chances are correlated accordingly.

Part of the Problem or the Solution?

Universities say they are part of the solution, that their door is open, and that their research and international pursuits make positive contributions to society. But they are regularly accused of being insufficiently accountable for learning outcomes, graduate attributes, and life-sustaining skills, in exchange for the funding and/or public and political support received. While universities pursue internationalization and study-abroad programs, the local community often sees international students reducing the number of places available for domestic students and the switch to English-language programs as undermining their own national language.

Research shows universities often choosing collaborators geographically distant from companies or organizations on their doorstep. This varies according to mission group, with newer or lower/nonranked universities more likely to be engaged locally—but it speaks to growing criticism that universities prioritize international reputation over being good neighbors.

We might argue that these times will pass. But many of the changes being sought and/or implemented reflect genuine concerns and are substantive. Higher education has historically had a close relationship with the city and country of its founding. Today, the public is asking whether it is still serving its interests. These challenges mean the university cannot sit on the sidelines—nor can its students.

Enhancing and Deepening Engagement

Recent years have seen a significant number and range of initiatives being undertaken by universities, university associations, and governments—often in partnership with each other. They aim to rethink and reboot the university for the twenty-first century.

The UK Civic University Commission has promoted the idea of the “civic agreement” to be cocreated and signed by key stakeholders, including universities and other educational institutions, within a city/region; so far, over 30 universities have signed up since it was launched in January 2019. The European Union is pursuing “smart specialization” policies as a place-based approach characterized by the identification of areas of strategic significance, which build sustainable capacity and overcome regional disparities between and within countries; higher education and research, along with vocational education, are central to these actions.

Many universities across Europe are beginning to shape their academic profiles in response to the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals. In its sixth report on the *Socially Responsible University*, GUNi, a UNESCO network, advocates that universities adopt a “glocal” perspective, linking the local and the global. The Magna Charta Organization is seeking to rewrite and capture the fundamental tenets of higher education for the twenty-first century. I am involved with the “21st Century Lab,” organized by the University of Lincoln (UK), which is drafting a call to action for higher education for the twenty-first century.

It is clear that there is no single blueprint, but there are probably three broad approaches for enhanced engagement. The *social justice* model focuses on students, curriculum, and pedagogy. At the other end of the spectrum is the *economic development* model, which focuses on the commercialization of research through intellectual property deals, technology transfer, etc. The *public good* model, in contrast, sees engagement as wholly embedded within and across all functions and units of the college/university. It is a bridge across teaching and research and not a “third mission.” In this model, the university adopts a systematic, systemic, and strategic approach, based on an analysis of the needs of the place. And this is not just for low/nonranked universities, although universities will develop different and distinct approaches.

What Are Universities Good for?

Ultimately, the agenda is bigger than grandstanding about what the university does for “the public good,” and implies deeper changes to the university’s vision and mission. What is required is for higher education to be holistically engaged and to reflect this engagement in its vision and mission and in its daily activities. Universities need to be key institutions at the regional level. They must also aspire to being globally engaged institutions that educate open-minded, critical, and aware citizens, and through their research activity help to define global lines of action leading to a fair and sustainable world. We sit at a historic junction. There is no time for complacency. ▲

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