



“Vietnam has to look south and stop watching the north! The north today is sinking morally, ethically and economically”

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By Carla Estrada Jopia

What are the main challenges that face the construction of a university open to the 21st Century?

The first challenges are many. We can make a list. I think the first challenge is that the university be reformed once and for all. But not reform such as has existed in the past 40 to 50 years - the challenge is to make a thorough reform of the way of thinking, it is a cognitive reform. If the university does not make a cognitive reform I believe that it is not prepared to face other major challenges facing humanity. So the first challenge is a cognitive challenge.

The second challenge, that is related to the cognitive challenge, is to rethink how to organize the ideas of the university. What are the big ideas that carry the future, what are the big issues that the university should be a leader in today as a new way of thinking, as a means to generate new knowledge? I believe that within the big issues, there is one that the university has completely divided, has subdivided, which is the human condition: how should we think about the human condition of tomorrow? The human condition as the meaning of life, in the anthropological sense, in the bio-anthropological sense - what is life, what is the common good? The above are issues or discussions that may seem very philosophical, but are related to other disciplinary fields such as biology, physics, geography and sociology.

The other challenge is the place they give to the subjects that I mention. At the stage of reorganization of their ideas and knowledge, they should be able to unite and not separate sciences and humanities, and assume that both can communicate among themselves.

The fourth challenge is that the university should also consider how to integrate within itself major problems currently facing the planet. The university should not only produce knowledge, for the 'outside', but must produce knowledge inside. The university should imagine in its womb the ecological problem, at the level of its own operations, in the way they think about their facilities and how to create and foster in students an ecological conscience. The university must also think about the inside and not just about the problem of large climate crisis, the problem of food, and of human discomfort. I think those are, broadly, the challenges of a university that is much closer to reality and projected much further into the future.

About the cognitive reform, that is the core of the reform, how would it be?

In particular the cognitive reform or cognitive revolution, I call a paradigmatic revolution, is inevitably a paradigmatic

revolution of the university. In the same way as the Copernican revolution. This is in the sense of rethinking how to reorganize the means of transmitting knowledge. For example, creating a Faculty of life, a Faculty of land, and a Faculty of humanity. It may seem Utopian, but I think if the university does not dare to innovate, the system will always remain stunted and when we can finally talk about reform it will be just small reforms.

To be specific I will take the case of a young university in Brazil, the University of Tocantins, which is about 6 years old. It is in a very unique region of the country, as it is geographically located in three major ecosystems; the Amazon, the semiarid northeast and the Pantanal ecosystem of Mato Grosso. The University of Tocantins understands its geographical situation was structured in a very interesting way. For them it was impossible to ignore the geographical context, and so the university was established as an ecosystemic university. This resulted in the development of many courses on ecological issues and the social situation in the region (which is relatively poor, with the presence of many ethnic minorities and black people). The university is then able to take into account their social role within the region, and is open to the difference between their anthropo-social situation and that in other states in the country. It is the only federal university in the area considered to have an important role from the standpoint of developing courses that go in the direction of a desirable development model for the region. All the professionals are trained with a particular approach according to the needs and problems of the region.

This university could not have been planned in the traditional way, with traditional faculties, but was instead forced to create a thematic university with a structure that allows for two years' study. Young people can go into different subjects and then in the third year, begin to make their specializations. I believe, based on my experience, that this is a good example of a university that takes into account the challenges facing education today. And the effort is not minimal, because we are not talking about a private university or a particular initiative, but a federal university, the federal government of Brazil, who must give account after their tutelage and ministry - this is a significant experience, I'm not saying that it is representative, but it is very significant.

In any case, regrettably, we must say that in our experience when a new university is created what prevails is the will of who put in the money.

What is it that Vietnam can learn from other experiences?

Vietnam has much to learn. While I do not assume the posture of someone who knows everything, I am not the bearer of truth, but I do believe that they have a very rich reality and the first thing they should do is to rescue their own culture, to know what is the cultural value of the Vietnamese people and from there, from that heritage and values, raise the standard of their own education.

Europe today watches the south; the West is viewing the values of Vietnam as a heritage. Europe says that even with the problems that exist, there are some ways of living, there are certain advantages, that even without many resources can be maintained - such as solidarity, brotherhood, wisdom, kindness, etc. Faced with all the social unrest suffered by some countries, Europe is looking south in search of those values that are priceless. Then, think about seeking an American model of the classical type or another; in my opinion it is completely disconnected from what may be their own university in Vietnam.

The University of Tocantins could be an example?

Obviously, such a model can be viewed with enthusiasm. What I believe is that Vietnam has to look south and stop watching the north! The north today is sinking morally, ethically and economically. Look south, at neighboring countries - South Africa, Senegal, Brazil, Chile, Costa Rica or India - that is what we have to look.

I think if we are creating something new, let's do it with an Utopia. It may sound impossible today, but perhaps to-

morrow it could be a reality. I think that currently there is a preoccupation with the immediate: everything has to be now. I think, with certainty, that you cannot do things right if you do not give yourself time to think about the future. Immediacy is an obsession which we must seek to avoid.

What is the role of the World Class Universities in this cognitive reform?

I honestly think that none fail to see how they could participate. If you ask me what is the role of the Sorbonne I think that at the Sorbonne they spend their time and make their time, also at Harvard - they will continue to operate under the same logic and so I expect nothing from them. And in cases of universities in emerging countries, like China, that have entered into the same logic to try to attain those levels, they have done so at great cost; no freedom, no independence. India's youth are trained to go to work, but under what conditions? These universities hold lead positions in the rankings, but those universities send many young people to study outside the U.S., France, Britain, or even Australia ... there are not many who go to Brazil or Chile. These young people will learn within a system made up of the same logic that will later be replicated.

Imagine how good it would be to create a new university in Vietnam, a revolutionary one, where Western youth who have a poor quality of life can come here and change themselves, in relationship with nature, in a society so rich as this. That can be a huge enrichment, that can be a global model.

You do not need a ranking: you can be a model as a university that advocates a good life. That could be invaluable.

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