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How Much Education Do We Really Need?
Universities of Applied Sciences in Transition

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»Universities of Applied Sciences (UAS) students develop the ability to apply scientific knowledge and methodologies and, in some cases, make use of artistic abilities. Unlike tertiary level A universities, which mainly conduct fundamental research, UASs focus on applied research and development. At the crossroads between practical training and academic knowledge, UASs play an important role as drivers of innovation.« (SERI, 2017, p. 20) This is the current educational mandate of the Swiss universities of applied sciences according to the latest publication of the State Secretariat for Education, Research and Innovation (SERI).

In contrast to the universities, Swiss universities of applied sciences are relatively young educational institutions. Their origin dates back to an initiative of the Director Conference of Engineering Schools (DIS), which in the 1990s demanded that technical college (HTL) graduates should receive a nationally and internationally recognized level of relevant educational qualifications equivalent to that issued by the universities. Following the general trend towards more academization, professional vocational colleges were integrated in the Swiss federal government's Hochschul-Gesamtplan (Comprehensive Plan for Higher Education) in October 1995, with the adoption of the Teaching Law. Between 1995 and 2003, from the 70 existing technical colleges, seven state-accredited universities of applied sciences emerged. (Weber et al., 2010, p. 8). In the meantime, two more have been privately sponsored (SBFI, o.J.).

Teaching with Practical Relevance

According to legislators, the profiles of the universities of applied sciences should clearly differ from those of the universities. »Equivalent, but different« was the magic formula. College students who generally have professional training and vocational school certificates should be trained to use scientific knowledge for practical purposes, and be trained to enter an external labour market as qualified professionals. Lectureships should be staffed by experts with a university degree and professional experience outside the university. Doctoral studies, publications in academic journals, participation in academic conferences, or international contacts with other educational institutions should predominantly be a matter for researchers and lecturers at universities and should not be included in the scope of the universities of applied sciences.

The initial phase of the universities of applied sciences was influenced by Switzerland's dual education system, the circumstances and interests of the cantons, the regional economy, and various occupational fields, in particular from industry and technology. (Weber et al., 2010, p. 7f.) However, the structure of universities of applied sciences has since moved away from the tradition of Swiss vocational training and become increasingly based on the structure of universities. This has made them less of a complementary and more of a competition to universities.

The Consequences of the Bologna Process

For both colleges and universities, the European educational tradition has diminished in importance, and has been superseded by the US model, which has long been advancing a system of education and value taxonomies. The consequential high level of pressure resulting from an attempt to numerically measure educational quality and performance, one that is allegedly objective, has put both the educational institutions and the people working in them in a permanent state of competition. This reorientation, triggered by the Bologna Process, the pressure to achieve institutional accreditation, and ever greater economisation of education, has led to profound changes in teaching, research and training, as well as education, staffing and funding policies at the Swiss universities of applied

sciences, with at times precarious consequences for students, lecturers, and scientific and administrative staff.

Currently, around 75,000 people are enrolled at a Swiss university of applied sciences (BfS, 2016). The UAS offer around 300 different study programs, from agriculture to business information technology (SBFI, 2017, p. 20). Since the introduction of the Bologna Process, UAS lecturers have been teaching an increasing number of students an ever growing range of different subjects and/or subject combinations. The aim is to simultaneously maximize individualization whilst maximizing standardization, which should enable an individual assessment of the educational performance. Drafting study programs, formulating module goals, and calculating points, which in the form of »credits« have largely replaced content as the central element of teaching, require more resources compared to the actual teaching.

Successful instruction is defined as the most straightforward way possible to achieving the predefined credit point score in the standard study program courses, and the desired certificate in further education. The keyword here is: »Efficiency«. Norbert Hofmann, Vice-President of the Association of the University of Applied Sciences and Arts Lecturers Switzerland (Verband der Fachhochschuldozierenden Schweiz – fh-ch), firmly asserted in an interview[1]: »Learning how to learn has now moved more into the foreground of education against the background of ›lifelong learning‹. Efficiency is the key word here, and in particular for several interest groups: firstly, the students, who can efficiently collect their ECTS points (European Credit Transfer System), and secondly the financiers, who demand low costs per ECTS point. Thus, the European ECTS educational monetary system increases the efficiency of obtaining ECTS credits. But that can sometimes mean that students may not attend a vocational module as they have already collected enough ECTS credits (180 ECTS). Attending the work-related module would further reduce the students' time to get better grades in their remaining modules. Thus, “efficiently” studying and financing education can unfortunately sometimes come at the expense of education quality.«

Consequently, research on educational success and the latest advertising campaigns do not focus on the content of the training but on the final diploma, which should primarily promote the students’ careers, particularly in financial terms. The SBFI emphasizes explicitly: »The quality of its education system and the creativity of its researchers are the main reasons for Switzerland’s high level of innovation and commercial competitiveness.« (SBFI, 2017, p. 10) And yet study programs are becoming ever more compactly designed, with little to no time or space allotted for the mistakes, inquiries, reflections and discussions that make innovation possible.

The Consequences of Accreditation

Attempting to numerically map knowledge and education at the level of higher and further education, an enormously fragmented endeavour that uses up high administrative resources, corresponds to the drive towards institutional accreditation that all universities, universities of applied sciences, and universities of teacher education are obliged to undergo in order to attain the protected designations “University”, “University of Applied Sciences” or “University of Teacher Education” (HFKG, 2016, Art. 28 (2) (a), Art. 29, Art. 62 and 63). According to the Swiss Agency for Accreditation and Quality Assurance (AAQ), the core purpose of institutional accreditation is to inspect »the quality assurance system of the universities, with which they guarantee the quality of their teaching, research and services. Institutional accreditation is one of the prerequisites that universities must meet in order to receive federal contributions.« (AAQ, 2016)

Norbert Hofmann summarizes the link between education and quality and the regulation of evaluation and accreditation at the universities as follows: »An educational standard in the Swiss context is only possible through the quality standards set out in the Accreditation Regulation of May 2015 (as of 1 January 2018). It specifies the conditions of accreditation of higher education institutions and other institutions of the higher education sector, lays down procedural rules, and defines the quality standards to be applied in the evaluation. The quality standards are largely determined by two factors: the time available to the lecturers for the students and the heterogeneity of the student cohorts.«

Since 2015, the ongoing system change has come at a high human resource and financial cost. Norbert Hofmann says: »The changes made to implement the Federal Act on Funding and Coordination of the Higher Education Sector (HFKG – Hochschulförderungs- und -koordinationsgesetz) have used up substantial resources in setting up new institutions, such as the Higher Education Council, the Accreditation Committee, and swissuniversities (Rectors' Conference). For example, the Association of Swiss University Associations VSH-AEU, fh-ch, and the Swiss Association for Teacher Education SGL (Schweizerische Gesellschaft für Lehrerinnen- und Lehrerbildung) were merged to become swissfaculty in 2012, in order to jointly develop and represent mutual political concerns. In the process of setting up the new bodies, a number of activities have been left out, such as recommendations for participation rights (HFKG, Art. 12.c) or the call for sufficient funding for the universities of applied sciences. All these bodies will require several years to set up so as to create functioning processes and trusting cooperation.«

In the last few years, the pressures to achieve accreditation according to international educational standards, such as AACSB, has led to a higher recognition being given to the published works of the teaching staff in relation to the actual teaching and commitment in practice. Much as in the case of introducing the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) in the Bologna process, the accreditation system involves applying a points system that overrides, and at times completely shrouds, the discussion about the actual content.

Chronically Underfunded
In recent years, administration and research have been so greatly expanded at universities of applied sciences that in 2017 the share of research accounted for more than 20 percent of the total UAS operating costs (SBFI 2017, p. 20) and about one third accounted for administration (Basic Data 2016). Thus, less than half of the UAS operating costs remained for teaching.

The job profile of the faculty of universities of applied siciences is increasingly geared to that of university professors with their own research projects and as heads of research groups and employees for which they are responsible. Norbert Hofmann, the Vice-President of the Association of the University of Applied Sciences and Arts Lecturers Switzerland (Verband der Fachhochschuldozierenden Schweiz – fh-ch), says: »In the last 10 years, the intermediate level academic staff has been expanded. These are supervised by the lecturers and for whose research projects the lecturers must obtain third-party funds. This expansion of the intermediate level academic staff thus effectively reduces the time lecturers are available for the students.« Lessons are marginalized and the administration enlarged, causing the press to circulate headlines such as »The Top-Heavy Management of the Universities of Applied Sciences« (NZZ, 3.2.18) or »The Universities of Applied Sciences Have Become Ivory Towers« (NZZ, 13.2.18).

The consequences of the lecturers' deteriorating working conditions on the quality of education are clear for Norbert Hofmann: »The increasing demand for more self-financing through third-party funds is competing with the primary mission of colleges – high quality of education – because less time is available for the students. And finally, there's the competition among the universities: widespread marketing and advertising, internationalization, accreditation according to international educational standards (e.g. AACSB), long publication lists, number of patents. In turn, these multiple assignments for the lecturers reduce the time available to them for the students.«

The task of acquiring third-party funds for research projects, which usually involves extensive applications to foundations and private and public institutions, is generally underfinanced, i.e. a large part of the work is done during free time. It is very often the case that not only different universities but also different research groups from within the same university take part in the same project call. In the best case, this may lead to new synergies. But frequently, competition within one's own university coupled with permanent underfunding also create fears of idea theft, hinder open communication, and lead to self-censorship and a diminishing employee solidarity.

Norbert Hofmann formulates the intention of the relevant provisions of the Federal Act on Funding and Coordination of the Higher Education Sector (HFKG – Hochschulförderungs- und -

koordinationsgesetz) and the potential implementation problems as follows: »The HFKG and the Accreditation Guidelines define the unity of teaching and research. Article 30b of the HFKG states that UAS offer teaching, research and services in several disciplines or departments. Specialized teachers remain on the pulse of practice through services, further education and applied research & development and can impart relevant knowledge to students through current expertise. Of course, this requires appropriate time resources and a contemporary infrastructure. The fh-ch has been fighting against the underfunding of the universities of applied sciences for more than 10 years.«

Transparent Participation Rules Required

Being innovative is not only a challenge for the lecturers, but also for the universities themselves. They need to be flexible, encouraging and supportive in their organizational structures and bodies in order to offer the lecturers the working conditions that make innovation possible. The trade union demand for »Innovation through Participation« is based on the idea that better work results can be achieved together (Keller & Staack, 2009, Friedrichsmeier & Wannöffel, 2010). Swiss universities of applied sciences have rights of participation, which include information, consultation, counselling and opposition. The participation rights (Unia, o.J.) are exercised within the framework of participation committees.

The fh-ch has also been calling for transparent and binding rules of participation for more than ten years. A request put to the Swiss University Council in 2018 was rejected, although the accreditation of the universities of applied science and teaching universities under the HFKG shows a clear need for action.

At the universities of applied sciences people work for people and perform an important social and educational mission, also concerning labour market policy. Education issues need to be seen in larger contexts, and not just in their current status quo. Norbert Hofmann also emphasizes this (2018) by stating: »It should be noted that the economy works internationally and short-term goals from business and politics do not lead to sustainable education provision for universities.«
And he explains further: »Universities have a responsibility to qualify students for a functioning labour market. Universities must clarify the question of the need for specific Bachelor's and Master's degrees in the long-term with all stakeholders. New courses such as Industrial Engineering or Master of Science and Engineering have, in the past, required about 30 years to be established in the economy. Industrial engineering, for example, was introduced as a course of study in other European countries long before the start in Switzerland. Here, the universities assume their great social responsibility for the students and their employability.«

Remarks

[1] All of Norbert Hofmann's statements in this article are based on a written interview with the authors on May 11, 2018.

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