

**THE ROLE OF UNIVERSITIES IN SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION
POLICY LESSONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ESTONIA**

(Higher) education is often perceived as one of the sectors where socialism made considerable progress. This has allowed the policy makers and the general public to have very high expectations from the university sector: it is expected to be the "magic medicine" that allows Estonia to catch up with the rest of the developed world.

Limiting the (understanding of the) role of university in social transformation just to its (possible) economic role, is short-sighted. Higher education can and does produce a mix of political, social, cultural and economic ends under any political regime. If Estonia wants to design the optimal higher education system with corresponding institutional differentiation, curriculum (content), models of assessment, authority structures, teaching methods and peer networks, she has to define the characteristics of desired type(s) of individual and social order.

This requires a social contract which is slow to develop and hard to reach as the Estonian current efforts towards this end clearly show. In order to contribute towards this process, I should like to bring to the attention of policy-makers the policy-lessons of my research on the role of universities in social transformation and make recommendations that would allow Estonia to overcome the existing problems and prevent making the same mistakes again.

Higher education policy lessons:

- (i) The socialist calculation debate and the quality of economic research in SU show how:
 - dangerous is the build-up of just one school which members share a common theoretical understanding, use similar methodology;
 - important is the presence of academic freedom, competing scientific communities and quality of their research.
- (ii) There are common characteristics about the research and researchers who influenced policy debates before and after 1989. More particularly, advice that affected public policy was based on research at a very high international level and presented by researchers that had legitimacy / high academic reputation.
- (iii) The higher education policy and the method of instruction which was designed to prepare a large number of productive and rational workforce produced rather narrowly trained professionals who failed to take the SU beyond the third industrial age, the legitimate the soviet regime and compete with the West.

- (iv) The most important role of Estonian universities performed before the restoration of independence was preserving of the Estonian culture and reproduction of national elite.
- (v) Soviet underdevelopment of social sciences has left a qualitative effect on Estonian social scientists, their understanding of policy processes and possibilities to influence and contribute to it through research and teaching.

Higher education policy recommendations for Estonia:

If Estonian wants to avoid the Soviet modernisation failure and take advantage of the global public good of science, improvements in teaching, research and institutional set-up are desirable. Given that the quality of research and teaching tends to be interconnected (one has improve one get positive results in other), package of the following measures has to be taken:

- (i) Curriculum development - introduction of flexible and liberal art component to the higher education curriculum.
- (ii) Library development - the library collections (esp. of social sciences) should be audited and international committees established to put together a list of classics and most important journals in all major subjects that should be available in Estonian academic libraries. In order to economise the initiative to unite the Estonian Academic Library with that of the University of Tallinn is supported, and matching funds from EU sources applied for.
- (iii) Human capital development with the aim of preparing faculty and research capacity for universities, increasing internal competition and diversification of scientific communities. Hence, Estonian government is encouraged to:
 - set up a scholarship fund to support graduate students that have been admitted to the leading Western programs and support program to attract them back to Estonia;
 - deepen bilateral relations with and agreements with foreign governments and organisations already supporting Estonian graduate students;
 - establish new agreements with foreign governments and academic institutions;
 - support the establishment of competitive University of Tallinn.
- (iv) International aid in the form of collaborative and comparative research between Estonian social scientists

and those of ECE/FSU, Latin America, South-East Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa. To build up cultural capital and network ties about the development experiences elsewhere, it should be understood that international cooperation with EU and North America is not enough. It is proposed to redesign the foreign aid program that Estonia already has and is required to enlarge in the future towards the collaborative/comparative social science research and mentorship between Estonian scientists and those of recipient country.

- (v) International dissertation committees - there should be two sides to this measure:
- Estonian graduate students undertaking Ph.D studies in Estonia should have in addition to a local advisors also foreign mentors;
 - Estonian professors should advice the graduate students from the countries that Estonian foreign aid is targeted to.
- (vi) Establishment of two competence centres: political economy, and development studies with the following characteristics:
- size of 10 researchers;
 - with clear thematic focus that has importance for Estonia (e.g. fight against HIV/AIDS, poverty reduction, education and economic development);
 - duration of five years or more;
 - linked to university departments.
- (vii) Establishment of the system by which a position or a promotion is given to researchers. As the Estonian scientific community is too small to ensure a non-biased treatment of the applicants, it is recommended that the selection committees are made up of foreigners who make the decision solely based on academic merits.
- (viii) In addition to natural sciences, advancement of social science should be planned and supported in the national development plan - Knowledge Based Estonia. In other words, social sciences should be treated as an infant industry and special attention needs to be given to the methodology of social sciences because:
- international experience seems to suggest that social science that is of prime value to public policy tends to be empirical rather than theoretical,
 - descriptive work is valuable but its possibilities to contribute towards theory development and through this towards public policy are limited.

- (ix) In the process of linking the higher education and science to national economic development, support of disciplines connected to Estonian culture should not be forgotten. Funding should definitely include but not be limited to the subjects that not taught / researched anywhere else in the world.
- (x) In order to improve the teaching outcome, it is recommended that:
- the learning experience of students be based less on fact awareness and more on problem solving;
 - students are encouraged to speak up in classes;
 - the use of textbooks and their translation and adaptation from English into Estonian is increased and supported;
 - classes are taught by individuals who have earned their advanced scientific degrees in the given field.