

ACADEMIA:
HAS THE IVORY
TOWER BECAME
TOO EXCLUSIVE?



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INTRODUCTION

Higher education institutions seem to be in a position of crisis. For far too long there has been an ongoing debate in society claiming that academia is disconnected from realities of society and has become an ivory tower. This is in relation to how the university has widened the divide between those who are privileged and those who are marginalised, and the manner in which academia controls knowledge as to how, and what can be taught. The current educational challenges include ivory tower research, used here to describe problems separated from everyday life and the focus of many academic institutions on generating academically incomprehensible publications that will only be viewed by select few.

This is problematic because universities are not fulfilling the whole purpose of spreading knowledge but inadvertently limiting knowledge to the most privileged, setting up a standard or hierarchy that is exclusionary. Academia has long been criticised for being full of detached professors who ignore the concerns of students and the real world in order to pursue narrow scholarly pursuits. Critical to the question is, has the ivory tower become too exclusive, and how can we make academic research results accessible and useful in the real world?

The disconnect of academia from the realities of the community has been characterised by the inaccessible academic research or even expensive research papers, hiking costs of university fees and rapidly rising student's debt, changes of expectations and criticism of the current system claiming that the Eurocentric influence in curriculum is still prevalent. The university system is still shutting its doors to historically marginalised individuals and thereby exacerbating inequality.

Not so long ago, universities saw confrontation from students calling for transformation, free education, and decolonisation of curriculum from the Eurocentric influence. The universities have tried to bridge the gap but there is still more that needs to be done to mitigate the situation. Breaking down the 'ivory tower' is a collective effort and universities are part of the society in which we live. Therefore, they are somewhat a reflection of a broader community.



THE PURPOSE OF ACADEMIA

There has long been discussion about the purpose of universities. The purpose of the university is an important one, and it should be kept in mind because it shapes our academic identities. Most of the time, university life continues on as usual. Teaching and learning take place, research is conducted, and the stress over finding a balance between academia, society, and social benefit continue.

Education has seen the effects of globalisation. The emergence of technology has played a significant role in facilitating access to educational opportunities. We are constantly bombarded with claims that technology will make it easier to get access to research and to learn on our own. Moreover, statistics is showing how digital technology is expanding. However, this enhanced accessibility has not been evenly distributed around the globe. There is a huge digital divide that needs to be addressed. Rapid technology advancements have made the "digital" university and curriculum restructuring all too real. In many economies, there is also a need for social restructuring due to the issue of growing social inequality. Although many academics have benefitted from having access to networks and knowledge on a worldwide scale, performance constraints have resulted from the increased competition for talent and focus on global rankings. Many academics also complain that universities are becoming increasingly influenced by financial and business patterns, and that they feel like teaching factories.

One of many ideas driving the current debate in higher education circles about how institutions might adapt to an uncertain future by emphasising life skills and competences, is that they should foster critical, creative thinking. While some of us may feel that the university has turned into too much of a business, the main drivers are not only economic but rather an aging population and the expected mismatch of skills to future occupations. . Many academics dispel the notion that universities are acting entrepreneurially, but given the changes in the outside world, the university must become more socially involved if it is to enable higher education to show its own worth outside the "ivory tower" or risk losing its relevance to society.



The university does not exist in isolation. The university is one of several social institutions in society and we cannot ignore public demands that academia must make contributions that are more pertinent to our society. The universities must collaborate closely with business and government organisations, directly impact the national economy, and promote social change. Students enrol at academic institutions for a variety of reasons, and universities may have varied purposes. Students enrol in universities to prepare themselves to participate in the local or global economy, to build a solid foundation for the future, and for some, to seek learning for its own sake. These several reasons should caution us to the possibility that there may not be a single accepted notion of the university or purpose of higher education. While many academics may prefer to cling to an ideal, the university of the future will arguably derive its right to exist primarily from being engaged with the outside world and creating knowledge that will benefit all people. At least in developing countries. Academics must modify their position and take on new duties that better reflect the changing nature of the economy. This can be accomplished because academics are the model for lifelong learning in our society.

Finding the fine line between remaining academically relevant and becoming more socially relevant is more fruitful. Skilled human resources and knowledge resources have been identified as two of the most crucial elements for enhancing national competitive advantage. In order to prevent the risk of research projects becoming too constrained due to unilateral pressure from societal demand, the engaged university should collaborate with governments and industry to continue to produce knowledge that is valued by society while also safeguarding and protecting innovative and high-stakes research.



WHAT CAN WE DO TO LOWER THE IVORY TOWER?

One method to connect the ivory tower to society is through discussions in higher education circles regarding research-based education, teaching-led research, and the idea of "powerful knowledge." These theories urge professors to encourage all undergraduates to engage in independent research so they can develop both discipline knowledge and crucial life skills. Research is frequently regarded as a task for senior students only and as being beyond the scope of junior undergraduates. Developing critical twenty-first-century skills of critical thinking, analysis, and creativity involves redesigning a curriculum that exposes undergraduates to the research process of formulating questions, developing hypotheses, identifying methods, conducting data analysis, and responding to critique and feedback. These competencies are precisely the kind that society needs to face an unpredictable future.



CONCLUSION

In order to stay afloat, the university needs to undertake a complete manoeuvre, and academics and academic leaders, like any excellent lifelong learners, must play a significant role in the process of change. When things change, it can be disconcerting, but it can also give us the confidence to reshape our own lives. Engaging our society more actively requires academia to express a larger vision for what they intend to accomplish and re-negotiate responsibilities, because 'business as usual' is limited and does not adapt to change. Academia needs to rethink their institutional mission and position if they want to remain relevant and survive. Institutions can serve both roles as the ivory tower and national asset at the same time. As academic institutions, we create knowledge; as social institutions, we change the futures and economies of our communities through the education we provide. Trust and respect for their integrity should be extended by governments, businesses, and other stakeholders, who must respect academia's ability to balance the needs of the community.

Students are the future, and as we look to the future, academia should be wise to make use of this hopeful community.