DAL23 - Det Akademiska Lärarskapet 21 april 2023 vid Högskolan i Skövde

To Study, or Not to Study: Who Belongs in Higher Education?

Erik Lagerstedt, Doktorand, Institutionen för informationsteknologi
Kajsa Nalin, Adjunkt i informationsteknologi, Institutionen för informationsteknologi

Abstract

The world is continuously changing, as highlighted by the theme of this year's DAL conference (Högre utbildning i en föränderlig värld). Academia has, partly through the adoption of a quantifiable mindset, developed into a domain particularly ill equipped for dealing with sustainability challenges emanating from such a changing world (Urai & Kelly, 2023). Here, sustainability refers not only to the climate crisis, financial or environmental challenges, but to social aspects of sustainability as well—challenges such as ensuring inclusion and equality are coequally important to address (United Nations General Assembly, 2015).

There is a proposed solution for how to achieve a more sustainable and just academia; by adopting a culture inspired by the economic doughnut model (Raworth, 2017) to academia (Urai & Kelly, 2023). The doughnut model is originally intended as a general economic model, where humanity is proposed to find safety and justice in the sweet-spot that rests on a social foundation safeguarding against critical human deprivation, without overshooting planetary boundaries (Raworth, 2017). Seven principles accompany the doughnut and have been translated to academia (Urai & Kelly, 2023) to highlight necessary changes in mindset towards achieving sustainability. With this contribution to DAL23 we want to discuss how students' sense of belonging is a complex yet crucial piece in this effort, mainly relating to the third principle (Urai & Kelly, 2023).

The changing world has already led to changes in the student composition, and the change is likely to continue. Since 2021, Swedish universities are bound by law to promote 'broadened recruitment' (Swedish: breddad rekrytering, SFS 1992:1434, ch. 1 § 5). The third principle of the academic doughnut model (Urai & Kelly, 2023) suggests that we, as academics, need to move away from the idea of universities as 'ivory towers' towards institutions thoroughly integrated in society. Apart from the problematic self-view of academics as academia being a place 'where learned men engage in the noble pursuit of objective and "pure" knowledge' (Urai & Kelly, 2023, p. 6), the ivory tower stereotype also challenges certain students in different ways. For instance, the transformative nature of higher education might alienate a student's family and friends by making it more difficult for students to relate to people they knew since before their education, a phenomenon known as cultural suicide (Brookfield, 2015). There can thus be a social pressure working against students as they pursue higher education.

This pressure is, however, not only from outside of academia. Norms, ideals, and identities related to academic subjects can affect the sense of belonging of students in ways that create a de facto, if not de jure, bias against certain students. For instance, Stout & Wright (2016) have found correlations between gender identity, sexual orientation, sense of belonging, and thoughts of leaving the studies in computing-related fields, where heterosexual men had the highest sense of belonging and lowest amount of thoughts of leaving. Approaching such diversity with an attitude of 'needing to provide additional support for them' might maintain the division of 'those that belong in academia' and 'those that do not', thus enforcing the ivory tower culture. An alternative attitude is to 'find a way for us all to integrate', that is, acknowledge that it is necessary with mutual negotiation of meaning. With that said, we want to acknowledge that this can be easier said than done, partly due to existing structures and culture(s) in academia that are difficult for individuals to challenge (Urai & Kelly, 2023), and partly due to inherent power structures in teacher-student relations (Ashwin et al., 2020, ch. 6).

To conduct education in a changing world, it is necessary to acknowledge that academia is part of that world, and therefor needs to change accordingly. Instead of viewing the universities' mission of education as a task of changing the students, education is an opportunity for the universities to change with the students. Such change is not only an opportunity to change the problematic aspects of academia, but also to take a more active role in society's journey towards sustainability.

References:

Ashwin, P., Boud, D., Calkins, S., Coate, K., Hallett, F., Light, G., Luckett, K., McArthur, J., MacLaren, I., & McLean, M. (2020). *Reflective teaching in higher education*. Bloomsbury Academic.

Brookfield, S. D. (2015). *The skillful teacher: On technique, trust, and responsiveness in the classroom*. John Wiley & Sons.

SFS. *Högskolelag*, 1992:1434.

Raworth, K. (2017). *Doughnut economics: seven ways to think like a 21st-century economist*. Chelsea Green Publishing.

Stout, J. G., & Wright, H. M. (2016). Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer students′ sense of belonging in computing: An intersectional approach. *Computing in Science & Engineering, 18*(3), 24–30.

United Nations General Assembly (2015). *Transforming our world: the 2030 agenda for sustainable development*. United Nations General Assembly resolution A/RES/70/1.

Urai, A. E., & Kelly, C. (2023). Rethinking academia in a time of climate crisis. *Elife, 12*, e84991. https://doi.org/10.7554/eLife.84991