

ON THE GROWING SOCIAL ROLE OF UNIVERSITIES UNDER KNOWLEDGE SOCIETY

Olena Orzhel

Institute of Higher Education National Academy of Educational Sciences of Ukraine, Ukraine

Kateryna Tryma

Institute of Higher Education National Academy of Educational Sciences of Ukraine, Ukraine

Abstract. *The paper intends to investigate the social role of higher education institutions (HEIs) under knowledge society. As knowledge becomes the main asset and driver of social-economic transformations in the 21st century, HEIs are positioned as centres where knowledge is generated, accumulated, disseminated and applied. With emergence of knowledge society, university mission “to contribute to the public good” is becoming more visible and tangible in HEIs’ operations.*

Responding to community needs or societal demand, HEIs will liaise and/or compete domestically and internationally with other state and non-state actors: non-governmental organizations (NGOs), authorities, interest groups, local communities. Both competition and cooperation may produce win-win effect, or end up with win-lose or lose-lose result.

Case study method will be used to research different cooperation patterns between HEIs and other actors. In more detail, relationship between HEIs and NGOs will be explored to test the hypothesis that NGOs, who have been leaders in societal change over the last three - four decades, are losing primacy to HEIs. We will examine the social role of HEIs and their cooperation with civil society in situation of emergency, when societal demand for knowledge, expertise and response to crisis is high.

In detail, we intend to look at Mariupol State University – a HEI with strong community ties and reputation of a civic university – in order to examine its community service and interaction with municipal knowledge hubs during hybrid war unleashed in 2014.

Therefore, the aim of this research paper is to investigate whether and how under knowledge society the social role of HEIs changes in emergency situations and outline their possible contribution to problem-solving in cooperation with other partners, first of all NGOs. Key words: higher education institutions, non-state actors, non-governmental organizations, knowledge hub, knowledge economy.

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Introduction

The paper looks into the social role of higher education and intends to demonstrate how the functions of a higher education institution (HEI) have changed under the pressure of social responsibility. As knowledge becomes the

main asset and driver of social-economic transformations in the 21st century, HEIs are positioned as centres where knowledge is generated, accumulated, disseminated and applied (Towards Knowledge Societies, 2019). With emergence of knowledge society, university mission "to contribute to the public good" is becoming more visible and tangible in HEIs' operations. From "ivory towers" (Universities are not ivory towers, 2018) HEIs become centres of community initiatives, drivers of social-economic development, problem-solving hubs capable to generate solutions to respond to societal challenges. The crisis in Ukraine that started in November 2013 have affected many spheres of life, but has not changed significantly the role of HEIs and higher education sector.

The article examines the case of Mariupol State University, a HEI located in the East of Ukraine in a city that experienced a Multi-Launch Rocket System (MLRS) attack from the territory of so-called "Donetsk People's Republic" in January 2015 (Spot report by the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine, 2015) when over 30 civilian citizens were killed, about 100 wounded, over 53 building ruined, including schools. While university social responsibility theme is not broadly discussed in Ukrainian academic and expert circles, the attack on the city and proximity of the frontline (10 kilometres from the city) compelled local community to mobilize in order to protect citizens and the city from hybrid war attacks unleashed in the East of Ukraine by Russian Federation. This influx of cause-oriented activism was listed in the survey conducted with participation of Mariupol State University scholars (Pakhomenko, Tryma, & J'moul, 2018) conducted by Mariupol State University scholars and researchers confirms the noteworthy role of academia in counterworking Russian propaganda, as well as acceleration of efforts of civil society, university staff and students to counterattack the hybrid warfare that was especially intense in the period of 2014 – 2015.

Examining the case of Mariupol State University, this research paper aims to investigate whether and how under knowledge society the social role of HEIs changes in emergency situations and outline their possible contribution to problem-solving in cooperation with other partners, first of all NGOs.

Mariupol State University (MSU) was chosen as research object among four other HEIs that exist in Mariupol, for a number of reasons:

- MSU is mostly integrated into local community, actively participates in social life of the city and the region, has close and permanent ties with local authorities and civil society;
- it is a HEI with the slant towards humanities, political and social sciences; therefore, its academic staff is experienced in social work and public relations, policy advice and political consulting; expertise of MSU knowledge workers was solicited during and after the crisis caused by MLRS attack;

- MSU staff and students has demonstrated civic activism after MLRS attack and contributed to many local civic initiatives, including the establishment of knowledge hubs.

Literature review

Academic discourse on the social role of HEIs started to unfold in the late 1990-s. Some scholars link it with emergence of the Triple Helix concept and discussion of university-industry-government relationships initiated by the publication of H. Etzkowitz and L. Leydesdorff (Etzkowitz & Leydesdorff, 2020). Other researchers refer to UNESCO 1998 Declaration (World Conference on Higher Education, 1998) that emphasizes the social role of universities and states the obligations of governments, HEIs, scholars and researchers to serve the society. In the first case, the investigation of relationship between universities, government and business resulted in the concept of "entrepreneurial university"; in the second case, distinct statement on the obligations of HEIs to community or wider society raised high on the agenda the concept of university social responsibility (USR).

UNESCO Declaration emphasizes higher education mission "to contribute to the sustainable development of society", including lifelong learning, consolidation of human rights, democracy and peace, active civic participation. Ten years later, 2009 UNESCO Communique has defined higher education as "a public good" and has added to two core functions of HEIs the third one – "service to community" (World Conference on Higher Education, 2009).

While acknowledging the significance of knowledge transfer, research and development activities (R&D activities) of HEIs and commercialization of knowledge generated at and by universities, we intend to focus in this investigation on another aspect of university social responsibility: service to community and contribution to the public good.

Over the last two decades, several factors have instigated the discourse on the social role of higher education and university social responsibility:

- recognition of the growing role of knowledge under knowledge economy;
- rise of social dimension in Bologna process;
- rise of corporate social responsibility in business and its extrapolation to higher education sector;
- lack of trust in public sector institutions and financial crisis of 2008.

Over the last two decades, publications of the European Union, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, United Nations Organization, World Bank, independent scholars are exploring knowledge as the main asset, the

problem-solving tool to overcome social, economic, political, cultural, local and global challenges, as a driver for development. Considering that knowledge is concentrated in universities, the latter took on the role of knowledge centres capable to propose solution for numerous problems of real life: "Higher education systems exist primarily not only for knowledge creation but to address practical issues of life. Universities should be able to address the challenges that communities face by not merely providing solutions but also building the requisite societal capacity to enable communities to handle future challenges" (Higher Education in the World, 2017).

Bologna process has instigated the discourse on the social role of HEIs via introduction of social dimension in London Communiqué of 2007. Since then, the commitment of EHEA members to social dimension always remains relevant. In Bologna declarations and communiqués, this commitment is shaped as equal access to higher education and broader representation of groups from different social backgrounds, including disadvantaged groups and non-traditional learners; provision of student services and flexible learning pathways (London Communiqué, 2007); development of programmes that meet the needs of fast-changing labour market; consideration of cultural and social diversity; pledge to social inclusion, social solidarity, and civic engagement (Yerevan Communiqué, 2015); contribution to lifelong personal development, intercultural understanding, ethical awareness, equitable access to higher education (Paris Communiqué, 2018).

Nowadays, a broad and diverse pool of discoursants takes part in USR discourse: individual scholars, HEIs, university networks (European Network of Socially Responsible Universities, European Framework for Social and Environmental Responsibility), projects. Several projects on university social responsibility have been implemented by European HEIs under Tempus and Erasmus+ programmes.

In recognition of USR importance, QS World University Rankings introduced assessment of "universities' social responsibility by measuring how seriously a university takes its obligations to society by investing in the local community and environmental awareness" (QS World University Rankings, 2019).

The rise and growth of USR has been influenced by corporate social responsibility (CSR) that has a longer history than USR. For some scholars and experts, CSR was a starting point and a pattern for modelling USR (Mehta, 2011). Introduction of ISO 26000 (ISO 26000 – Social responsibility, 2020) – an international standard on social responsibility addressed to international business, large and small private companies and firms, public institutions, including universities – was an important step in promoting and advancing USR in HEIs via organizational values, governance principles, research ethics etc.

Another factors that gave a push towards USR is decrease of trust in public institutions and financial crisis of 2008 that compelled HEIs to become more open to the public and accountable to taxpayers (Trust in government, policy effectiveness and the governance agenda, 2013). Both factors questioned the rationale for funding universities under the times of scrutiny and demanded the proof of utility of HEIs and their impact on economy, community or wider society. Responsibility was interpreted as accountability and HEIs felt obliged to report to society and provide evidence of public benefit of their teaching, research and community engagement. In the domain of teaching and learning, university social responsibility was embodied as "employability"; in the domain of research, it evolved in "Responsible Research and Innovation" approach (Responsible Research and Innovation-Tools, 2020), EU programme "Science with and for Society", internationally recognized concept of "science shop" and other initiatives aimed at participatory research that responds to the needs of local communities and takes into account concerns of larger societies (Living Knowledge Network, 2019).

In academic discourse and real life, university social responsibility intersects with the third mission of HEIs that today is widely recognized as a core mission, alongside with teaching and research: "previously separate functions of teaching, research and engagement are transformed in a space capable of innovation, of co-creation of knowledge, of visibility for alternative ways of living, of the development of a deeper trans-disciplinary comprehension of reality and its dynamics, and of support for an inclusive form of active citizenship at both the local and global level" (Higher Education in the World, 2017).

Among numerous definitions of the third mission, we regard as dominant the following key features: 1) third mission deals with HEI activities outside academic community (Solomon, 2019), beyond the walls of the university; 2) third mission is not about volunteerism or altruistic service only – it is about mutually beneficial cooperation between a HEI and outer world, where the former contributes to community and benefits from this cooperation (Karlsen & Larrea, 2019, 3) third mission is closely linked to the first and second missions, three missions complement each other, as today it is generally recognized that knowledge is generated not in the laboratories only, and skills developed during community engagement project will be useful during teaching and learning (Third Mission of the University of Vienna, 2018).

In the progressing discourse on university social responsibility and third mission of HEIs, concept of "civic university" has found its rebirth. The idea of a civic university is not new: HEIs of this type were established in the 19th century in industrialized regions of United Kingdom with the aim to facilitate industrialization. In the second decade of the 21st century their reconceptualization occurred due to several reasons. While universities have been

competing over the last two – three decades for international students, grants, high national and international rankings, the status of regional civic universities that serve their communities have been downgraded because civic universities lose in competition for internationalization, research grants and high salaries for graduates who find jobs at regional - often stagnant - labour markets with lower salaries than graduates of large metropolitan HEIs. But the demand for knowledge and demand in knowledge workers has brought a civic university closer to its local community to "provide opportunities for the society of which it is part" including individual learners, businesses, public institutions (Goddard & Vallance, 2012, p.6). Knowledge that HEIs generate, accumulate and disseminate is seen "as a key factor in urban or regional development clusters and sectors" (Goddard & Vallance, 2012, p. 4). In the UK, the National Commission was formed to closely research the civic university roles and functions and develop guidelines and recommendations for their revival (Truly Civic: Strengthening the connection between universities and their places, 2019). The Commission came out with the concept of "truly civic" universities, their key characteristics being:

- related, integrated in the place and context (historical, geographic, strategic and other nuances);
- understanding local populations, their needs and challenges;
- understanding themselves (why, what for, how HEIs are engaged with communities);
- having community engagement embedded into all daily HEI activities;
- working according to the action plan and priorities, knowing the boundaries;
- having local ownership (e.g. citizens are proud of "their" university);
- working with other local institutions (Truly Civic: Strengthening the connection between universities and their places, 2019).

Methodology

Initially, with this investigation we intended to demonstrate that under knowledge society and as a response to local community needs or wider societal demands, HEIs are to enhance their third mission, lead in societal change and take on functions specific of the grassroots NGOs. Our hypothesis was that HEIs as knowledge hubs are more capable to respond to serious societal challenges and compete with NGOs for the delivery community services related to knowledge. We believed that we will find evidence that local NGOs were losing primacy to HEIs and develop recommendations on how HEIs and NGOs could work together for the public benefit when faced with grave challenges of hybrid war, under the circumstances when hostilities interpose with propaganda.

We applied the case study method with the purpose to research and describe how MSU as a civic university responds to the above mentioned challenges. Internet search was used to collect the data from the web-sites of MSU and five knowledge hubs operating in the city.

Focus-groups interviews (face-to-face and online) with Department of History academic staff helped to specify the roles of MSU academic staff and their vision of the university social role in the circumstances of hybrid warfare. In addition, on-line focus-group interviews with representatives of local NGOs who run five knowledge hubs were organized in October and December 2019 and January 2020. Total hours of the conducted interviews – over 15 hours.

Content analysis and comparative analysis were used to draw conclusions from the collected data.

During data collection and analysis, the following inadequacy was faced: while MSU reports contain strict numbers of events and participants, they lack description of events; whereas interviews with representatives of knowledge hubs and civil activists provided information about details of events (thematic foci, participants, debating topics), but failed to provide reports as written evidence.

Research results

MSU is a rather new Ukrainian HEI (established in 1991), comprised of 5 faculties, with 3, 200 students, 300 of them are foreign students. Its academic staff amounts to 250 teachers grouped into 21 departments who provide 40 Bachelor and 32 Master Programs (Mariupol State University, 2019). Our analysis of MSU statutory documents, institutional by-laws (Statute, Strategy etc.) has not revealed reference to university social responsibility, third university mission, obligations of community engagement and the like. Judging from MSU web-site, the HEI has a rich cultural-social life and regularly holds cultural, social, educational events for students and potential students (school kids).

MSU is a partner to local self-government and a host of public fora, festivals, conferences etc. (Mariupol is currently the largest city in Donetsk and Luhansk regions and the only regional centre capable to host big national and regional events, like national forum "Donbass Recovery and Development", All-Ukrainian Youth Forum, East-Ukrainian Forum "Recovery through Dialogue" etc.).

Our interviews have revealed that MSU scholars are commissioned by local and regional authorities to provide advisory or consultative services; many members of academic staff are invited by local and regional TV stations, printed and electronic media to comment on political events or policy initiatives. But for different reasons these facts are not publicized in media or MSU web-site, individual or department web-sites, Facebook accounts etc. Information on

Department of History academic staff fulfilling the functions of knowledge workers for regional and local authorities and media is presented in Table 1.

MSU successfully operates EU Information Centre, "Window to America" Information and Resource Centre, the Baltic-Black Sea Regional Studies Centre, the Institute of Ukrainian-Greek Friendship and Hellenistic Studies, UNDP Centre for Research and Development, Italian and Polish Cultural Centres. Local Archaeology Museum is situated on the territory of MSU.

As a big cultural regional hub and conference centre, MSU is not accessible to small local cultural or volunteer initiatives due to excessive bureaucratic procedures. But the university supports cultural initiatives of staff and students (e.g. National Culture Days celebrated by foreign and Ukrainian students, dancing, singing etc.).

Table 1 Academic Staff Participating in TV and Radio Programmes: Knowledge Services Solicited from MSU Department of History in 2017, 2018, 2019*

	2017	2018	2019
Invitation to local TV and radio	11 scholars 20 broadcasts	11 scholars 27 broadcasts	13 scholars 32 broadcasts
Contribution to printed and electronic media	58 expert opinions, commentaries, interviews	46 expert opinions, commentaries, interviews	49 expert opinions, commentaries, interviews
Development and conduct of a sociological survey	Social-Political Situation in the Region (informal request from local self-government); Awareness of Ukrainian Citizen Rights and Duties (commissioned by local self-government)	Social-Political Situation in the Region (informal request from local self-government)	Social-Political Situation in the Region; Analysis of Political Positions of Local Population (informal request from local self-government)

**Based on the internal reports of MSU Department of History.*

Local knowledge hubs are informal education centres established by local NGOs and civic activists to unite, educate and entertain Mariupol community; they are platforms where general public and civic activists cooperate, share knowledge and experience, develop. There are 5 big knowledge hubs platforms: the Halabuda Project, the TU Platform, BETC Space (Business, Education, Technology & Co-working), Vezha: Creative Space and IZBA-Chytnalnia Intellectual Cafe.

Their activities are funded by grant programs and individual financial support. Their premises are not used to hold big international, national or regional events, but rather local initiatives.

All five were established after the attack of January 2015 and provide informal education: open lectures, seminars, presentations, public discussions and meetings.

At the same time, each of the knowledge hubs has its specialization: e.g. in addition to civic education, the Halabuda Project provides IT, painting and photography courses (Halabuda Project, 2020); BETC Space supports business and entrepreneurship initiatives and delivers free business courses for local inhabitants willing to start their own business (BETC Space (Business, Education, Technology & Co-working, 2020). Vezha: Creative Space is a free-of-charge co-working for civic activists. It was opened in 2018, but has already hosted over 50 educational activities and become a home of many ambitious local projects, one of them – a reconstruction project "Mariupol Central Square" presented to and supported by City Mayor (Vezha: Creative Space, 2020). Besides, Vezha: Creative Space is used as an exhibition hall for local artists.

The TU Platform is a place for the meeting of the representatives of local artists and NGOs who activities are involved into cultural life of the local community (TU Platform, 2020).

IZBA-Chytalnia Intellectual Café is a free zone for civic activists and a military-friendly café because its owner is an ex-military (IZBA-Chytalnia Intellectual Café, 2020). It welcomes NGOs working with the military and war-related military issues, like providing help to the army, organising psychological rehabilitation workshops, trainings in first medical aid, medical literacy, behaviour in extreme situations etc. Over 2017 – 2019, 54 training events were held (IZBA-Chytalnia Intellectual Café, 2020).

Civil society activists cooperate with local authorities, but they are rarely requested to provide expertise or invited as knowledge workers. Instead, they are looked upon as Vox Populi – citizen representatives who articulate opinions, attitudes, feelings of local population and present it to local and regional authorities in the form of "Opinion Reviews" or "Local Initiatives".

Quite often knowledge hubs, other NGOs solicit expertise from MSU provided by individual scholars and researchers as knowledge workers. For examples, the Halabuda Project during 2019 has invited 13 representatives of MSU academic staff to speak during public events, participate in discussions. It is worth mentioning that this knowledge hub was created on the initiative of MSU teachers and former students.

Neither of the knowledge hubs was ready to share their records of activities to assist us with more detailed analysis of their activities. Information on Department of History academic staff who provide expert support to the local knowledge hubs and NGOs is presented in Table 2.

Table 2 Knowledge hubs Soliciting Knowledge Services from MSU Department of History in 2017, 2018, 2019*

	2017	2018	2019
The Halabuda Project invitation to deliver public lectures	10	4	6
IZBA-Chytalnia Intellectual Café invitation to take part in discussions	4	3	Data non-available
A survey "Student Participation in Contemporary Social-Political Process" commissioned by NGO "MOBI: International Organization of Noble Initiatives"	+		
A survey among students on their vision of cultural initiatives / changes / innovations in the city of Mariupol for local authorities and NGOs regarding their participation in All-Ukrainian infrastructure development competition commissioned by Vezha: Creative Space			+

*Based on the internal reports of MSU Department of History.

Conclusions

We analysed the case of MSU, looking for evidence that this HEI is changing its mission and activities under the influence of numerous factors: citizens' traumas and unrest after MLRS attack, growing demand for information and knowledge services during hybrid war, proximity of frontline, loss of population due to migration, including student population, competition with other HEIs etc. It was verified in the course of research that social-political situation in the city of Mariupol and the region has not affected MSU's mission and strategy, which is reflected in university internal by-laws, policies and activities.

At MSU, social responsibility is primarily aimed at students: it is embedded as modernization of curricula, provisions of adequate educational environment, opportunities for self-fulfilment, entertainment and the like.

MSU provides services to its local community; among MSU external stakeholders two groups of clients dominate: 1) potential students, i.e. schoolchildren, and 2) regional and local authorities. The latter use MSU premises, organizational and expert support for large-scale regional, national, and international events. Such activities are of mutual benefit for the HEI and its partners, allowing students and staff to benefit from access to new knowledge, participation in discourse etc. and providing partners in the public sector with organizational support and expertise of MSU knowledge workers who are its major asset.

Currently, local civic activists, NGOs are not among MSU close partners.

Officially, the HEI does not promote its knowledge workers, nor recognizes their contribution to the discourse or activities aimed at community development, protection from hybrid warfare, social capital formation etc.

Most importantly, that in spite of lack of recognition and incentives from MSU leadership, academic staff is ready to provide knowledge services, as well as other services to local community, cooperate with media and civil society. In other words, MSU demonstrates awareness of the growing social role and responsibility at the individual level and refuses to recognize them at the institutional level.

In our initial hypothesis, NGOs were behind HEIs in extending services to the local community. In fact, it is not so: today Mariupol municipal knowledge hubs are fully integrated into local community, respond to its needs, closely cooperate with other community actors and combine several services, which makes them sustainable organizations. To put it differently, if compared to higher education, civil society sector remains a more proactive and flexible actor, capable of knowledge services delivery, contributing to social capital development, mobilising community for better security and self-service.

Local knowledge hubs have developed sufficient expertise (project management, winning grants etc.) that allow them to attract other community players and solicit services from knowledge workers outside their organizations. The scope of cooperation between knowledge hubs and academia is increasing with every year. MSU has advanced in its social role and community service in comparison with other Mariupol HEIs, though cannot claim the status of a civic university according to our initial hypothesis.

Meanwhile, the majority of Ukrainian HEIs prefer to stay distant from community life and societal challenges, focusing on teaching, learning and research. Isolationism of Ukrainian HEIs is an impediment for development of higher education sector, knowledge society and society at large. Under knowledge society, local communities, wider society together with HEIs and other knowledge-generating institutions become co-creators of new knowledge, participants in knowledge generation, testing and application. Community life, societal challenges provide impulses for new ideas, stimulating HEIs to generate more knowledge for solving real-life problems.

If isolated, HEIs are deprived of a potent source of knowledge and testing ground for their hypothesis and theories. Accordingly, society, local communities lack innovative ideas for solving problems in social, political, cultural, technological and other spheres. Overwhelmed with unresolved problems, society and communities direct resources (time, funding) to deal with problems, restricting support to knowledge generation, R&D activities, higher education.

The gravity of isolationism should be recognized by Ukrainian HEIs, their contribution to social change enhanced, cooperation between academia and community augmented, all resulting in a stronger society, nation, state.

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