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## A Comparative Analysis of Classical and Postmodern Views on the Idea of a University

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### Abstract

Background: The crisis that the modern university is experiencing today, is conditioned by the crisis of its *idea* as of a classical essence. The *idea of university* was formulated by W. von Humboldt, however, its history starts with the Greek-Roman era when the ancient philosophy in its cognitive attitude to the world saw its truth, leaning on intelligence that brought it to the harmony of beauty and good. In this quality, *the idea of university* was changing the university history. However, today, by rejecting any natural unity and integrity and also reconsidering classics, the postmodern views diversify the classical university and eliminate the possibility of its common form. Questions arise: can the common *idea* for the university be preserved in these conditions? Will it be preserved (and should it be preserved) by the postmodern culture? Is it possible today to have the unity of the university as a classical social and educational institution? Do modern university models (entrepreneurial, corporate, research, etc.) have their own *idea*? Methods: The purpose of this article is to search for differences between the modern and classical universities. The comparative method is used. Results: Distinctive characteristics (peculiarities) of the modern university have been discovered and described. Conclusions: A conclusion is drawn that there are transformations of the modern university forms in accordance with the conditions of the modern culture.

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## 1. Introduction

Concerning the existence of an *idea* (essence) in the university that informs it with a special – humanitarian, aesthetically and ethically filled – aura, there are two points of view. The first is supported by the authors who write about the “death of university” or its “ending”. It is believed that in the modern conditions, “the university has died” (Barnett, 2001). Its unified *idea* is gone which in the classical culture of the past was based on serving the society, seeing the university’s mission in exalting the human to knowledge and the truth. The second viewpoint is that the modern *idea of the university* does exist, but is not presented in a ready-made mode, and *must be awoken* differently in different historical conditions. However, always, “in order not to allow a decline to the level of overall indifference, the university must honestly preserve an aristocratic order” as its own “idea” (Jaspers, 2006, p. 115). Yet, Barnett (2001) as a representative of the former point of view, writes about the possibility of preserving the *idea of the university* today. Though “an understanding of what the university is called for to serve in the modern world happened to be lost”, there is still hope “that there will also happen a miracle now and a new university will emerge” (Barnett, 2001, p. 52).

In its classical model, the university proceeded from the project of Enlightenment. “Behind the concept of knowledge and the truth there stood ideals of university Enlightenment” – writes Barnett (2001, p. 31). Therefore, the purpose of university was to “improve the world by teaching people and improving the views and knowledge about it” (Bathmaker, 2003, p. 49). Its enlightenment *idea* included striving for knowledge, social justice and truth. Intellectual search and critical analysis were considered as the basis for a better world and academic freedom. Of course, the modern university has inherited the *idea* of the classical university, but its new social and cultural context cannot but inform of itself. Consideration of this context and its impact on the modern university is of current interest for the present research study introduce the paper, and put a nomenclature if necessary, in a box with the same font size as the rest of the paper. The paragraphs continue from here and are only separated by headings, subheadings, images and formulae. The section headings are arranged by numbers, bold and 10 pt. Here follows further instructions for authors.

## 2. Illustrations Subject and methods of research

The subject of the current research is the contemporary – postmodern – university. The purpose of this article is to answer the questions about what it is and how it is different from the classical university. The problem which is stated and solved in this study is connected with justifying the possibility of changing the content of the *idea of the university* in the present-day pluralism of university models and with explaining its specific characteristics and forms of existence. Comparativism has been used as the main method of this research.

It is known that the *idea of the university* in its traditional content was framed by Humboldt (1985), though historically, “the university is a West European idea inherited by us, Europeans, from Greeks” (Jaspers, 2006, p. 150). Nevertheless, the modern university is experiencing a period of withdrawal from classics: it is becoming postmodern. The founder of the postmodern university concept is Webster (2013) who calls the postmodern university rival of the classical university and, by comparing these two models, is sure that the Enlightenment project on which the classical university was based meant the necessity to see one *idea of the university*, one form of knowledge and its certain *prepared* sum that the student had to master. Whereas the postmodern university does not have an inner unity and thus does not have distinctive fixed unified and common features. Our scholars agree with this opinion. Latysh (2002) thinks that the modern university still does not possess integrity, which is unambiguously interpreted by the society. It turns into one of transition composites from an Alma Mater. The university today is more like a library, where each person chooses a book according to their tastes, rather than an ivory tower, where the chosen ones are nurtured.

The postmodern university unites all the presently existing universities with their inner characteristics. Therefore it cannot have its own single *idea*. Webster (2013) believes that the postmodern university draws attention to itself not by the *idea*, but by the task of getting good financing from the government and sponsors. The author points that the university in our time, as opposed to the classical university, is not the only source of knowledge. It has competitors and in this function it fails to be necessary in its single form of existence. A multitude of universities appears and this blurs its former specific and determined forms, limits and *idea*.

### 3. Results

#### 3.1. Why does the postmodern university not have its single idea?

The classical university had an *idea* of the humanistic role of education and served the health of the national spirit. Nonetheless, the social reality places new demand on it. What does it serve now? How has it changed and, correspondingly, how has its *idea* changed? These questions are answered by many authors in the Western publications.

Thus, García Ruiz (2003) writes that the postmodern university has a danger: it may eventually lose the university *idea*. She says that today it already has no *idea*. In the university conglomerate, when their multitude of forms is born, each tells about of its own essential *idea*. However, each time this *idea* is totally different from the traditional definitions. The postmodern university, according to the author, only imposes definitions of *its best experience*. This university breaks the traditional values of culture and thus demolishes its own idea. The new-born universities bring education into action in various forms and compete with each other. But this also means that the *idea of the university* is disappearing. Xabermas (1994, p. 33) testifies: “Those who keep the former idea of the university belong to the hostile innovative tendency”.

Indeed, is the *idea of the university* going or staying under the conditions of its postmodern existence? In favor of a positive answer to this question, there exist many arguments. Thus, García Ruiz (2003), expressing fear on the modern university’s loss of its *idea*, meanwhile affirms that the postmodern university is more democratic because it attracts more students and therefore is mass. The mass university is a phenomenon of its postmodern existence, which cannot be viewed within the scope of its negative characteristics. It does impact its *idea*, but introduces extra values into it. Indeed, in the situation of the *liquid modernity* (Bauman, 2008), talent can not be a rare phenomenon. On the contrary, everyone is required to be talented. Moreover, everyone must have an ability to explore the educational standard. Everyone may acquire the university level of education. This requirement, secondly, turns “a necessity for the graduate to have new characteristics”. They must be able to work in the situation of uncertainty, be permanently ready for changes because they may face informal contexts of their work. The postmodern university model does not imply eternal, absolute and invariable characteristics of the graduate (Bathmaker, 2003), and the modern university in this respect finds itself in the situation of reconsideration.

Third the mass nature of the university, on the one hand, is conditioned by its postmodern state and, on the other hand, its conditioning causes the necessity of new personal and professional characteristics of its graduates. This, in the corresponding time, as new conditions influencing the *idea* of the university was predicted by Weber (1990), who paid attention to the fact that in the conditions of mass scale forming of scholars, politicians, entrepreneurs, etc., much attention should be given to ethics and professional responsibility. Everyone must clearly understand that one must pay for the consequences of their actions. Fourth, one of the consequences of the postmodern university is the change in the priorities of its main subjects. If the classical university had main subjects of the professor and the student, the postmodern university has the administrator as such. Riddings (2009) considers the figure of the administrator to be the main one because they find resources for development. Their main work is not the educational activities, but accountability. Due to this, the university is becoming a transnational bureaucratic corporation. Such a university is striving for perfection – in this logic, accountability is turning to be the main type of its activity. Criteria, accountability and perfections are far from those classical criteria of the university that W. von Humboldt used to talk of in his time. All the criteria of the postmodern university are aimed at the idea of the effective survival in the circumstances of competition. The university must be competitive in the global educational space – that is the logic of the administrator.

#### 3.2. The destiny of the liberal art constituent in the idea of the university in its postmodern model

Newman (2006) and Humboldt (1985) connected the liberal art constituent in the *idea of the university* with the difference in teaching or professional training of students and its education. Humanitarization is the prerogative of education in which not only accumulation (cumulation) of knowledge, but personal highly intellectual and spiritual development of students takes place. They linked liberal art education with the universalism of education, height, ethic development and aristocratism of mind. In present days, the question on humanitarization of university education is of special interest due to the situation of mass education, loss of its elitism, absence of antecedent

liberal art characteristics of the modern science and growing technocracy of thinking. How does liberal art education reveal itself in the university?

In the Russian university, there are two viewpoints regarding liberal art education. One of them connects it with the abilities of liberal art sciences in postgraduate educational institutions. Today, in this respect, there has been formed a policy of some radicalism when the value of education humanitarization is not visible and a tendency of reduction in liberal art disciplines is found. This position finds its excuse, first, in that liberal art sciences do not bring material effect, and, second, in that the liberal art department graduates experience difficulties in job placement. Nevertheless, Webster (2013), quoting García Ruiz (2003), claims that the latter argument is inadequate because the globalized world now has a new sphere of knowledge application for liberal art major graduates. This sphere is the “symbolic and analytical services”. The liberal art department graduates are becoming “symbolic analysts” and can perform actions of intermediaries when solving various problems. Today, specialists in advertisement, producers, designers, journalists, etc. work as analysts. They do not have clearly fixed positions. Their work is to manipulate symbols and visual images. For this reason, liberal art major graduates are exceedingly in demand at present.

The second viewpoint is the continuation of classics and arises from the special – that of university – “atmosphere of thought” (Newman, 2006), from the “intellectuality of spirit” that Ortega y Gasset (2005) talked about. Jaspers (2006) called this specificity of the university aura “an intellectual conscience”, and Xabermas (1994) – “a style”. The content of the *idea of the university* viewed from this position is characterized in definitions of perfect, sacred, aesthetic and aristocratic spirit. It is present in the university not only with purposes of professional, but also spiritual and intellectual development of students.

However, in the postmodern society, education at large and university education in particular is more and more revealing possibilities of commercialization and market. Therefore, the discussion on the destiny of the liberal art constituent in the *idea of the university* during the postmodernism era is conditioned by the impact on it of such circumstances that may be controversially related with the content characteristics of the classic *idea of the university*. Indeed, what does market in education mean? How does the market thinking correspond (or can it correspond) to the *idea of the university*? This question is set by Bauman (2004), who offers reflecting on some answer points. For the postmodern university, the suitable answer turns to be the one in which the researcher speaks of *tertiary education*. The *idea of the university* in this case is connected with the fact that education must provide not a formalized, established and steady sum of knowledge that becomes habitual and unending. On the contrary, *tertiary education* gives knowledge on “how to destroy the generally accepted order, how to get rid of habits and prevent habituation, how to modify the fragmented elements of experience into the previously unknown samples” (Bauman, 2004, p.91).

Education viewed at this angle has its logic which proves effective in providing its humanitarization due to carrying the potential of the possible professional’s relevance to the postmodern culture specifics. It is necessary for education to see the market not in its economic meaning, but as a specific means of human thinking. The main characteristics of such thinking are self-organization, self-support, the ability to think through the anticipatory steps, project and predict the future. The market thinking views activity from the point of its constant correspondence to demands that the society has at this stage. Such activity is not firmly outlined by canons, certain norms and principles, but turns so flexible that each time depending on the situation it may turn to be “any and *different*”. It does not get fixed and has no strongly fastened essence-substance as a standard and norm, but reveals itself as an ideal state, i.e. movable and allowing adaptation to specific situations.

Therefore, the postmodern university is not a space where the *idea of the university* can not live. Of course, here, it is transformed according to its content, but in its essence, it remains humanistic and encouraging the human’s life in corresponding, i.e. postmodern, conditions of culture.

#### 4. Conclusion

The *idea of the university*, being its essential characteristic, does have a historic content, that in the circumstances of the postmodern culture appears in characteristics different from those in the classical culture. That is why the university always “has a fluid of spiritual life as a background of thinking..., and the university is getting impoverished if this human and spiritual underlying cause does not pulse anymore” (Jaspers, 2006, p. 69). The modern university has to turn to such concerns that it traditionally never had and those that were never carried by its *idea*. The university professor now has become “not more competent than a network of memory devices in the work

of carrying the set knowledge or than an interdisciplinary group in its elaboration of new technical skills”. Professors and academicians do not act as experts, and their opinion rivals with those of movie stars, journalists and popular presenters. Thus, a necessity in professors as people able to explain the specifics of the modern social and cultural state is viewed doubtful by many (Lyotard, 1998).

At the same time, there must be no nostalgia on the disappearing classics of the university. The university is alive in its *idea* renewed according to its time. “The idea of the university is not visible or audible from the outside, it is glimmering in the ashes of institutions” (Jaspers, 2006, p. 96). Though, of course, one must not forget the warning that K. Jaspers wrote in his time: “In order to prevent decline to the level of overall mediocrity, the university must honestly keep aristocratic order in itself” (Jaspers, 2006, p. 115).

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