

Karin Doolan

Local Voices Expressing Global Concerns: Academic Resistance in the Croatian Science and Higher Education Area

Public demonstrations in protest of neoliberalism and its effects on higher education have become a global phenomenon. The latest example is the student protest in Quebec which is both a revolt against tuition fee increases and the broader political and economic setting which encourages such a policy. Martin Lukacs captures this revolt in his recent *Guardian* article entitled “Quebec student protests mark “Maple Spring” in Canada” (May 2, 2012): student protests are described as dissent against tuition fees and the related idea of education as a commodity purchased by “consumers” for self-advancement, as well as dissent against neoliberalism and its austerity agenda, individualism, competition and inequality.

The Academic Solidarity union’s Declaration on Science and Higher Education published in April 2012 in Croatia, shares this global revolt. The Declaration is a multi-disciplinary critique of the dominant neoliberal economic order and an attempt to influence science and higher education policy away from a neoliberal agenda of ethical retooling along detrimental lines: privatisation, commercialisation, competition, financial sanctions, elimination of certain study areas and other cost reductions. The aim of this article is to present the main points of this key document to an international audience. These points include criticism of the neoliberal faith in the market, the neoliberal pressure for the science and higher education sectors to act almost exclusively as a service for economic growth, the reinforcement of the “rational entrepreneur” ideal of (wo)mankind, precarity, university rankings, privatisation, underfunding (and austerity measures on top of that), social insensitivity in relation to tuition fee payment and other risk factors, and top-down education policy making.

Neoliberal terms of reference

The neoliberal faith in the market and lack of faith in the state is infiltrating education in Croatia similarly to the way it has infiltrated other services crucial to our wellbeing such as the healthcare system. In the science and higher education system the effects of neoliberalism can be identified both overtly, through the pressures exerted on those working in these areas in terms of their exposure to performance targets, competition and cost reduction, as well as more subtly in relation to “changes in the language of everyday institutional life” (Roberts and Peters, 2008:1), where “competitiveness” (rather than “solidarity” for example) is the buzzword. In a broader sense, the Lisbon process is particularly singled out as guilty in the Declaration for the way in which it has transformed the politics of the welfare state by subordinating social citizenship to economic growth and competitiveness (Chalmers and Lodge 2003). The individualism that is integral to this position is poignantly reflected in the following quote from the Strategic framework for the development of the Republic of Croatia 2006-2013 (2006:6): “Although the effects of decades of promoted justice and expectations that the state will take care of the individual are still present, such thinking is slowly disappearing. New generations are growing up and maturing with the knowledge that their biggest support in life lies in the results of their

labour". Lynch (2006:3) captures this neoliberal tone by noting that "the individual (rather than the nation) is held responsible for her or his own well-being".

The underlying tone of the Declaration is one of frustration with this individualistic discourse, with global social inequalities, lowering living standards and deepening existential insecurities and the way that the state pays for the economic crisis by cutting costs in education and social welfare. For these problems to be seriously addressed there is a requirement for broader economic, social and political changes whose aim is to nurture values such as solidarity, social inclusion, sustainable development and the common good in opposition to competition, social exclusion, economic growth for the few, and selfish private interests. More specifically, an alternative to the neoliberal agenda in science and higher education is called for with regard to: the purpose of science and higher education, the subjectivities of academic and administrative workers and students, the status of academic fields, quality, rankings, private and public higher education and social inclusion.

Science and higher education as slaves to economic growth

With regard to the purpose of higher education, the neoliberal pressure is for the science and higher education sectors to act almost exclusively as a service for economic growth. To illustrate this, the Strategic framework for the development of the Republic of Croatia 2006-2013 states that: "A variable which in all research proves to be an important determinant of growth is so-called human capital or education. Education has a strong, positive and universal influence on economic growth" (2006:5). This pressure can be questioned on several levels.

Firstly, the notion of economic growth as such demands scrutiny. For example, Stieglitz (2009) has challenged the notion that GDP per capita growth necessarily means better conditions in health, education and human rights. Nussbaum (2011) reinforces this by calling such a measure of growth "crude" and warns that a focus on it does not encourage countries to address issues such as health and education which "typically do not improve with economic growth" (2011: ix).

Secondly, the Declaration questions the notion of higher education for economic growth. It states that "The main imperative of science and higher education is and must remain an ethical responsibility towards the development of a more just and humane society" (p.18). Therefore, it emphasises the purpose of higher education in holistic terms: the development of the individual as a citizen, the education of specialists, the cultural, ethical and egalitarian mission of education, education for democracy, and the strengthening of local communities (Jonasson 2011).

The purpose of higher education raises a related issue of how valuable different academic fields of study are perceived to be, which is in turn connected to funding. Indeed, an economic profit driven science and higher education system is likely to privilege certain fields of study over others. The Vice-Chancellor of the University of Cambridge, Leszek Borysiewicz, notes this by asserting that the current economic climate has encouraged many outside academia to assess the impact of universities in "increasingly narrow, utilitarian terms, concentrating only on economic benefit or benefit to individual graduates and their employability" (2011) and that it is necessary to value the range of contributions universities have to society, a process in which the arts and humanities play a crucial role. This issue

becomes particularly acute in the austerity economy in which, as Morley (2011) observes, “higher education has been recast as profligate and extravagant” (p.2). Within this context, the arts and humanities are particularly at-risk (as Nussbaum (2010) observes, they are seen by policy makers as “useless frills”), which can be illustrated by the list of “non-profitable” departments which have been restructured or shut down. The demand is that all fields of study are recognised discursively and financially as valuable.

The rational entrepreneur “ideal”

Economic reductionism affects not only funding, study content and teaching practices but also people or, as Ball (1997) puts it, “who we are” and “who we can become”. In this sense, the Declaration draws a distinction between “rational entrepreneurs” and “thinking subjects”, juxtaposing them as a question of capitalist versus humanist values. In the “rational entrepreneur” paradigm, the student is constructed as a consumer of a private good. Flexibility, communication skills and competition are key words. As Lynch (2006:3) notes, “competitive individualism is no longer seen as an amoral necessity but rather as a desirable and necessary attribute for a constantly reinventing entrepreneur”. In the “thinking subject” paradigm, the individual is not conceptualised as a human resource and one who is capable of managerially creating her career but rather as an empathetic human being capable of taking a critical stance towards social, political and ecological phenomena and enjoying a free education which leads to intellectual emancipation and political self-awareness. The Croatian Right to Education protests manifesto (2009) captures this latter ideal in the following way: “We deem it important to give back dignity to the idea of collective interests and social solidarity, against the representational-media culture of the cult of individualism....we see this as an ideologically problematic representational model of social processes with far-reaching political consequences, which include the abolishment of social rights and institutions of social solidarity” (Right to Education Manifesto, April 2009).

Precarious times

The affective dimension of living and working in these times of uncertainty also requires addressing. Ross’s (2009) work on life and labour in precarious times talks about “the march of precarity” (“intermittent employment and radical uncertainty about the future”) across the workforce (p.4). He uses the term “multi-class precariat” in order to draw attention to the shared concerns of those who stand at opposite ends of the labour market hierarchy: workers in low-end services and members of the “creative class”. At the moment, the neoliberal austerity agenda does not provide much optimism for employment security with junior members of the academic community and others in non-tenure positions as particularly at-risk. Cuts proposed by the Croatian government in June 2012 to public service employees’ income and benefits (e.g. reduction in basic salary and lowering per diems) further this sense of detrimental insecurity.

Rankings and competition

Quality is another central concern in the Declaration formulated in opposition to quantitative indicators of quality that feed world rankings and academic competition. Although there is awareness that competition is not a new phenomenon in the higher education area, it used to be formulated on different grounds: as a question of methods, models and knowledge rather than places in ranking tables. The most recent case of such rankings in the Western Balkan

countries is that of Macedonia: the ranking, based on “19 indicators of academic performance and competitiveness”, was commissioned by the country’s Ministry of Education and Science and its results were released in February 2012.

University rankings reduce interaction in the higher education field to one of competition, they are based on reductive indicators, and they overlook historical and cultural differences between higher education institutions. Importantly, as Lynch (2006) notes, none of the league tables focuses on the quality of student experiences and none assesses universities in terms of values such as inclusivity and respect for diversity. The Declaration demands that the Croatian higher education area does not participate in such rankings. Reed College in the USA can be cited as an inspiring example of a higher education institution which refuses to participate in numerical university rankings. According to the Reed College website, its president, Colin Diver, has criticised rankings as grounded in a “one-size-fits-all” mentality: “They are primarily measures of institutional wealth, reputation, influence, and pedigree. They do not attempt, nor claim, to measure the extent to which knowledge is valued and cultivated” on each campus.

The quality approach we should promote is one in which professional and socio-cultural criteria are considered and where transparency is the guiding principle. Such quality is grounded in cooperation, solidarity and reciprocity among staff and students, in academic freedoms and self-governance, and in a commitment to making all forms of scientific and administrative practices publicly available. These practices include research results and their implementation, financing and spending and the transparency of various public calls (e.g. for job positions). This is a system in which quality is nurtured as a value in itself rather than as a set of quantitative indicators with which to compete in the higher education market.

Underfunded education

The regulation of private and public investments and institutions with the aim of protecting science and higher education as a collective good is a further important issue. We are witnessing a burgeoning privatisation (“privatisation as the universal medication”, Declaration, p.37)) and commercialisation of the higher education sector. This currently takes the form of increased private investment into higher education at the individual level in the form of tuition fees (60% of students in Croatia were fee-paying in the academic year 2009/2010, according to Croatian Bureau of Statistics data), but it is expected to further develop towards greater investment from the private sector. This in turn is expected to further negatively impact public funding for higher education, which is already extremely low in Croatia at 0.95% of GDP in 2008 and lower than the EU27 average of 1.14% (countries which allocate a higher percentage of GDP include Denmark, Belgium, France, Austria, Slovenia and Germany). Croatia’s public investment into higher education as a percentage of GDP is also lower than in, for example, Estonia, Ireland, Spain, Cyprus, Hungary, Malta, Poland, Finland, Sweden, Norway and Island. What is particularly problematic is that the already underfunded Croatian science and higher education system is in the position of fighting against austerity cuts rather than fighting for increases.

Privately owned science and higher education institutions are rejected on several grounds. The document questions the quality of profit-driven private science and higher education

institutions in Croatia and raises issues of corruption, data manipulation and access. The Declaration demands that university higher education remains exclusively public.

Blindness to social inequalities

Free and socially inclusive higher education is set as a priority in the Declaration. “Free” is used in order to encapsulate the requirement that direct costs of study should be covered for all students at all levels of study from state funds. The current model of charging tuition fees in Croatia whereby students pay according to how successful they are in accumulating ECTS points (so-called “excellence”) is open to critique on the grounds that it is based on an explanation of success as resulting only from psychological factors, such as intelligence and motivation, rather than also from institutional and social factors (such as financial means). This can of course be recognized as part of the broader capitalist discourse on the self-made (wo)man which Salecl (2010) captures as follows: “Above all, the self-made man is independent from social constraints, with sheer determination and hard work, he could rise above the social and economic conditions into which he was born. He confronts the world with an all-conquering smile, and obstacles only help to shape him”. Similarly, according to Moreau and Kerner (2012), in its ideal-typical form the neoliberal discourse in higher education suggests that the main responsibility for one’s learning and care responsibilities is with the individual. In other words, when we think of at-risk groups of students, the focus is on the student adapting or changing rather than the institution.

A myriad of studies (both in Croatia and internationally) have shown that successful educational progress is not just the result of “sheer determination and hard work” but rather it is also related to both the social profile of the student and to institutional characteristics and these findings need to be considered in relation to the tuition fee model. But, possibly even more importantly, it is crucial to recognise higher education as a collective good and a worthy public investment rather than an unfortunate public cost benefitting only individuals.

Social inclusion in higher education is referred to within the social dimension policy guideline within the Bologna process. The guideline draws attention to the commitment that students entering, progressing through and completing higher education should reflect the diversity of our populations, i.e. that obstacles should be removed for at-risk groups of students. However, this is a policy which is not high on the agenda in the current profit-led context. As Nussbaum (2010) ironically observes, equal access “is not terribly important; a nation can grow very nicely while the rural poor remain illiterate” (p.19). Tuition fees are one such obstacle to equal access, as is inadequate student support for the at-risk student (insufficient provision of subsidised student accommodation in Croatia, scholarship amount) since the indirect costs of higher education are particularly high. Student loans, as a way of allowing market relations into the educational sphere, are rejected as an inappropriate source of funding for those in need.

Top-down education policy making and a final note

Finally, reforms in higher education in Croatia have been unsystematic, have lacked consultations with staff and students in the system and have tended to involve uncritical policy borrowing furthered by international organisations such as the World Bank or OECD. It is therefore necessary to develop a more systematic approach which includes an analysis of the current situation conducted in cooperation with the academic community, shaping policy

options based on this analysis and evaluating these policy options with interested parties. Decisions on these policies should be made with the academic community, staff and students, the implementation of policies should be closely monitored and reformulations should be developed if there is a need for them. In other words, a more bottom-up approach to policy making is called for.

The Declaration on Science and Higher Education is a valuable document on several levels. Firstly, it is a contribution to thinking about science and higher education in today's world. It refrains from nostalgia and is oriented towards the future, recognising the need for reform in order to shape this future along the line of values such as solidarity, equality, justice and ethics. Secondly, the document demands broader social and economic changes, but it also displays a note of self-criticism from the academic community and identifies the need for reform from within. Thirdly, it does not just demand changes; it also proposes recommendations on how to achieve them and cites various authors to reinforce its arguments, thereby drawing attention to the fact that local voices in Croatia are also expressing global concerns. However, there is a demand for creative solutions in the local context in opposition to the "periphery's" uncritical policy borrowing from the "centre".

As a conclusion, a question implicitly raised by the Declaration is what kind of higher education system do we want for what kind of society? And the answer to this question can be found in the following values mentioned throughout the Declaration: a higher education system and society based on nurturing the collective good, solidarity, justice, ethics and participation.

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Karin Doolan is Assistant Professor at the Department of Sociology, University of Zadar in Croatia where she lectures in sociology of education, cultural theory, research design and qualitative research methods. Before taking up this position she worked at the Institute for Social Research in Zagreb as a researcher and consultant on various projects with a prominent social justice agenda. She has also contributed as a policy analyst to developmental projects both in Croatia and the UK. She holds a PhD and MPhil from the University of Cambridge.

