

## **Rebuilding Universities of the Past for Future Ukraine and Beyond**

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### **Abstract**

This article presents findings from a series of interviews focused on the future of higher education. Members of a team of young people called *Future is in Our Hands (FIOH)* were brought together by the Ashoka program Youth Leadership for Emerging Future. These young people, many of whom are refugees, sought to answer the question, “What kind of a world do we want to live in?” through a series of conversations, convenings, and interviews. One of their areas of inquiry was about the future role of higher education with a focus on universities. As universities in Ukraine (and elsewhere) have been destroyed through war and conflict, FIOH saw an opportunity to reimagine what they could look like so that when it came time to rebuild, they were better than before – more relevant, more productive, and better able to meet the needs of young people and their communities.

### **Introduction**

This report comes from a young team called FIOH – Future Is In Our Hands, engaged in the Ashoka program Youth Leadership for Emerging Future<sup>1</sup>. Our main mission is to create projects and unite the youth around the topic of the future. What kind of world do we want to live in? We are Ukrainians. And every day, we read, hear, or watch the news. Our home suffers from an endless number of missiles and bombs every day. Our home is in ruins, and a lot of those ruins are educational institutions. For us, education is what the future starts with. So we set out to find answers to the question: what should rise from the ruins? Our hearts are breaking with pain because it is impossible to explain and justify the killing of children and youth working behind their desks. However, our responsibility and our mission call us to design a new educational system so that it will not be the old forms that could rise from the ruins but new and different models that will serve the future. Therefore, this study is a sketch of the future for us, just the first step towards designing the world we would like to live in. This work arose from our sincere desire to start taking very concrete steps to create a vision of the future as seen by the youth.

### **Rationale**

The university as a phenomenon should be considered exclusively in the narrow sense of the word and limited to the comprehension of the understanding of the university from the moment of the emergence of the name “university.” The origins go back to the 13th century, when “universitas studiorum et magistrorum,” i.e., the association of students and masters (teachers),

was first mentioned. This establishes the first aspect – the university is a corporation of students and teachers. The basis of the university is their fruitful interaction, and this interaction has created the first model of an educational institution – the medieval university. This is the second aspect: the medieval university aimed to form universal, not utilitarian, knowledge. For this purpose, the curriculum began to exist: a compulsory faculty of the liberal arts, only upon graduation from which a student had the opportunity to receive further specialized education at one of the three higher faculties: medicine, law, and theology. The third aspect that characterizes a medieval university is its three freedoms (autonomies): judicial, financial, and academic. The university was an autonomous institution that had the task of improving the moral and intellectual qualities of men. Thus, the university was supposed to be an autonomous institution united around the goal of obtaining universal knowledge that improves and fosters the qualities of students and teachers as stewards of their respective communities.

The Renaissance, whose central idea was to restore the power and importance of the idea of Human as a free being, emphasized the death and obsolescence of the rough scholastic form of teaching in the destruction of mind and revived the form of “academy” – free debate and dialectics, the search for truth in a joint discussion. The phenomenon of the Reformation, which provoked a split in Christianity and gave rise to new orders and religious movements, initiated the concept of the national university.

The Age of Enlightenment gave birth to a new wave of relevance and popularity of science and gained innovative methods and discoveries that became the push and ground for the emergence of the Second University – a modern (classical or research) university. Wilhelm von Humboldt and his model of the university retained financial and academic autonomy from the medieval model, and **research became central**. Primarily, university professors and students used research as the main tool and principle of learning and knowledge acquisition. We argue that to this day, the predominant university model is the Wilhelm von Humboldt Classical University. Reflecting on the state of the university today, we rely on the meaning of this word, which was laid down in the origins of the university phenomenon: the purpose that the university serves and for which it was built, the knowledge offered by this university, the quality and making sense of this knowledge, and last but not least – the quality of the relationships within the internal life of the university, the corporation of students and lecturers. Since the university, by its very nature, is a “laboratory” for raising a new generation that comes to replace the existing one; therefore, the form and content of education must be in line with the values that society sees as the basis of the future.

That is why we have launched a study aimed at finding the answer to the question: “What is the place and the state of today's university, and what should the university of the future be like?”

## **Methodology**

To collect the data for this study, we used a semi-structured interview method, interviewed eight experts, and added our three sets of answers. In order to select the experts, we analyzed and searched for individuals according to the following criteria:

- We were looking for people from different fields, people who are directly related to universities, philosophical concepts of education as a system, as well as experts in politics and economics (we wanted to get the complete picture of the problem at the level we have available now).
- Different European countries (so far, we have managed to cover three countries: Poland, Estonia, Ukraine, and partially Germany (the expert is not German but is a specialist in this topic and has direct experience of interaction).
- In addition, we have studied an array of scientific literature and lectures on the topic, ranging from statistical data to historical articles.

The experts invited for interviews were former or current rectors, deans, and ministers of the Ukrainian government. Some of them had experience teaching as visiting professors at several universities in disciplines ranging from humanities (philosophy, history, languages), arts (drama, literature, music), social sciences (sociology, psychology, pedagogy), economics, management, medicine, and engineering.

## **Results**

Below are themes that emerged from the interviews.

As students, we currently provide our own feedback and intellectual guidance as the university provides only rote learning opportunities. Having studied the history of the university, we can conclude that the original cooperation of students and teachers is no longer its foundation.

## **Problems**

Here are a number of problems that we also identified together with experts during the study:

**Commercialization of knowledge.** At the end of the 20th century, the market entered the university and became the center and main element for decision-making. Today's university primarily serves economic development. What is the principle by which a student chooses a major, and what is the most common question asked by parents? "What can you do for a living?" Commerce determines students' decisions.

Commerce determines the topic and direction of research.

Commerce determines the list of majors and faculties; new professions are becoming more and more numerous, old professions are disappearing, and "knowledge" is fragmented and reassembled for siloed disciplines and new directions. The benefit of the present drives the development of the future.

- Commercialization has led to the massification, fragmentation, and consequent obsolescence of knowledge. Fragmentation of knowledge in order to produce a narrow specialization in a short time creates a narrow mindset of a student who can perform a limited range of tasks. The world has accelerated many times over. Technologies are being updated, trends and demands are changing, and opportunities for changemaking are increasing while universities continue to transmit "ready" knowledge and use old

practices that quickly become obsolete. The focus on rote learning of fragmented knowledge prevents deep engagement with complex ideas and discourages the curiosity and innovative approaches to learning that are essential skills today. Only people who have experienced this more involved engagement with knowledge and ideas are capable of changemaking and of creating – people who have a synthesis of complex and multifaceted knowledge gained through reflection and research. Do people who not only have knowledge but can develop, change, and connect it with other experts graduate from university?

***Loss of Respect.*** Research, which formally remains the core of the university, in fact, often becomes “citation for citation's sake,” “research for research's sake,” and graduation papers are Chat GPT responses. The sense of research for the sake of knowledge and discovery has been preserved only in a minority of institutions.

- The virtual world is becoming much more attractive than the university world. Diplomas are losing importance in the market, and certificates of course completion are becoming more important and relevant than degrees. Throughout its history, the university has had the status of a “threshold” that people have to cross in order to earn respect and recognition in society as intellectuals and competent people. The university is losing respect.
- The person and humanity exist outside of education because inside; there is a teacher and a student, hierarchical relationships, and responsibilities. Is there respect for professors? Is there respect for students? Does a corporation in which relationships and the fruit of relationships are learning and the educational process, in which discussions and debates educate a free person, still exist? To summarize, we dare to emphasize that the form remains, but the essence is gone.

### ***Three Scenarios***

There is no exact answer to the question: *what does the university serve today?* The search continued, and we developed three scenarios that the university could follow:

**Scenario 1: What happens if everything remains as it is?** Most experts expressed the opinion that time will destroy universities that do not transform and do not offer young people the educational systems that are relevant to the times and the future.

But at the same time, it was noted that this is an opportunity – the university crisis may begin to stimulate active, creative people to provide alternative opportunities.

Also, with regard to society and its consequences, if the university becomes obsolete, the society that depended on it will not be able to react directly to disasters and quickly generate new ways to solve problems. Societies will lose their own autonomous ability to reinvent themselves, think in new ways, and effectively change themselves in response to global and local challenge scenarios.

**Scenario 2: What changes can be introduced to an existing university?** Experts' opinions were mostly divided into three areas.

- 1) There is no point in reforming the current system of university education; it is in a state of absolute loss of meaning and deviation from both the corporation of students and faculty as well as an engaged research organization. Therefore, it is necessary to simply create a new one in parallel, either by gradually eliminating this system or allowing it to collapse on its own.
- 2) There is a chance to reform the modern university, and the three main focuses that need to be outlined are the return of genuine scientific research, the granting of the three freedoms mentioned below to the university, and the return of adequate teacher-pupil (professor-student) relations, in which there will be mutual respect and curiosity.
- 3) Changes to the university are absolutely necessary, though not to ensure that it continues to exist in its current form, to support the feeble system so that it does not fall apart before the creation of another university and the educational system as a whole. The reason for this is that the educational system is the backbone of society, and all of society's life rests on it, so we cannot allow the system to collapse completely, as this will lead to a radical aggravation of the crisis, including the crisis of humanity, and an increase in the level of violence at the household and state levels.

For us, as for Ukrainian youth, the third direction is extremely important because even now, observing the state of our society, which is gradually killing its educational system and has been at war for more than 10 years, we are seeing how society is becoming more and more violent, how it is becoming more polarized, and hatred is becoming acceptable.

**Scenario 3: What should a new university be like?** Our experts had a variety of concepts of completely new universities, but there are certain key features that most of them have in common, so let's talk about them first and then move on to consider individual models.

Features of the university of the future include the importance of freedom in three important areas: relevance and humanity. *Three Freedoms*. There are three fundamental freedoms to the ideal university of the future: academic freedom, financial freedom, and political freedom (autonomy).

The freedoms in these three areas are the most important characteristics for the development of a university that can become the basis for the future because only in an atmosphere of freedom can young people capable of creativity in a broad sense be raised.

Academic freedom, which means that the curriculum should be determined exclusively by teachers and students, the burden of bureaucratic reporting should be lifted from teachers, and the unified system of evaluation through standardized tests should also be removed.

Financial freedom, so that the university can independently direct financial flows for research, support of talented scientists, and its own maintenance.

Political autonomy, i.e., the absence of an ideological aspect; unfortunately, in a huge number of countries, the university has become a space for propaganda.

**Relevance.** The university should become the birthplace of the future, a place where real scientific discoveries take place. The university should develop projects for the future, from fundamental principles and basics to the creation of a detailed picture. In addition, the task of the university should be to raise the elite, i.e., people who shape society and are responsible for decisions.

**Humanity.** This is probably the point that causes us the most pain. Not only does the university have no right to foster hatred, but it must first and foremost form a picture of a world in which violence is unacceptable and in which diversity is perceived as happiness and a gift.

**Humboldtian Ideal.** Another common feature is the return to the initial understanding of the university, or to the Humboldtian one, and thus, first, the return of the universal level of disciplines (seven liberal arts), the purpose of which is not to develop practical competencies, but to develop a human being as a person and foster their soul, and second, the creation of genuine free research that will concentrate scientists around universities.

**High Standards.** The university should select and train the best, and this is not about discrimination or exclusion from society. Everyone should have the right and opportunity to enter the university, but only those who demonstrate the best results, which will be measured not by tests but evaluated by real experts and masters, based on a complex learning process, should graduate. Standardization, generalization, and simplification kill talent, and the university should become a place that finds, supports and nurtures talent and capacities for changemaking.

## **Unique Models**

Two interesting models were shared in the interviews. They included the university that was developed as a response to the crisis and the university as an opportunity for sharing experience and knowledge. Interviewees also focused on the importance of diversity in higher education models.

**University As a Response to Crisis.** When a university is founded, it must choose a specific enough problem to solve, for example, the problem of war or environmental disaster. The task of its work should be to solve this social problem within 100 years, and each time, during its activity, to return to the origin of the formulated problem and, on this basis, to make any decisions about the direction of research.

**University As an Opportunity to Share Experience and Knowledge.** To unite people who can enrich each other through communication in the natural environment. They do not have to do this within a clear infrastructure, such as a classroom, but it can function in airports or planes. The main thing is to abandon the academic form and move to communication between two individuals who are “educating” each other.

**Diversity of Models.** Nevertheless, the interviewed experts emphasize that there should be educational diversity and that the university should be just one of the links on the path to

developing education for the future. The most important thing is that the university should serve the future, exist, create, and be directed toward a better world in which one can live.

## **Conclusions**

The university is not just a name with a historical context; it is the idea of an intergenerational community of learners building relationships that will become the main mechanism of education as a dynamic interaction of complex knowledge and ideas, dialogue, and development of the soul. Could we look into every university and evaluate every teacher? Of course not. We have created an overview of experts' responses, literature, and observations, and, being concerned about it, we want to share it. The university, as an idea and an institution of supposed stewardship or humanity, is in crisis. It's not the first one, but the question is whether it is not the last one.

The university has remained only as a form – walls, faculties, positions, hierarchies, and titles. But what should be the content? What should be the idea? We are standing at the origins of this question and looking into the distance for a long way to find new answers. But we are taking the courage to postulate:

For a university to find its new purpose, it must be given the freedom to search and experiment. Allow a multitude of forms to exist. Allow students and professors to seek new challenges and ask new questions. A new university should be created for a brave new mission. That is why the university should stop clinging to the familiar form in its agony and embark on a search for new content. Let's build the future together!

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<sup>1</sup>Recordings of the interviews can be viewed:

[https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL7cv5o3Z1bzQXwUJ\\_vPOWYFrlcsxOBshP](https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL7cv5o3Z1bzQXwUJ_vPOWYFrlcsxOBshP)