

Dmytro SHEVCHUK

## THE CONTEMPORARY UNIVERSITY A Tradition that Creates the Future

*The concept of the university as a space in which different ideas may be developed and confronted is not new. Such a possibility is inherent in the academic tradition from the beginning of universities, which have always embraced mutually opposed currents of thought. This characteristic is particularly conspicuous in the case of the contemporary university, which combines universalism of research and an administrative hierarchy; applied knowledge and pure knowledge; the academia as such and the particular areas of scholarship.*

I dedicate my paper to the three universities each of which I can call my *alma mater*. To them I owe my knowledge and academic values, my outlook on life, and my understanding of the world. They are the Ostroh Academy and the Kyiv-Mohyla Academy (the two oldest universities in Ukraine), and the John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin. They are comparable schools despite the fact that the latter is closely connected to the Catholic tradition, while the Ostroh Academy and the Kyiv-Mohyla Academy, at their origins in, respectively, the 16th and the 17th century and since their renaissance in the late 20th century, have drawn upon the tradition of the Ukrainian Orthodoxy. The three universities are connected by a strong tradition which has determined their development and makes it possible for them to contribute to the growth of society.

The reflections on the condition of the contemporary university I shall put forward below are based on the debates we have held at the National University ‘Ostroh Academy’ for three years now, as part of the project entitled “The Mission of the Contemporary University.”

### PRESENT DAY DEBATE

In discussions on higher education, one hears claims that the classical model of university has been exhausted: university education has declined in its value, the authority of intellectuals has diminished, and the university itself has abandoned its mission. The development of mass higher education and the resulting ‘inflation’ of the university diploma are believed to be among the reasons for the present situation. Such a diagnosis, however, is merely superficial and it fails to explain the serious problems faced by the contemporary university. In order to realize their entire scope, one also needs to consider a broader

picture of the urgent issues affecting today's world: the rapid changes in the political, social, and economic life which preclude long-term planning, the transformation of the anthropological foundations of culture (the widespread ideas of transhumanism and posthumanity undermine the belief in the exceptionality of human beings), disappearance of lasting identities, the conflicts of interpretations, and the prevalence of post-truth.

All the mentioned problems are responsible for the present transformation of the university which, however, does not consist merely in administrative changes or in the introduction of the new ministerial or governmental regulations, but is about the essence of education as such. New phenomena in this field, such as 'continual education' or 'lifelong learning,' are evidence of the fact that education is no longer considered a lasting result or a completed process, but becomes the foundation for creating new social, cultural, or economic contexts. In other words, contemporary education aims at shaping a personality capable of self-learning and it is for this reason that we need to rethink educational practice as such.

The context of the transformation described above gives rise to the question of the 'purpose of the university' and, indeed, academic milieus have been putting forward questions about the mission, place, objectives, and role of the university in the contemporary world. Should the university be adapted to the conditions of liquid modernity or should it rather uphold the unchanging universal values, striving to overcome the liquidity of the modern times and design a sustained development of the world?

While discussing the contemporary mission of the university, it is important to point to its options of change which conform to its essence. Burton R. Clark, for instance, in his description of the complicated and multidimensional character of the transformation process of the institutions of higher education, proposes the model of a change-oriented university. Analyzing the entrepreneurial potential of contemporary universities and the possibilities of the development of their infrastructure, Clark observes that in the case of universities transformation affects not only numerous elements of their administrative structures, but also the necessity of finding new streams of income, a changing array of base units responsible for different territories of academic activity, and a multiplicity of contradicting, yet enduring beliefs.<sup>1</sup>

The main issue relevant to the change, or transformation of the university is how to reconcile tradition and innovation, how to remain connected to the past and to the permanent system of academic values, at the same time undergoing essential changes, adapting to the demands of the time, and continually revising the

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<sup>1</sup> See Burton R. Clark, *Sustaining Change in Universities: Continuities in Case Studies and Concepts* (Maidenhead: Society for Research into Higher Education & Open University Press, 2006), 6.

vision of the future. Thus, the following questions are well-justified: Should the university abandon its institutional identity and transform into a 'liquid,' modern institution, which has 'musealized' its own tradition and adapted to the 'liquid modernity'? Or, on the contrary, should it remain the 'island' of stability, and persevere forming human subjects in the time of the 'death of the subject,' as well as commit themselves to the universal values in the time of relativism and seek truth? The above questions certainly do not exhaust the issues pertinent to the contemporary situation of the university. Yet they prompt a third one: Are we not, by mere consideration of such opportunities, falling into the trap of instrumental approach to the university, and is our position not marked by 'four C's, namely, commercialization, commodification, corporatization, and competition?

### EVOLUTION OF THE UNIVERSITY

One of the ways to understand the essence of the change of the university and its tradition is to refer to the evolution of higher education institutions which has been going on for almost a thousand years now and produced several models of the university. Can we say that the contemporary university is creating its own model of itself? Or, rather, is the university entering into conflict with its earlier models due to its institutional and ideological indefiniteness? Has the university rejected its previous ideas and missions, while demonstrating that it is incapable of creating a new idea consolidating it and defining its institutional identity? However, even should we find out that the 'conflict' is actually there, it need not be necessarily considered as negative. Analyzing the functioning of conflict in modern culture, Georg Simmel writes that the emergence of an internal conflict in culture is always conducive to its renewal. The same may be true about the university, but also about the crisis of culture and society. Although one may say that the university has been destroyed and lies in ruins,<sup>2</sup> it is also the case that, in the present day discussions, those who proclaim the 'death of the university' immediately announce also its 'resurrection.' Such is, for example, the view of Ronald Barnett who writes that, difficult to believe as it is, the Western university has in fact died; however, the history of the university shows its extraordinary capacity for renewal and adaptation to new conditions, which arouses hope for the miracle of the emergence of the new university.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> See Bill Readings, *The University in Ruins* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997).

<sup>3</sup> See Ronald Barnett, *Understanding the University: Institution, Idea, Possibilities* (New York: Routledge, 2015).

## UNIVERSITY MODELS

## The University as a Corporation

The corporational model of the university reaches back to its origin. The idea of a union of the intellectuals and of their autonomy stems from the university's institutional identity. It is common knowledge that the University of Bologna is considered the first institution of this kind. However, it was the 13th century that became a genuine age of universities, which was by no means accidental, as it was then that the medieval corporations developed, the phenomenon having its implications for the institutions of learning. However, medieval intellectuals, who had found their place in the world, proved unable to make correct choices for the future or to face new alternatives, which brought about the crises in the development of the universities without offering any ways to resolve them and contribute to renewal of the academic institutions of the time. One can say that the mental habits of medieval intellectuals immobilized them in this respect.<sup>4</sup> Therefore the 13th century may be considered as the most important to the development of the medieval university, as, in fact, in the following centuries the university would undergo a transformation, and its professors assume a new social and cultural status. Firstly, the intellectual and scholastic was replaced by a new type: that of the intellectual-humanist. Secondly, in the 14th and 15th centuries, the process of the aristocratization of professors began, which led to the emergence of a gap between the scholarship and the education that persisted until the 19th century, when the idea of the university as a research and teaching center emerged.

In the late Middle Ages, 'nationalization' of the universities began: their role in the perception of locality and universality changed (although universities were not yet means of establishing modern national identities). It should be mentioned that the medieval university had a twofold character: on the one hand, it was part of the city in which it was located; on the other hand, it was significant for all the Christian world. In the 14th and 15th centuries universities began to gradually lose their international character and their influence did not go beyond the regions in which they were established. This particular change may be considered as initiating the university models that followed, which fostered a close relationship of those institutions with the national context; as such, they became important for the implementation of the policies of the respective national states.

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<sup>4</sup> See Jacques Le Goff, *Intellectuals in the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1993), 224.

### State-Controlled University

The second model of the university is related to the educational reform introduced by Napoleon Bonaparte, which envisaged that all the universities would be fully state-controlled. Napoleon believed that the state could not develop without a simultaneous development of education and, consequently, wanted to institute changes in the French school system. Such was the beginning of the idea of the 'French university' which, in a sense, was a state-owned corporation. It must be noted that a similar model was implemented after the Second World War also in Eastern Europe. Indeed, in most post-communist countries universities still follow this model: they are subordinated to the state and do not enjoy actual autonomy.

### Humboldtian University

However, it is the third model, created in Germany and known as that of the Humboldtian education ideal, which has turned out most significant for the understanding of the evolution of the university. The aim of that model was to support the modern national state. The most important, however, is the fact that the model in question embraced the idea of academic autonomy (state non-intervention in university affairs), as well as that of combining scientific research and education. Although known as the Humboldtian education model, it was also highly regarded by such intellectuals as Johann Fichte, Friedrich Schelling, and Friedrich Schleiermacher, all of whom contributed to its justification and implementation. The essence of the new academic institution was to combine objective science and subjective education. As Wilhelm Humboldt wrote, the purpose of the university should be to conduct scholarly research in the deepest and broadest meaning of the term and to develop teaching materials useful in moral and spiritual formation.

Sadly, the German model of the university was closely related to the rise of the national state. In his programmatic text, Wilhelm Humboldt discussed the relationship between the ideal of the structure of the academic institution and that of the state. In his view, the state should support universities and academic freedom (also financially), which implicated the question why the state should support universities without interfering with their activity. An explanation of this apparent 'paradox' can be found in Wilhelm Humboldt's works. He believed that free research should bear the 'fruit' the state might use to achieve its political goals.

In a sense, universities fulfilled a quasi-religious function in the 19th-century secularized society. The political function of the university consisted in the

formation of a conscious citizen: “University studies, as opposed to specialist education, are the process of autonomous development of all the powers of a human individual, including the moral ones. This is why education through research is, according to Humboldt, simultaneously *moral education* of a person: we expect autonomous philosophical thinking to result in knowing truth and prompt us what the right action in a given situation is.”<sup>5</sup> The university tradition is thus put in service of the *ethos* of the community: the *ethos* that supports the idea of the common good, thus defining the community’s future.

Martin Heidegger’s rector’s speech, given at the University of Freiburg on 27 May 1933, is considered as a symbolic end of the model of the university advocated by Humboldt. The main idea of the speech is to strengthen the core of the German university. Heidegger asked whether the university of his time was capable of becoming the spiritual leader of the nation. He believed that to answer this question the university should engage in self-reflection. Therefore, he referred to the concept of will, adopted from the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche. He conceived of the existence of the university as the will directed towards the essence of that institution, but the idea was difficult to put into practice in his nihilistic times. And it is for this reason that Heidegger ended his speech with a somewhat esoteric phrase from Plato’s *Republic*, “All that is great stands in the storm...” In a sense, this phrase may be read as a prediction or a premonition of the future of the university and the changes to which it would be subject in the late 20th century.

The contemporary transformation of universities leads to their excessive commercialization and to the domination of neoliberal logic in their administration. This tendency began with the reforms introduced by Margaret Thatcher’s government in the United Kingdom, which resulted in the decline of the authenticity of academic life. Such, at least, is, for instance, the opinion of Leonidas Donskis, expressed in his conversation with Zygmunt Bauman: “A university, which is supposed to follow a logic (faithfully cherished for centuries) of deliberate thought, unhurried creativity and measured existence, is nowadays forced to become an outfit that rapidly reacts to market fluctuations as well as changes in public opinion and the political environment.”<sup>6</sup> In the same conversation, Zygmunt Bauman adds that Thatcher is not the only person to blame, as a large number of university professors joined those who were destroying academic institutions.

The opinions that the academic tradition has been destroyed are to a large extent exaggerated. Instead, it must be affirmed that the traditions began within

<sup>5</sup> Herbert Schöndelbach, “Universität Gumboldt,” *Logos*, no. 5–6 (2002): 9.

<sup>6</sup> Zygmunt Bauman and Leonidas Donskis, *Moral Blindness: The Loss of Sensitivity in Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Polity Press, 2013), 136.



the models emerging in the history of the university not only have not ceased to exist, but define the contemporary university.

### A CRISIS OF THE UNIVERSITY?

Nowadays, one can hear numerous opinions declaring a crisis of the university. As Jaroslav Pelikan observed, diagnosing problems of the university had become a kind of domestic sport or family business.<sup>7</sup> The discussions usually focus on the university not fulfilling its main function: some say that it does not prepare specialists to meet the needs of the market, others claim that it does not educate a critically thinking citizen.

A critique of the contemporary university is presented also in Bill Readings's *The University in Ruins*. The author's principal claim is that the dominating model is, at present, that of the university of excellence. This model has brought to ruin the previous one, that of the university of culture, identified with the Humboldtian university. The cause for that transformation was a decrease in the role of the national state, which has made culture, understood as the symbolic and political equivalent of integration, lose its value. Therefore, university as the main institution of national culture in the national state has been subject to transformation. As a result, the idea of culture has been replaced by that of excellence and the university succumbs to the logic of consumption. As Bill Readings writes, students of a university of excellence are not *like* consumers: they *are*, in fact, consumers.<sup>8</sup> In other words, universities are similar to companies in that they provide services to their clients; in this case they are educational services. According to Readings, the university is transforming into a transnational bureaucratic corporation. Professors (who are simultaneously lecturers and scholars) are no longer central figures in their universities, since the central place has been given to the rectors, to whom all the other members of the academia are liable.

Readings's book contains several proposals of how the idea of the university should be renewed. One of his ideas, which may be called conservative, suggests seeking possibilities to enter into a new agreement with the national state; the problem is, however, that the national state, as it was understood in 19th and at the beginning of the 20th century, no longer exists. Another suggestion is that a new idea of the university should be invented. Such an attempt,

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<sup>7</sup> See Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Idea of the University: A Reexamination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).

<sup>8</sup> See Readings, *The University in Ruins*, 27.

however, might also prove ineffective; for instance, the idea of excellence has led to a crisis of the university rather than resolved the existing one.

Readings proposes a new logic of the development of the university. He calls it the logic of institutional pragmatism which rests on the belief that, nowadays, the university needs to reject the views, characteristic of the previous epochs, including the Age of Enlightenment, which posed it as an ideal community which is not subject to change. According to Readings, the university should be open, inclusive, and flexible in relation to those whom it serves and continue the tradition of “being together,”<sup>9</sup> which emerged as part of its essence.

It should be said, however, that the concept of the university as a space in which different ideas may be developed and confronted is not new. Such a possibility is inherent in the academic tradition from the beginning of universities, which have always embraced mutually opposed currents of thought and various realities. This characteristic is particularly conspicuous in the case of the contemporary university, which combines universalism, or egalitarianism, of research and an administrative hierarchy; applied knowledge and pure knowledge; the academia as such and the particular areas of scholarship. This diversity results in a multiplicity of debates and a variety of concepts. The mission of the university makes it possible for the followers of the opposing standpoints to rationally defend their ideas. Alasdair MacIntyre writes precisely in this vein: “Universities are places where conceptions of and standards of rational justification are elaborated, put to work in detailed practices of enquiry, and themselves rationally evaluated, so that only from the university can the wider society learn how to conduct its own debates, practical or theoretical, in a rationally defensible way. But that claim itself can be plausibly advanced only insofar as the university is a place where rival and antagonistic views of rational justification, such as those of genealogists and Thomists, are afforded the opportunity both to develop their own enquiries, in practice and in the articulation of the theory of that practice, and to conduct their intellectual and moral warfare.”<sup>10</sup>

## TRADITION AND INNOVATION

It is worthwhile to focus on the question of how the tradition of the university is perceived nowadays. In what terms is the relationship between tradition and innovation described at present?

<sup>9</sup> Ibidem, 20.

<sup>10</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry: Encyclopaedia, Genealogy, and Tradition* (Notre Dame, Indiana: Notre Dame University Press, 1990), 222.



One of the best known ideas on which the contemporary understanding of the university tradition draws is Burton Clark's concept of the "organizational saga" as the foundation for the development of the identity of the university. Clark writes: "An organizational saga is a collective understanding of a unique accomplishment based on historical exploits of a formal organization, offering strong normative bonds within and outside the organization. Believers give loyalty to the organization and take pride and identity from it."<sup>11</sup> The organizational saga of the university is related to its mission and, as such, it is reflected in its organizational practices and values.

Its organizational saga is important to the identity of an institution as it represents its organizational culture. In the case of the university, the purpose of an organizational saga is to create a general image and inspire loyalty to it. Most importantly, though, the organizational saga, despite its being oriented towards the organizational development, may also encourage innovation. While its aim is, in a sense, to define a 'modernization of the tradition,' the concept of the organizational saga may also elucidate the tension between tradition and innovation in the university.

A good illustration of the above discussed notion can be found in the idea of an entrepreneurial university.<sup>12</sup> Burton Clark writes that should the tradition prove insufficient, universities need to develop an entrepreneurial response. In his view, the entrepreneurial university, reluctant to accept state regulations or standardization, is continually experimenting and striving for an institutional identity of its own, and, courageously seeking to be unlike others, enters the 'market.' According to Clark, entrepreneurial universities believe that the experimental change in the character of their activity is more attractive than adhering to the traditional forms of the academia.

The emergence of the idea of the entrepreneurial university may be considered as a response to the threat of an 'avalanche.' This metaphor for the rapid changes which may occur in higher education was proposed by Michael Barber, Katelyn Donnelly, and Saada Rizvi.<sup>13</sup> To prevent the 'avalanche,' the university should seek cooperation with its external environment, respond appropriately to the changes in its surroundings (government, business, civil society), and raise awareness of the risk related to new practices whose results are not obvious.

It is not necessary for the entrepreneurial university to reject tradition. The university's 'entrepreneurship' should be expressed by its capacity to spread its

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<sup>11</sup> Burton R. Clark, "The Organizational Saga in Higher Education," *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 17 (1972) no. 2: 178.

<sup>12</sup> See Burton R. Clark, *Creating Entrepreneurial Universities: Organizational Pathways of Transformation* (Bingley: Emerald, 1998).

<sup>13</sup> See Michael Barber, Katelyn Donnelly, and Saada Rizvi, *An Avalanche is Coming: Higher Education and the Revolution Ahead*, <http://www.avalancheiscoming.com/>.

tradition, while, at the same time, transforming the society, rather than by its effective participation in the market or by selling its educational offers. In other words, the 'entrepreneurship' of the university is manifested also in its cultural policy.

#### THE UNIVERSITY IN DEFENSE OF FREEDOM

The important elements of the university which help maintain its tradition and encourage innovation are related to freedom. The university plays an important role in the emancipatory project of modernity. Its tradition, which includes the freedom to acquire knowledge and the freedom of research, has provided the foundation and justification for freedom as a political value. One may say that the university *a priori* presupposes a system and organization determined by the ideal of freedom. The system in question is manifested in the general political order and, at the same token, affects its shape. The university is perceived as an institution demonstrating the autonomy of reason, rational (self-)criticism, and the priority of acquiring and spreading knowledge. As such, the university has deserved trust and respect as an institution capable of influencing the shape of society and designing its future.

The reflection on the role of the university in our times, in the aspect of institutional policy in higher education, is related to the general diagnosis of the contemporary world, its cultural, political, or anthropological dimensions. Martha Nussbaum observes that "radical changes are occurring in what democratic societies teach the young, and these changes have not been well thought through."<sup>14</sup> According to Nussbaum, "thirsty for national profit, nations, and their systems of education, are heedlessly discarding skills that are necessary to keep democracies alive. If this trend continues, nations all over the world will soon be producing generations of useful machines, rather than complete citizens who can think for themselves, criticize ... and understand the significance of other person's sufferings and achievements."<sup>15</sup>

The university should spread the idea of creating a space in which autonomous and free pursuit of knowledge is possible. In fulfilling this task, it should rely on its own tradition which must play a self-disciplining role. This self-discipline, however, need not be repressive or totalitarian, since it has always had 'gaps' introduced by the ideal of *artes liberales* as such. The self-discipline of the university, defined by its tradition, idea, and mission, is an expression of the university's responsibility for the future.

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<sup>14</sup> See Martha Nussbaum, *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 2.

<sup>15</sup> Ibidem.

Moreover, the autonomy of the university includes the defense of academic freedom. This, however, does not make the university close upon itself. On the contrary, the autonomy of the university is the foundation for its commitment to public issues. It is, therefore, necessary to understand what happens to the university once it becomes ‘committed.’ First of all, ideals created by the university cross the limits of this institution and are implemented in social and political practices. The process of the academic ideals reaching out to the world is possible because to study at the university means much more than just to acquire knowledge. The evolution of the university (from the medieval corporation to the contemporary models) has proved it is an institution which can effect changes in a human being, forming his or her conscious personal identity that is not limited by the person’s being a member of a community, but guided by his or her pursuit of the common good for the future.

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Nowadays, although the tradition of the university is not declining, it is necessary to reflect on it anew in order to create the university’s future. University studies may be conceived of as a process of developing the person’s life project. However, the view that the university is in crisis should be considered as a confirmation of the poor condition of this institution. As José Ortega y Gasset believed, every reform, if reduced to a struggle against vulgar misdemeanors committed at universities, inevitably becomes vulgar itself. The contemporary university must find a balance: between maintaining academic traditions on the one hand, and, facing the political, economic and cultural temptations and challenges of modernity, on the other; between the national state, which is gradually losing its sovereignty, and the global market. This is why we ought to consider the university as the tradition that creates its future by implementing its own cultural policy in defense of freedom.

Translated by *Patrycja Mikulska*

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#### ABSTRACT / ABSTRAKT

Dmytro SHEVCHUK, *The Contemporary University: A Tradition That Creates the Future*

DOI 10.12887/32-2019-4-128-17

Rejecting the frequently raised claim that the tradition of the university is on the decline, the author emphasizes the necessity of grounding the vision of the future of this institution on the reflection on its past. He discusses both historical and contemporary models of the university (e.g., the medieval corporation of scholars, the state-controlled university, the Humboldtian university, and the entrepreneurial university), pointing to the need to find a balance between maintaining academic traditions on the one hand, and, facing the political, economic, and cultural challenges of modernity, on the other; between the national state, which is gradually losing its sovereignty, and the global market. Drawing on the ideas of such authors as Jaroslav Pelikan, Bill Readings, Burton R. Clark, Michael Barber, Katelyn Donnelly, Saada Rizvi, Alasdair MacIntyre, and Martha Nussbaum, the author proposes considering the university as a tradition that creates its future by implementing its own cultural policy in defense of freedom.

**Keywords:** crisis of the university, transformation of the university, mass education, organizational saga, academic freedom

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Dmytro SHEVCHUK, Współczesny uniwersytet: Tradycja, która buduje przyszłość  
DOI 10.12887/32-2019-4-128-17

Odrzucając głoszoną dziś często tezę o upadku tradycji uniwersytetu, autor artykułu podkreśla konieczność oparcia wizji przyszłości tej instytucji na refleksji o jej przeszłości. Na podstawie analizy zarówno historycznych modeli uniwersytetu (średniowiecznej korporacji uczonych, uniwersytetu państwowego, uniwersytetu Humboldtowskiego), jak i jego współczesnych koncepcji (np. tak zwanego uniwersytetu przedsiębiorczego), wskazuje on potrzebę znalezienia równowagi między tradycją akademicką a odpowiadaniem na bieżące wyzwania polityczne, gospodarcze i kulturalne, a także między potrzebami tracących suwerenność państw narodowych a wymogami globalnego rynku. Odwołując się do prac autorów takich, jak Jaroslav Pelikan, Bill Readings, Burton R. Clark, Michael Barber, Katelyn Donnelly, Saada Rizvi, Alasdair MacIntyre i Martha Nussbaum, autor przedstawia uniwersytet jako instytucję, w której tradycja służy budowaniu przyszłości i która prowadzi własną politykę kulturową mającą na celu obronę wolności.

Słowa kluczowe: kryzys uniwersytetu, transformacja uniwersytetu, szkolnictwo masowe, saga organizacyjna, wolność akademicka

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