


O Futuro da Educação Superior e a Sociedade

Sessões da Comissão UnB.Futuro
Volume 1



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Internacionalização da Universidade

*Pascal Smet*³⁸

Muito obrigado. Desculpem que não falo português. Quero falar português, mas é uma língua muito complicada, a pronúncia é difícil. Meu “partner” é brasileiro, therefore, I have a connection with Brazil. It is not the first time I am here. I have been here many times visiting friends and relatives. This is the first time, of course, in an official capacity. So when you say “you are home” in some way it is true because I have a secret ambition which I will tell you about in a minute. We are having elections in May of next year in Belgium. We will have European elections and federal elections, and we will have regional elections. We call it the mother of all elections because it is the first time we will have all elections on the same day, so some are already panicking. Anyway, my ambition is to be elected and work hard for another five years. After yet another five years of hard work it is my secret dream to come to Brazil, to emigrate to Brazil and to live here one day, but I have to

³⁸ Pascal Smet foi ministro da Educação da parte flamenga da Bélgica entre 2009 e 2014. Em 28/10/2013, participou de sessão da Comissão UnB.Futuro acompanhado de reitores de universidades e membros do corpo diplomático belga. Mais informações sobre sua trajetória estão disponíveis em: <http://en.pascalsmet.be>

admit that it will not be living in Brasília. I prefer the beach, the Mata Atlantica. Who knows?

Anyway, I am very happy that you gave me the opportunity to speak today, together with the important delegation of Flanders, the Flemish community of Belgium. We are here not only with the vice-chancellors and their deputies but also with the heads of university associations. All our university and university colleges are part of associations and all the heads of the associations are here which means that not only the universities are present but the higher education sector as a whole and I am very glad that we are all here today. Moreover, I am very honored that you have come to listen on this bank holiday. I am happy we can talk about the future. On the basis of the debates, we had I will now give a few introductory remarks. So, ladies and gentleman, I should not tell you that the world is subject to a lot of change. It is my conviction that today we are living in a time frame. I remember from my history classes that a time frame is a period in which people live, and during that period - which may be forty, fifty, one hundred years - things change a lot and that is what we are experiencing today.

You know, we are coming from Europe, some would say old Europe, and I think that we are living now in a period in which the economic but also the political power of the West, being both the US and Europe, is shifting to Asia, and I think it has already shifted to Asia and probably Brazil too as well as a few other countries, but to be quite honest and I think I can be honest in a place of free thinking, which universities should be, Brazil is on the brink of being one of these countries of the future, but it is clear that we in Europe and the US have lost our monopoly on good education, we have lost our monopoly on political and economic power, which is not always easy because these last one hundred, two hundred years and today we have to come to terms with this new situation.

This is not always easy and I think there is one big danger that we have to take into account in Europe, meaning that we should not become a kind of museum people will visit to admire the cul-

ture, but at the same time, the future is being shaped elsewhere, probably here in Brazil. I think it is very important to understand that we are living in this time frame and still too many people in Europe and in Belgium too think that we have this monopoly on good education and we are the best qualified and best educated people in the world, but that is no longer the case. As we speak today young people are studying very hard, are investing lots of time in their futures, parents are working hard for them. We call it the after World War II feeling. We experienced this too and somewhere along the way we have lost it.

Secondly, I think in the world we are seeing another very important phenomenon that we are probably underestimating probably a little bit, being the whole urbanization of the world. Here in Brazil you have a big urbanization going on as well and your cities rank among the most populated in the world, but even in Europe we find it hard to conceive that 84% of the world's population live in cities, which means that the ideas and opinions of these people growing up in cities are very varied and this means that people of all walks of life live in the same place and the only thing that they have in common is very often the place they live in and then I think it is very important to understand that these young people grow up in another reality of confrontation, of diversity and this is the case in Belgium in particular, but in a lot of European countries still people have sometimes this countryside ideal. A kind of romanticized ideal of going back to the countryside that has disappeared completely but this implies another way of thinking and we will come back later to this topic.

Another phenomenon that is going on in the world and also one that Europe is having a hard time coming to terms with is the whole idea of immigration, migration and mobility of people. You know, that for a long time people left Europe, very often doing bad things, I mean, Portugal was the colonial power in Brazil and many European countries behaved badly in other countries but today lots of people are coming to Europe and contrary to Australia, Canada, USA, we do not have a kind of nation building migra-

tion. We in Europe are probably getting more immigrants and we are not using it as a nation building tool and that is a completely different approach but you will see, if you look to Europe you will see that nationalism is on the rise and the blame game is popping up again. That is something we should be aware of because the future of the world is a migrating world and people will move no matter what and I should not mention this to Brazilians because Brazilians are to be found everywhere in the world. Everywhere you go on a holiday, you will meet Brazilians and we have 60,000 Brazilians living in Belgium, which is not a lot compared to other countries but nevertheless.

Another phenomenon that is going on in the world is that we are underestimating, and we will come back to this later, the whole digitalization of our society, especially with the tablets that are coming our way and I believe this will be a real game changer. We are thinking in images so much more now and we can talk about it later too, we are living in a society centered on story-telling and images. But this digitalization is bringing people together. The development of the internet is a completely different reality in which we are living. Therefore, this time frame we are living in with urbanization, with migration, with digitalization is upsetting huge numbers of people and is also going back to the old values, the old security, but we should not do that. We should never forget the past but we should always focus on the future. I met your governor this morning and we talked about Distrito Federal and about youth movements and manifestations that are taking place all over Brazil and one beautiful thing that struck me is that young, probably middle class, people here in Brazil demand education for all and this is a lesson to be learned from Europe.

The democratization of our educational system meant that everybody had access to high quality education free of charge and we were able to become a rich society, and one of the most important steps in becoming such a society was education and still is education. So if education is that important and you see that society is changing, then education should change too. And what

I see, and we are having a big debate in Flanders, in Belgium about reforms of our secondary schools, is that the world of compulsory education, primary and secondary schools, and higher education is a very conservative bastion that is not open to change. And in a way it's understandable because education is a system that society imposes on itself to transfer knowledge, values, norms, skills, and by definition it's in a way stuck in the past because it is always running a bit behind but the gap between reality and the system must not be too big, and my feeling is that this gap is becoming too big. And that is a real danger because once again education is a tool that society imposes on itself to educate its people and to run society and if this system is experiencing difficulties it will become impossible to run any society.

Therefore, educational systems have to adjust to new realities. This need for change applies first and foremost to primary and secondary schools and to a lesser extent to universities. Of course, primary and secondary schools are the foundations. When people go wrong there, there will not be a remedy any more in higher education, so we all have an interest in improving these schools. I have already pointed out one of these phenomena. I would like to talk a bit more about this, elaborate a bit more on the digitalization of our world. You might know that the printed word was invented in Belgium a long time ago. We were one of the countries where it all happened and the invention of the printed word was probably the most significant event in education and the transfer of knowledge because mankind no longer had to rely on the spoken word but knowledge was written down and we were able to bring about an increase in scale, to distribute knowledge on a large scale with a lot of people having access to it. The printed word was a very important element in the development of education and it is my conviction that the digitalization and the tabletization will even be more important than the printed word ever was, it will change the educational system completely, I mean completely and will come back to this. We will see that thanks to the development of applications, the inclusion of applications in the transfer of know-

ledge, the very existence of universities, places where you have all the wise men and luckily today women too, not always on the university board though and even in Belgium we have not enough female administrators but we have reached an agreement with the universities that the government will not impose measures on condition that they are able to bring change about themselves. Nevertheless, I would like to stress that we need more women on the boards of universities. We have lots of female students, but not enough female professors and teachers.

Back to digitalization now. This evolution will change the way universities are conceived and function completely. What do I mean by this? Let us now focus on traditional universities – and I would like to stress that it is not my desire to see them disappear – these are places where people try to confront the unknown and find new knowledge and of course confronting the unknown always starts by the known and that you have this freedom of thinking, also in Belgium we are seeing an instrumentalization of universities by political parties, political movements, everybody likes to pick a professor who will say what he wants to say and that is a bad evolution. I think universities should always be places of free thinking and should always be very critical of political powers, should be always very critical of society but should not be linked to political parties or movements and I have a feeling that everywhere in the world this is a tendency that is going on and in a way, I'm going to use strong terms, in a way this is a kind of a prostitution and there is real danger looming on the horizon.

We should instead cherish universities as places for free thinking, but the whole idea that you have people, young students, coming to universities with five hundred, eight hundred, sometimes thousands of students there and you have one person, a professor, giving his course and telling the same jokes year in year out, probably in a very old school-like manner; in the digital era this is of course ridiculous. I mean why should we continue to do that? Why should we invest public money in large infrastructure? We still do it in Belgium which sometimes leads to political

and other squabbling, the transfer of knowledge, the basic knowledge, you can do this on a tablet application and if students do not understand, they can go back and hear it again, they can do it in groups, they can do it everywhere they want and should probably not do it on their own.

They could do it on their own, they could do it in groups too for the ones who need this, but this means if you transfer the basic knowledge like that, the teaching of professors in universities will be completely different because these young girls and boys, they will have the basic knowledge and this is the interesting part, to work with knowledge, to find new knowledge, and then a professor should not be a kind of robot explaining what they already know, he should provoke them and these young students should provoke their teachers too. This implies a completely different approach since universities and professors will not be limited to any given place any more.

If I am a Belgian student and you have a good professor and he has his massive open online course, who would prevent me from hearing what this professor has to say? But of course I need physical contact with the professor too and I need assistance to debate and to see if I really understand it, so the whole idea of universities, of places where we have a fixed group of professors who are working with a fixed group of students is in my view something which will disappear over the the next ten or twenty years. We should reform our educational system and try to reinvent our universities and this probably means much more mobility for professors too. Maybe they should tour the world and maybe we will see that some professors become real stars, kind of rock stars. Why not? I mean, we're living in a period in which people have never been better educated than today. There's a big contradiction in this. We are all very well educated but at the same time it looks like we cannot debate in society anymore because you always have to explain everything in thirty seconds and it's getting worse. I mean, tv journalists, they will say, "why don't you say that?", you know, and then they keep repeating and they start

to cut and then you get something sometimes completely different of what you said in the first place and it is very bizarre, because we never been better educated and at the same time it looks like we are behaving like children. It's a real contradiction. Anyway, professors are much more important and I think that we will see a kind of global league of professors coming in the future and I'm not saying this is good or bad, I am not going to pass a judgment but I think it will come, and the digitalization will help a lot, so that means that not only professors will be 'on the road' a lot more going from one university to the other to confront students, but at the same time students touring the globe too. We should not lock up young people in places. I mean, I believe and people tend not to buy it anymore and one of the reasons why this is so, is that we don't have a common language and we don't live together and people on the planet should live together and the only way to do that is through education and bringing people together. And I think that universities must become 'virtual places of learning' and we should focus less on bricks and mortar.

Today we are seeing the success of MOOCs, the massive open online courses, and hundreds of thousands of students are already taking these courses. People are influenced by this, so if universities want to remain places where knowledge is created, universities have to adapt themselves to the realities of today's world, and the reality of today once again, we increasingly think in images, and maybe this is not wrong, maybe it is good even, but it's something very dangerous because we can get manipulated much more, the chance of being manipulated with images and storytelling is much bigger. So if we want to keep our culture, I do not mean the individual culture of nations, but the culture of mankind, one of the big questions in the future will be "how can we continue to develop, to create, to educate individuals as free thinking individuals who are capable of thinking out of the box, looking critical to things and not being manipulated into frame stories?" My feeling is that for everybody - even for politicians too - it is difficult to leave this 'frame narrative'. I sometimes have

the feeling that we're blind and playing a game we don't want to play. You cannot get out of it. And the only way we can get out of it is to educate young people to think differently and it's also one of the reasons we want to reform our secondary schools. We all know about literacy, we all know how important it is to be able to write. Although, who knows if people will still write next ten years? Maybe it is finished, I do not know, but literacy in a classical way is very important, numeracy is very important, scientific literacy is very important, but we are now introducing a new kind of literacy, it is media and image literacy.

I will tell an anecdote about how it works and then I will finish my presentation. Well, three years ago in Flanders and in Belgium everybody was talking about the aging population, in Europe everybody was saying: "oh, our population is getting old" and then they forgot that in the cities like Antwerp, Brussels, we had a boom of young people. Everybody was talking about these old men and women and the reality was that in the cities we had so many young people and children, and then we were experiencing difficulties because we did not have enough schools for all these children. I 'decreed' in May that by 1st September every child would have a place in a school. Mister Robert Voorhamme who at the time was the city councilor in charge of education in Antwerp, we belong to the same party, so it is easier to work together - and I talked about what we were going to do. And I knew that if I failed, I would be hung out to dry, I would have to resign. Well, that was going through my mind, but I like to take risks. If you take a risk in life, you have to wonder if it is a risk worth taking? Yes or no?

So, I said in parliament "we are going to make sure, and we only have four, five months, but we are going to make sure that every child will be in school by 1st September", which in my opinion is something very logical, I mean, in an educated society, a developed society like Belgium, a very rich country, if we're not going to be able to give every young child a school, it would be a failure of the state. But, hold on, in the press I was attacked because I was a fool. Who the hell did I think I was? I was going to say I am

going to have a place for every kid by the first of September. "He must be kidding." They tried to make a fool of me, and how did they do it? Not really in writing but by way of pictures in newspapers. We should watch them. Politicians appear in newspapers when journalists like you and think you are getting popular and it is a good thing they make very beautiful pictures. They can make very beautiful pictures of me, but they can also make very ugly pictures of me and what is more: ridiculous pictures. Because, you know, sometimes politicians are asked to do something and a fashion magazine asked me if I would do a photo shoot with them, me trying on suits and so on, and because the journalist in question was a friend of mine I said "ok, I'll do you a favor", and then I put a hat on my head, but I look very ridiculous wearing a hat. Nonetheless, I put it on my head, I looked into the mirror, and the photographer took pictures of me and I said "no, no, no. I don't want it", he said "ok, this is good". A quality newspaper, two months later, had a story on its front page about me saying that I would guarantee a school for every child and whose picture was like this (big) in the newspaper? I with a hat looking like a ridiculous guy and its message was very clear: he is saying something but he does not know what he is saying, it is just ridiculous. And that's what they are doing all the time, and it's on television too.

The way they show you on tv, we are - against our wills - subjected to some kind of narrative and the problem is that nobody is aware of it, and you are the only one to change this, society needs you, we have to make people aware of this danger. And that's the reason that we are now developing this image and media literacy courses, not only for young people, but for adults too. So in a nutshell, I think we are on the brink of a complete revolution on the way we organize education. You might know I'm a special type of social democrat, I always say, I believe in state-funded education. I believe that there is something like an intellectual elite, I believe in this. I'm also convinced that not everybody can belong to this intellectual elite, but I'm also convinced that society needs an intellectual elite, but I'm even more convinced that everybo-

dy who is able to belong to this intellectual elite should have at least the ability or the possibility or the opportunity to become a member of this elite and it is my firm belief that a child's family background should not a determining factor. So for the sake of all these individuals, for the sake of society as a whole because society is a group of people, we need that everybody has the opportunity to study, has the possibility to study, and the only way to do that is the state-funded educational system, but if we want to keep this, whether it's primary, secondary schools or institutes of higher education, it needs to offer quality but it has also to adjust itself to the realities of today's world and if the educational system will not do that in the next ten years, it will be replaced by something else and that's frightening me because that something else will not be a society, it will only people sitting together in a big space, and I believe in society and I believe that we can make society. Once again, Mister vice chancellor, thank you very much for giving me this opportunity and I hope - and you don't have to agree with me - that we can have a debate on this and once again I don't have all the answers either and I think that's good, because by debating and thinking together in a place like your university we can confront the unknown and we should not be afraid of the unknown. We should be very happy that we can leave the beaten path. Thank you very much.

