

The Clash of Humanism and Neoliberalism: A Research on Practices and Ideologies in Croatian Universities

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Abstract

The prevailing economic ideologies that entered the European higher education in the last few decades disrupted the long tradition of so-called ‘humanistic’ ideals and values. This resulted in changing shifts from ‘learning per-se’ to ‘learning for the labor market’, which challenged everyone involved in education at the universities. While many universities welcomed the neoliberal paradigm in teaching and learning, a growing body of literature started questioning whether the superiority of this paradigm led to irreversible reduction of humanistic values such as freedom, autonomy, emancipation, etc. In an attempt to explore the relationship between humanistic and neoliberal approaches to the University and to understand the attitudes of the main actors of higher education regarding the goals and mission of university today, a study among students was conducted in 2018. This paper presents the results of this study which involved 735 students from 11 faculties from Zagreb (Croatia). The results indicate that students look at university education from a pragmatic and egocentric (self-oriented) perspective. More specifically, they see the importance of higher education in developing themselves as free and independent individuals, but fail to see the broader context of the university and its role in the society. Results also show that students from technical sciences tend to agree more with the statements that relate to neoliberal orientation of higher education and university, as opposed to students from humanities and social sciences.

Keywords: Higher Education, University, Humanism, Neoliberalism

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Introduction

Over the past few decades, with the collapse of the Eastern Bloc, along with the establishment of anti-Soviet and anti-communist movements, the space has opened up for economies to connect and free themselves from the constraints imposed by political forces. Goods, services and human capital are beginning to move more easily across borders, resulting in disappearance of geographical constraints and creation of extraterritorial relations. In this process, the nation-state lost the power to regulate the flow of the goods and services, so free-market logic was soon promoted as the only solution for economic growth and gaining monopoly at the global level. This created a global sphere of competitiveness in which nations, in silent fight for dominance, ruthlessly use all possible resources that can help in positioning themselves in the world rankings. Natural resources that one country possesses are no longer seen as a key factor in its prosperity, but technological innovations that can help enhance the manufacturing process or reduce cost and production time.

Increasing the need for innovations led to increasing the need for new knowledges and smart and skillful human capital that could replace the physical one. This resulted in placing education as a national priority and an integral part of contemporary political ideologies. The notion that education, especially higher education, could be used as a mean of stimulating the economy and global competitiveness led to a demand for greater university involvement in the economy and society. The university started interacting more with business and communities by carrying out numerous social, enterprising and innovation activities alongside its teaching and research activities. Widening university activities is referred as the 'third mission' that, on the one hand, merges the idea of university as the bearer of positive changes that contribute to social development, and on the other, the idea of university as a key element of economic growth and development (Scott, 2006; Trencher et. al, 2014; Loi, 2015; Cooper, 2017; Pinheiro, 2017). However, by engaging more deeply in developing what is now called 'knowledge-based economy' and producing more specialized knowledges that meets the rapid technological and industrial needs, very soon the 'social' part of the 'third mission' was removed. This resulted in making the 'third mission' *de facto* an economic mission, which is less and less associated with the concept of the university as a socially responsible institution and more with the perception of the university as a 'hybrid organization' (Slaughter and Leslie, 1997). Such organization is tightly connected to the industry and is more focused on the production of useful and cost-effective knowledges, gradually undermining the humanistic values on which it was based on for a very long time, such as autonomy, freedom, equality and accessibility. In this way, university is transformed from a relatively autonomous institution that has evolved within the humanist tradition into an adaptive-bureaucratic and business-like institution (Readings, 1995; Fish, 2005) that is no longer oriented towards the benefit of the common good, but rather to the benefit of particular interests.

The task of the university is no longer the well-being of the individual and society, but the achievement of economic and political supremacy, through the development of human capital whose *modus essendi* and *modus operandi* are reduced to efficiency, competitiveness and entrepreneurship. In this way, higher education creates a semi-educated individual who must fit into the economic system, which, according to Fromm (1965), leads to deformations of individuality and a sense of emptiness. The

individual no longer sees education as a process by which he asserts himself as an emancipated person, but represents only a necessary process which he must pass in order to enter the labor market. The knowledge an individual has acquired through university education is fragmented and specialized because he no longer possesses the capacity to critically reflect on information and relate the content of information to a meaningful whole.

The idea of market-oriented (pragmatic) university is clearly seen in the strategic documents on higher education and university at the European level. In these documents¹, university is seen as an institution that participates equally in the process of developing the knowledge-based economy, by teaching relevant and current skills needed for employment, growth and competitiveness. Furthermore, it is emphasized that university should focus on ensuring sustainable financial resources and promoting international attractiveness and competitiveness. Specialization, innovation, mobility, flexibility, competences and management are the keywords that should guide all universities wishing to survive in the market. Moreover, the emphasis is placed on transversal competences, such as persistence, motivation, financial literacy and the ability to mobilize resources.

Despite the large amount of literature that warn about the negative effects of market-driven trends in higher education (Aronowitz, 2000; Checkoway, 2001; Bok, 2003; Newman, Courtier, and Scurry, 2004; Guthrie and Neuman, 2007; Kronman, 2007; Gibbs, 2009; Trani and Holsworth, 2010; Giroux, 2011; Hurt, 2012; McGettigan, 2013), research that examined attitudes of main actors of the university, such as teachers and students, are rare and insufficient for getting the bigger picture about the consequences of these trends. Pritchard (2004), for example, conducted a study with 82 university teachers and 986 German university students on the connection between teachers and students in the teaching and learning process, relying on Humboldt's three postulates: 1. unity of teachers and students; 2. unity of research and teaching and; 3. unity of knowledge. The research showed that, in terms of the unity of teachers and students, both groups said that nurturing relationship with each other was extremely important. In examining the unity of research and teaching, more than two-thirds of teachers said they view students as partners in the pursuit of knowledge, and 87.5% believe that promoting scientific work is a key part of their work. 87% of teachers and 70% of students believed that the university should contribute to students' personal development, although both groups stressed this should not take precedence over other segments of development (such as professional or emotional). The author concluded that Humboldt's idea of university is still present in German universities, but is more important to teachers than to students, who tend to view the university mostly as place where they acquire professional skills for easier employment.

Furthermore, Leisyte, Enders, and de Boer (2009) conducted research in England and the Netherlands with 48 university teachers, in which they examined their views on

¹ For example: *White Paper on Education and Training - Teaching and Learning - Towards the Learning Society* (Commission of the European Communities, 1995); *The Role of Universities in the Europe of Knowledge* (European Commission, 2003); *Reform of the Universities in the Framework of the Lisbon Strategy* (European Commission, 2005); *Supporting Growth and Jobs – An Agenda for the Modernisation of Europe's Higher Education Systems* (European Commission, 2011); *Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on a renewed EU agenda for higher education* (European Commission, 2017).

the impact of a changing institutional environment on teaching and research. The results indicated that, according to teachers, teaching and research should be closely linked, but not in favor of external demands and needs. A similar study was conducted by Reiners (2014). She questioned the views of German and English university teachers on changes in higher education in relation to Humboldt's and neoliberal model. In that research, English university teachers emphasized the need to link teaching and research and advocated a change in the way universities function for easier adaptation to the needs of the market, which was, for the author, a clear evidence of a paradigm shift from the humanistic to the neoliberal one. On the other hand, German university teachers, although inclined to the Humboldt model, emphasized the need to adapt the university to contemporary circumstances, that is, to balance humanist ideals and contemporary needs. Moreover, unlike their English counterparts, German teachers strongly advocated the autonomy of the institution, which explains why university teachers continue to participate in the management of German universities and not external actors.

One of the most comprehensive scientific studies, *Changing Academic Profession* (CAP) (Teichler, Akira and Cummings, 2013) was conducted to examine changes in the university in relation to selected elements of the Humboldt model. The survey was conducted from 2004 to 2012 with more than 25,000 faculty staff from 19 countries. The main topics of the research were the perceptions about their institutional environment, objectives of teaching and research, as well as their job satisfaction. The results showed that internationalization of education, growth of entrepreneurial activities and the adoption of managerial management styles affected teacher's work and profession. In addition to CAP research, McNay (2007) conducted a study on the higher education values with 300 university teachers from the United Kingdom. The study examined teachers' personal and professional values and their views on values that should support higher education, including: commitment to the pursuit of truth, mastering scientific thinking, professional responsibility, freedom of thought and expression, adherence to different opinions and attitudes, personality development and contribution to society. The results showed that university teachers stressed humanistic values as important in their work and expressed concern about the increasing focus on practical knowledges and specialized skills. Specifically, they pointed out that the university has lost its role as a critic of society and that with commercialization and marketization the integrity of science was fading. Furthermore, they argued that competitiveness has led to a decrease in collaboration between scholars and that students no longer view the university as a place in which they can develop their personality, but only as place in which they will get the knowledge to enter the job market. Finally, teachers said that students were an important factor in universities and that they need to nurture the ideas and values of their institution together. A gap in understanding the role of the university, teachers stressed, could lead to misunderstanding and alienation from one another.

In view of the above, a research was conducted about examining the students' perceptions on higher education and the University in Croatia, as a valuable contribution to debates on university in contemporary context.

Research purpose

The purpose of the research was twofold. Firstly, it attempted to identify and describe the students' perceptions about most important tasks of higher education. Secondly, it purported to explore which direction of higher education and the University (humanistic or neoliberal) students were more inclined to. The aim of this research was not to confirm or reject a particular hypothesis, but rather from the perspective of students, to analyze the situation in higher education in Croatia. In addition to exploring the students' perceptions, the research also explored differences in perceptions between two fields of study (technical sciences and humanities and social sciences).

Research sample

The study was conducted in the academic year 2018/2019 on a sample of 735 1st year graduate students from the University of Zagreb, Croatia. The sample included available students from 11 faculties, from two fields of study: technical sciences and humanities and social sciences. Five faculties belong to technical sciences (N=419; 57%) and six to humanities and social sciences (N=316; 43%) (Table 1). A total of 44,5% of male respondents (N=327) and 55,5% of female respondents (N=408) participated in the sample.

Field	Faculty	No of participants (N)
Technical sciences	Faculty of Architecture	47
	Faculty of Electrical Engineering and Computing	20
	Faculty of Chemical Engineering and Technology	1
	Faculty of Mechanical Engineering and Naval Architecture	238
	Faculty of Civil Engineering	113
Humanities and Social Sciences	Faculty of Economics	10
	Faculty of Political Science	9
	Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences	159
	University Department of Croatian Studies	10
	Faculty of Law	19
	Faculty of Teacher Education	109
Total		735

Table 1. Research sample (field of study, faculty and number of participants)

Instrument

As no suitable research instrument had been found in the available literature, the original survey² was created for research purposes, which was divided into three interconnected sections. The first section examined the students' perceptions about most important tasks of higher education (HE). Students were asked to rank the

² Except in the second section of the survey, where the statements are largely taken from the instrument constructed by Ilišin and Spajić-Vrkaš (2017) for the research about the needs, problems and potentials of the young people in Croatia.

importance of six proposed tasks of higher education, with the first place indicating the most important and sixth least important task. The obtained data are grouped into three categories. The tasks of higher education which students ranked first or second were grouped under category 'The most important task'. The tasks students ranked third or fourth were grouped under category 'Somewhat important task', while the tasks that were ranked in last two places were grouped under category 'Least important task'.

In the second section of the survey, students assessed to what extent they agree or disagree with nine statements about higher education orientation on a 5-point Likert scale. The reliability of the measurement scale was analyzed by Cronbach's alpha coefficient. The result of the analysis indicated that the measurement scale had an acceptable level of reliability ($\alpha = 0.731$). The third section examined students' perceptions about University orientation. Students were offered seven statements about University which they assessed on 5-point Likert scale. Cronbach's alpha coefficient level was acceptable ($\alpha = 0.785$). The results from 5-point scales were reduced to three categories. The first category included the 'strongly disagree' and 'disagree' quantifiers, while the third category included 'agree' and 'strongly agree' quantifiers. The 'Neither agree nor disagree' quantifier is the second (middle) category.

The survey had three additional questions, which examined the frequency of student's active participation in local community and their views on whether the University should focus on preparing students to work for the benefit of the local community and society as a whole. In the first question students evaluated how often, since their enrollment in higher education, they participated in public debates and discussions relevant to the well-being of society in whole. They were offered a six-point scale (from 'never' to 'more than six times a year'). The second question focused on frequency of their volunteer work in their local community since their enrollment in higher education. As in the previous question, they were offered a six-point scale (from 'never' to 'more than six times a year'). The third question examined their attitudes about whether the University should focus on preparing them to work for the benefit of the local community and society as a whole. They answered this question using a 'Yes-No-Don't Know/Didn't think about it' - scale.

Students filled the survey online in a period from October 2018 till February 2019. The responses were analyzed in SPSS program for statistical analysis - version 23. Descriptive statistic (frequencies, arithmetic mean, standard deviation) and Independent Samples T-test were used in the analysis.

Results and discussion

As seen in Chart 1, the most important tasks of the University, according to students, are the development of a free and independent individual, preparation of individual for labor market and advancement of science. On the other hand, ensuring the welfare of the family and strengthening the national economy are seen as least important tasks. The task of ensuring the well-being of society as a whole is ranked as somewhat important.

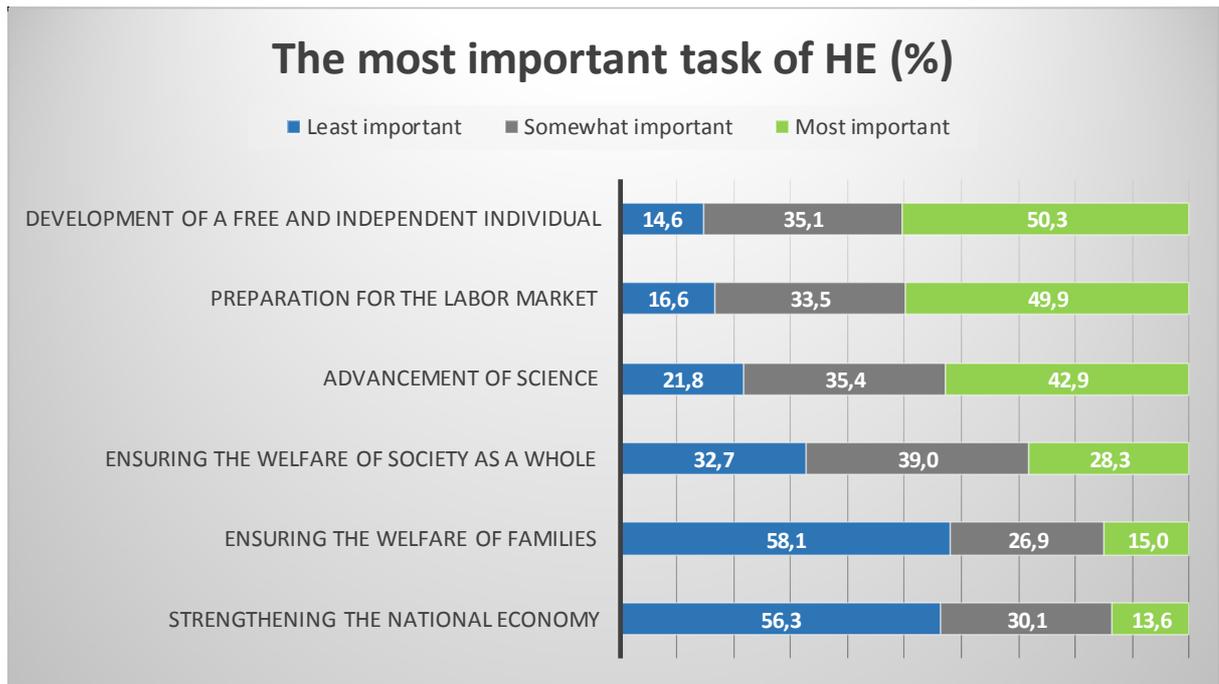


Chart 1. Ranking importance of six proposed tasks of higher education (%)

Chart 2 shows the results of students' perceptions about higher education orientation. More than 45% students (strongly) agree that higher education should be primarily oriented towards the interests of the labor market ($M = 3.25$; $SD = .814$), which corresponds to HE's highly-ranked task of preparation of students for the labor market (Chart 1). On the other hand, 20% think that higher education should be primarily oriented towards the interests of the capital, while almost half of them think quite the opposite ($M = 2.64$; $SD = .874$). The inconsistency of answers between first section (Chart 1) and section (Chart 2) is visible in the question about the role of HE in developing a free and independent individual. While half of students ranked the task of 'developing of a free and independent individual' as most important in first section of the survey, in the second 57% of them were unsure about should higher education be oriented towards this task ($M = 3.35$; $SD = .612$).

Chart 2 reveals that students can't make up their mind about the orientation of higher education towards developing local community ($M = 3.35$; $SD = .657$), ensuring world peace ($M = 3.24$; $SD = .800$) or ending inequalities among people ($M = 3.14$; $SD = .607$). These results are consistent with the scattered ranking of importance of higher education in ensuring the welfare of society as a whole in Chart 1. On the other hand, low-ranked task of ensuring welfare of the families in the first section is inconsistent with the result in second section, where 37% of students (strongly) agree that it should focus on family. Regarding the latter, 44% don't have a strong opinion about it ($M = 3.09$; $SD = .867$).

It is interesting to point out that 31% of students (strongly) disagree that higher education should focus on the interests of integrated Europe ($M = 2.83$; $SD = .923$). This is quite surprising considering high priority Europe gives to higher education. This result could be an indicator of national closeness of Croatian students to European integrations, which can be linked to the fact that almost 40% of them

believe that higher education should be oriented towards the interests of the state ($M = 3.02$; $SD = .918$).

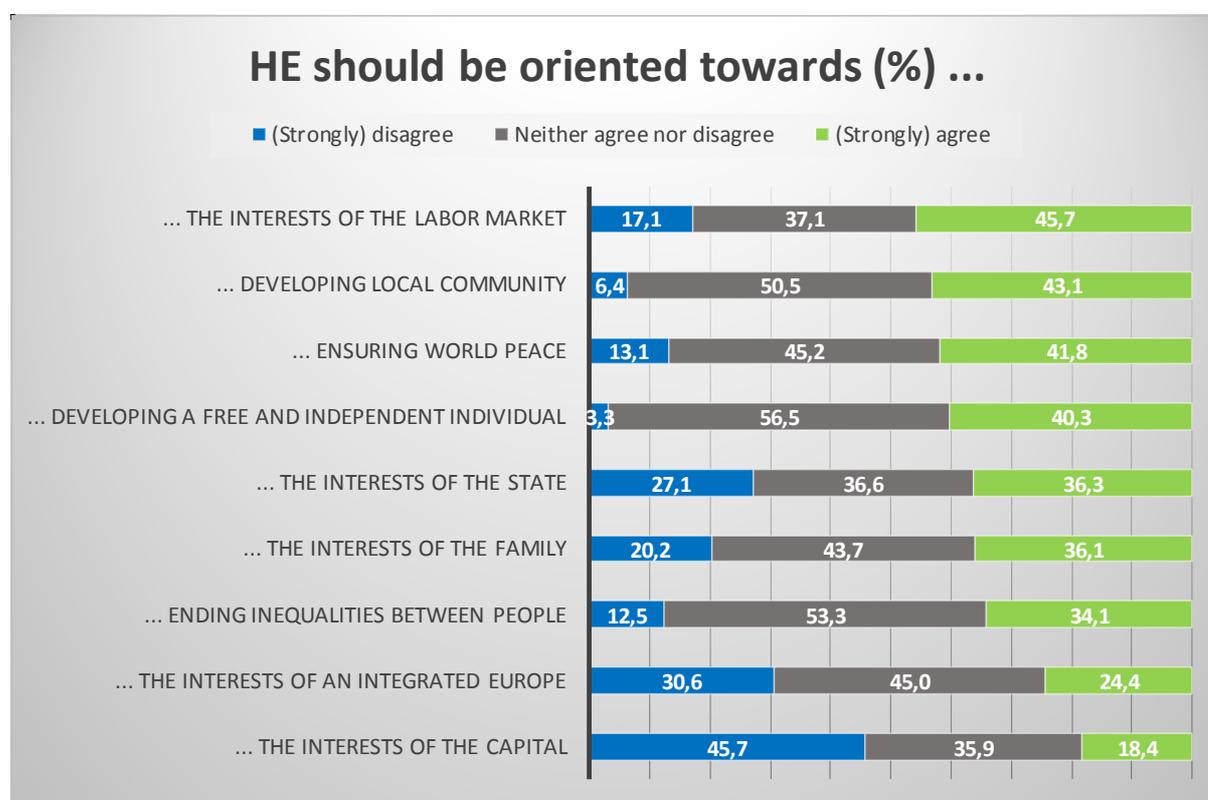


Chart 2. Students' perception on higher education orientation (%)

The results shown in Chart 2 are comparable to the results of an empirical study on the needs and problems of young people in Croatia from 2017 (Ilišin and Spajić-Vrkaš, 2017). In this research, young people positively assessed the importance of education in meeting the needs and goals at the social and individual levels, as well as in subordinating education to the interests and / or goals of the labor market. However, like students, young people were more restrained when it comes to the focus of education on the interests of capital and an integrated Europe.

Chart 3 shows the results of students' perceptions about direction in which University should be developed in the future. 64% of them (strongly) agree that study programs should focus on the acquisition of specific knowledges and skills that are market competitive ($M = 3.29$; $SD = .538$), while 40% agree that they should focus on gaining general knowledges and skills ($M = 3.11$; $SD = .905$), with equal number of those unsure about it. Large percentage of them (79%) believe that University should remain in the public domain ($M = 1.71$; $SD = .909$) and that it shouldn't be governed solely by the market laws ($M = 2.27$; $SD = .716$), but are unsure whether it should be free from political pressure and control ($M = 3.23$; $SD = .524$). Half of them think that University should be the main driver of social change (48,4%; $M = 3.38$; $SD = .697$), with 43% of them who can't make up their mind. Finally, they are not so sure whether University should encourage national and economic growth and development (54%; $M = 3.19$; $SD = .716$).

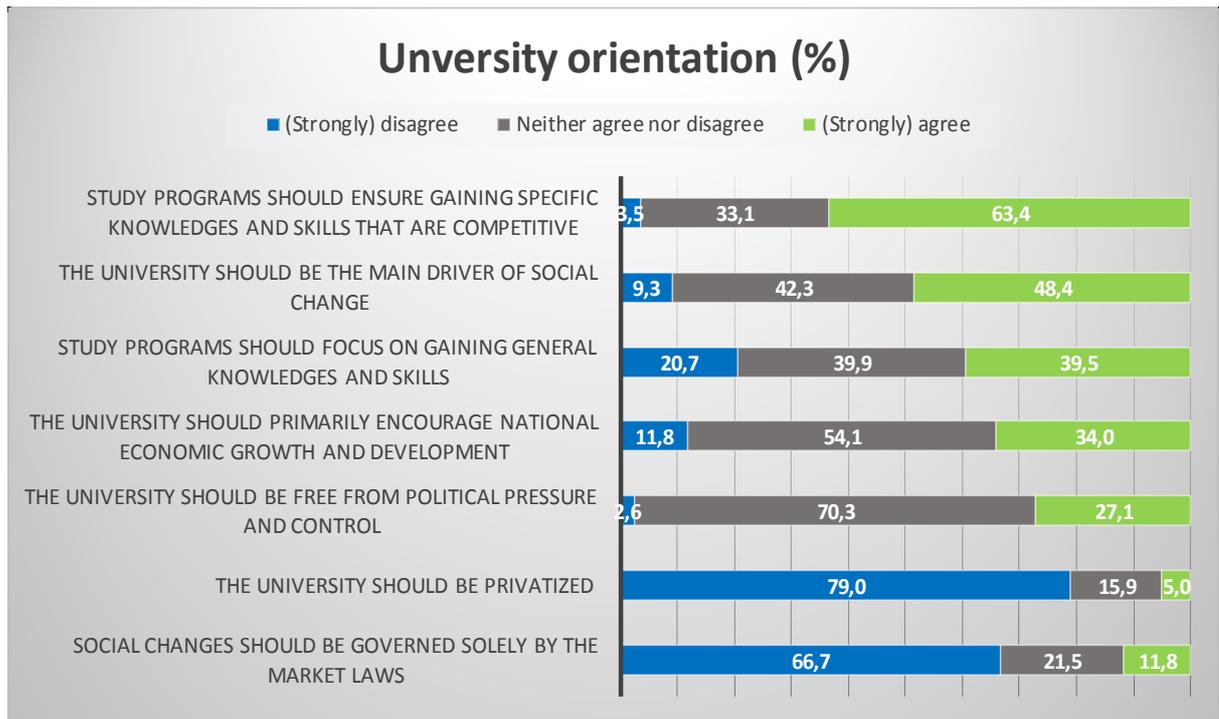


Chart 3. Students' perception on University orientation (%)

The results of the survey indicate a highly egocentric (self-oriented) and pragmatic perspective in understanding the tasks and roles of higher education and the University. Based on their answers, the University of Zagreb should develop into an institution that will prepare them for the labor market in a way to focus more on teaching specialized knowledges and skills that are competitive in the market, which is supported by their view that higher education should be subordinated to the interests of the labor market. More specifically, they see the importance of higher education in developing themselves as free and independent individuals, but failed to see the role of University in ensuring well-being of society and family, national culture and tradition. This shows that university education is viewed from the perspective of particular (own) usefulness, that is, they are more inclined to see education only as a mean of achieving better position in the labor market, without seeing the broader context of education and its role in the development of the society.

This is supported by the fact that, although they say that the University should prepare them to work for the benefit of a society as a whole (Chart 4) and that it should reflect certain humanistic values to some extent (such as ensuring world peace or ending inequalities or between people) their active involvement in promoting these values is at a very low level. This is confirmed by the fact that the majority (62%) has never volunteered in the local community (Chart 5) and half never participated in public debates on issues that are important to the well-being of society as a whole.

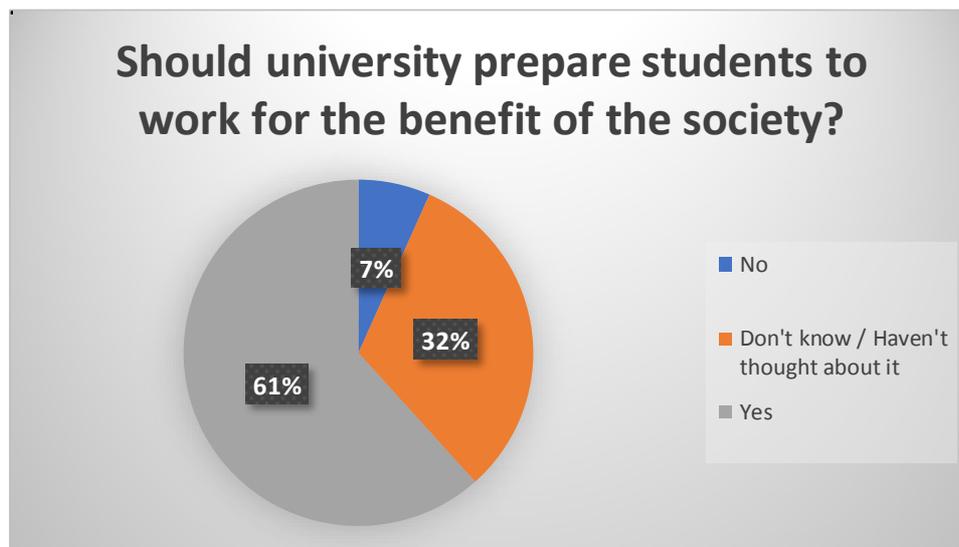


Chart 4. Students responses on whether university should prepare students to work for the benefit of the society (%)

This information reveals not only the student's passivity, but also their separation from the HE institution, as well as from the very idea of University, which they should be a part. In other words, although they advocate that the University should promote certain humanistic values, they are not sufficiently aware of the importance of their own involvement in the process, but rather hold that it is the task of some other actors. This conclusion is supported by the results of research conducted by Ikeda, Campomar and Veludo-de-Oliveira (2009) and Kandiko and Mawer (2013) which show that, although students believe that education should be oriented towards society, most of them in fact seek to achieve short-term results and material satisfaction, thereby confirming its neoliberal orientation. These results indicate the need for further research on the values of students in the education process and their commitment to promoting those values.

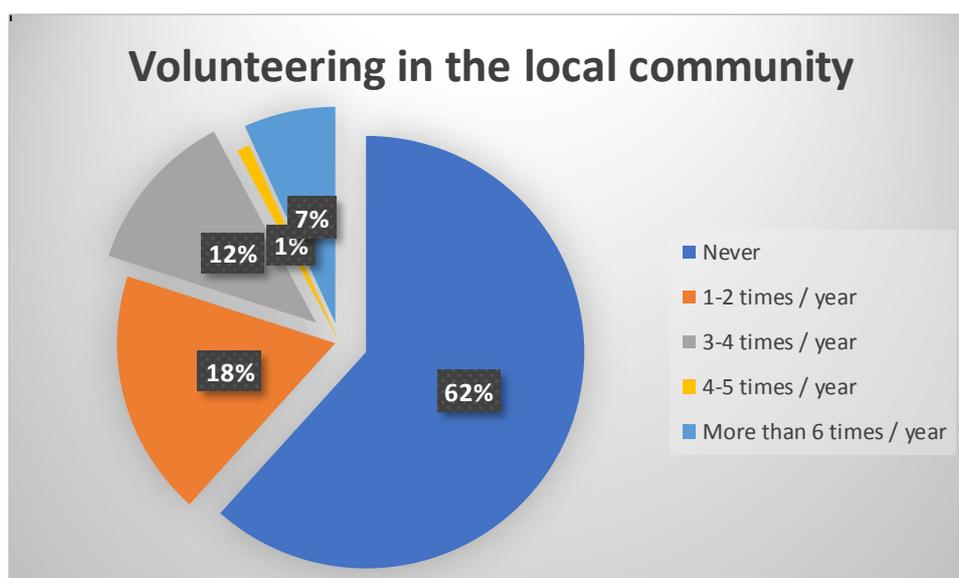


Chart 5. Frequency of student volunteering in local community (%)

Results of the t-test in Table 2 show a statistically significant mean difference in seven out of nine statements regarding higher education orientation at the .05 level of significance. On average, students from technical sciences (TEH) tend to support statements that relate to neoliberal orientation of higher education then the students from humanities and social sciences (HUM-SOC). For example, students from technical sciences tend to agree more with statements that higher education should be oriented towards the interest of the labor market, state, capital and integrated Europe as opposed to students from humanities and social sciences, which tend to agree more with statements that higher education should be oriented towards interests of society as a whole, ensuring world peace and ending inequalities between people.

	F	t*	df	Difference
Higher education should be oriented towards the interests of the labor market	4,747	4,254	733	TEH > HUM-SOC
Higher education should be oriented towards the interests of society as a whole	9,735	-3,157	733	HUM-SOC > TEH
Higher education should be oriented towards the interests of the state	2,010	2,222	733	TEH > HUM-SOC
Higher education should be oriented towards ensuring world peace	3,463	-4,025	733	HUM-SOC > TEH
Higher education should be oriented towards the interests of capital	,080	7,359	733	TEH > HUM-SOC
Higher education should be oriented towards the interests of an integrated Europe	4,537	4,448	733	TEH > HUM-SOC
Higher education should be oriented towards ending inequalities between people	14,535	-4,520	733	HUM-SOC > TEH

* $p < .05$.

Table 2. Results of the t-test on higher education orientation

Results of the t-test in Table 3 shows that means in three out of seven statements regarding University orientation statistically differs at the .05 level of significance. On average, students from technical sciences tend to agree more that social changes should be governed solely by market laws and that University should be privatized than students from humanities and social sciences. They, on the other hand, tend to agree more that University should be free from political pressure and control.

	F	t*	df	Difference
Social changes should be governed solely by the market laws	126,117	5,674	733	TEH > HUM-SOC
The University should be free from political pressure and control	46,969	-5,364	733	HUM-SOC > TEH
The University should be privatized	9,427	2,491	733	TEH > HUM-SOC

* $p < .05$.

Table 3. Results of the t-test on University orientation

Conclusion

The aim of this research was to explore students' perceptions about most important tasks and directions of higher education and the University of Zagreb. The results show that students have an egocentric (self-oriented) and pragmatic perspective in understanding the tasks and roles of higher education and the University. For them, the task of higher education in development of free and independent individual and in preparing the individual for labor market are equally important. On the other side, tasks that are related to University's civic mission are less important, even though majority believe that University should prepare student to work for the benefit of society as a whole. Results also indicate that students are more neoliberal oriented, but it is very likely they are not aware of that. For instance, they strongly advocate that higher education should not be driven by the interests of labor market and that University should stay in public domain. According to this, students do not see the subordination of higher education to the labor market as part of the neoliberal doctrine, but view the relationship *university-labor market* solely through the prism of facilitating their transition to the world of work as quickly as possible. Students from technical sciences tend to agree more with the statements that relate to neoliberal orientation of higher education and university, as opposed to students from humanities and social sciences, which is not that surprising. Humanities and social sciences are focused on learning about the meaning, purpose and goals of historical and social phenomena rather than discovering the truth of the natural world (as is the case in the technical and natural sciences), which is reflected in university teaching and teacher-student relationships.

Results also indicate a need for further research on higher education and University, their tasks and roles in contemporary context. Further research should focus on examining the perceptions of university teachers, in order to obtain a more complete picture of the current situation in higher education in Croatia.

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