World Café Session table 6

Approaches to forming a social contract with civil society
        Host: Chris Brink
        Rapporteur: Sijbolt Noorda

Central topic at this table was the requirement of a reliable social contract with civil society, which enables universities to fulfil their potential, while supporting pursuit of the highest quality of academic work, with full respect for institutional autonomy (MCO 2020)

In three rounds of discussion various participants contributed their thoughts and experience on this topic. It was frequently underlined that 'the social contract' is not to be conceived of as a formalized, legal contract, but rather should be taken as a metaphor for the kind of sustainable social support universities need to be functioning well.

A colleague from Budapest noted that in a metropolitan setting (unlike in a provincial environment) universities often don't experience strong, general support. Businesses as well as civil organizations see universities as a source of applied research, as well as a provider of immediate advice or assistance. A one-way-street kind of relationship rather than a win-win-situation.

In Greenland the one and only university enjoys good support from government at various levels in teaching and learning. In research the situation is less favourable. The country is being used as a kind of laboratory by many internationals, giving little or nothing in return. Meanwhile the research profile of the country's university clearly needs substantial support and development.

From Estonia it was reported that there is a legal requirement that universities should be serving the improvement of society and the advancement of Estonian language and culture. In actual practice the problem often is that very concrete positive impact ("easily understandable results and provisions") is gladly acknowledged while many other, less easily measurable contributions are not.

A Norwegian colleague stated that it often is quite difficult to strike a balance between a rather abstract social contract at the national level and the very concrete requirements at a local level, above all in small communities. Similarly, the protection of autonomy and freedom is simpler said than done in view of political priority claims.

In Timisoara the social mission of the university as a civic actor is certainly part of its main strategy. Through a wide portfolio of relationships, it is connected with its social, regional environment. It offers a wide array of societally relevant studies. Also, its European University Consortium underlines immediate relevance to city and region.

A North Macedonian colleague echoed this kind of connectivity. A regional university is seen as a pool of experts and well-trained young people. However, constant political changes make it hard to work on this in a stable and reliable way.

By way of mid-way conclusion, it was agreed that there is no single and simple template that is applicable under all circumstances. "But there is always a way to connect and communicate, easier in a regional setting than at national level."

The second round of discussions started a lively exchange on the very concept of the social contract. Connections between a university and its social environment are naturally multi-faceted and quite various, even more so if a university is an all-round institution. Such

connections are rarely leadership-driven, but usually at home with individuals and at departmental level.

It was observed that it usually is much wiser to entertain a close, productive relationship with society in many forms while sharing a 'for-the-greater-good' mindset, than to attempt to write it all up, to produce regular strategic documents etc. Moreover, various kinds of partnerships each require their own kind of engagement (business, national government, regional authorities, civic organizations etc.).

In addition, there is a clear need to respond to a wider, international agenda for which no local, regional or even national agent is available.

It was concluded that 'social contract' might not be the best way to put it. Maybe social engagement, commitment, interaction, responsiveness are better terms, clearly indicating a non-formal, two-way kind of relationship.
In a way it is an exercise in the 'mental geography of a university'.

In a third round of discussions students from Bologna and Greenland, and university leaders from Angola and Poland underlined the critical importance of the notion of civil society.

In many settings it isn't at all evident that the needs and interests of civil society are being served by government and/or national politics. Then it is very important that universities side with societal forces that aim at sustainable, fair and equal conditions for all.

It was noted that 'civil society' in this conversation (like in the MCO 2020) is being used in its broad meaning: the whole of society in its civic representation.

It was hoped that academic communities would set an example for society in terms of openness, equality and moral engagement. To this end international collaboration and mutual support was judged to be crucial. Autonomy and academic freedom are often being repressed, under threat, or being misinterpreted for specific political uses.