

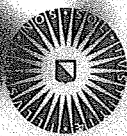
BEELDING VAN DE ACADEMISCHE GEMEENSCHAP

Verdragsdag van de zoektocht naar de hedendaagse universiteit

afgelees met:

Wolfgang Iser - Duitse literatuurwetenschap

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Universiteit Utrecht

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"A sense of discovery"

An interview with Gray Kochhar-Lindgren

On the morning of Monday the 29th of July, I find myself hurrying down the hill that is the Chinese University of Hong Kong campus. A little bit nervous I arrive at the local train station, to find all the trains riding according to schedule – unlike the day before, when the anti-extradition protests interrupted public transport to the University of Hong Kong (HKU), which is exactly my destination for today. At HKU I am meeting Professor Gray Kochhar-Lindgren, who is the director of the Common Core Curriculum, an interdisciplinary undergraduate programme that brings together students from all faculties to practice collaboration, creativity and critical thinking. Before coming to Hong Kong, Kochhar-Lindgren had taught in Switzerland, Germany and at different institutions in the United States. His experiences within the academic world thus stretch around the globe and he has happily agreed to talk about his visions on the academic community, both in Hong Kong and as a concept in general.

By Claudia Hacke

After being invited into the Common Core office, the Curriculum naturally becomes the first subject of discussion. The rationale for the programme, Kochhar-Lindgren tells me, lies in the change from a British three year undergraduate programme, to an American and probably not so incidentally, also Mainland Chinese four year undergraduate programme in 2012. "They [the universities in Hong Kong] were all asked by the government to start General Education programmes and the Common Core is Hong Kong University's version of that." Bringing together students from HKU's ten different faculties, "it is really the only formal curricular space in which those students have to intersect with each other," according to Kochhar-Lindgren. In relation to those different faculties, I ask him whether we can speak of one academic community, when the university is divided into ten different units. "So, I think part of your question is this relationship between university as a 'uni,' as a 'one,' and kind of a polyversity. The faculties definitely go in different directions, but I think there are different mechanisms at HKU which retain a kind of identity of the university as a whole." According to Kochhar-Lindgren, these mechanisms are the University Learning Aims, the Common Core, the shared physical space of the campus ("I think this main campus gives us a sense of community"), comparable structures in teaching and learning design and assessment, and, lastly, the University Grants Committee (UGC) of the Hong Kong Government, which advises the Hong Kong government on funding and development of higher education – e.g. universities.

Hong Kong, which is ranked the 4th most densely populated area in the world, has eight publicly funded universities that are all dependent, in different

ways, on the decisions of the UGC. I wonder whether this creates a competition between the different universities and share my thoughts with Kochhar-Lindgren, who confirms this. "It works in different ways. Everybody gets a certain amount for teaching, learning purposes and student places, but there is still a competition for which programmes get what number of students." In Hong Kong, the UGC together with the top levels of the universities, decide how many students can enter which programmes, Kochhar-Lindgren explains. "I could be wrong, but I think in the Netherlands it matters how many students a programme attracts for funding purposes. So that pits one programme against another. That is not quite the same here. That was very much the case in some parts of the US and I do think that that creates unnecessary competition between programmes." Besides competition between programmes, there is also the – "very stiff," in Kochhar-Lindgren's words – competition for research grants between scholars from the different institutions. "It does not matter whether it is internal or external, it is just competition for money. I think that may be one characteristic that you see across many university systems around the world: 'here is a pot of money, go compete for it.'"

Not surprisingly, Kochhar-Lindgren is not a fan of the international rankings. "I think they put unnecessary and generally inaccurate stress on universities. It is extremely hard to accurately distinguish one university from the other. There are such different contexts: in the Netherlands the system is different from Hong Kong." We continue by discussing the British Quacquarelli Symonds World University Ranking of 2019, which puts HKU in the 25th place, the Chinese University of Hong Kong at 49th and Utrecht University at 124. By admitting my surprise in finding Utrecht University not higher in the ranking, I coincidentally stress Kochhar-Lindgren's point. "Yes, and see, what does that mean? You and I both know what high-quality work is done at Utrecht University and the Chinese University. And there are different rankings which will put all of these universities in different positions. Which one is more valid? Some of them only look at the sciences, some of them look at reputation, some of them look at internationalization of faculty. There is this kind of false hope that everything is translated accurately into a final number, using different constellations of information."

When I ask Kochhar-Lindgren whether he thinks this competition is influencing the nature of universities, his answer is straightforward: "Of course, because it is tied into governments and it is tied into large corporations and it is tied into agendas from the city of Hong Kong. Personally, I think that is okay, but I certainly want to keep that what you call the 'wisdom tradition' alive as well. I think different spots of universities move more closely to that function. That sort of core liberal arts value is very important for cross-disciplinary and student diversity, capacities for a different type of thinking, articulation of historical and political contexts and practice in imagining new possibilities." Yet, precisely the

liberal arts, or the humanities, are currently under intense pressure regarding their 'usefulness' – a concept Kochhar-Lindgren thinks we have to be very careful about because of its pre-packaged definition.

We discuss how usefulness, or perhaps value, is evaluated by putting inherently different subjects on the same spectrum of comparison, which might lead to a distorted view of their respective values. "It is a spectrum of both epistemological outcomes and time frames. If you are a historian, you look at the university quite differently than if you were doing research on molecular reactions or genetics or quantum computing. One example of this is a biologist friend of mine, who has never read Charles Darwin. He is wonderful, but I was intrigued by the fact that a biologist would not have read Darwin, so I asked him why not. He quite straightforwardly answered that 'we do not need it; we are past that point in our research.' That is obviously true in the lab, but I value that context and that sort of longer-term history. Yet, you do have to be able to make an argument with some people about why that is important. I think some of the short-term thinking of finance and funding in universities is very detrimental to the social good. And so I would value some aspects of the institution taking the longer view."

Within this climate of competition, embodied by funding, international rankings and different stakeholders, what is the nature of the academic community nowadays? And who is a part of this academic community? I ask Kochhar-Lindgren these questions. He views the academic community as a fluid and expansive thing. "Obviously universities are very complicated organizations. I like to think that at every level of the organization people feel like they belong to the university. This is never completely uncontested space, since there are many points of tension, frustration, and disappointment in any large organization, including universities. But for me, every level of the university is part of the community; many learning partners supposedly 'outside' the university, like Utrecht and many individuals and organizations in Hong Kong, are also related to that academic community."

To Kochhar-Lindgren, then, the academic community is not limited to the boundaries of universities, but spreads out into society as well. "I think part of the talent of being a university these days is getting that balance [between being your own university and interacting with others] more or less in dynamic equilibrium." In that sense, the purpose of universities in modern day society should be multiple. "I think it should have a component of individual discovery, where each of us gets to explore things so that we can figure out how we fit into this very complicated world. I also think that universities are powerful institutions and they should think about how they serve society. You can name the big issues as well as I can. I think they should self-consciously have a network of social goods in mind and also produce knowledge of every stripe, while always asking about the ethical implications of that knowledge production."

In conclusion, the university as an independent factory of wisdom' is not how Kochhar-Lindgren envisions it. Rather there should be a balance between gathering knowledge, articulating relations, and serving society. "I admire the position that they should only be for the sake of learning, but I think that especially within the last forty years, with a sort of neo-liberal economics coming to the fore, international rankings – which I am not in favour of, but they are there – have sort of pushed things in a certain direction. I think this direction needs to be resisted at different points and I just want to do what we can to create the kinds of programmes and learning moments for us and for students where there is that sense of discovery."