

The Evolution of the University's Role from Knowledge Transfer to Human Capital Production

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Abstract:

The university is considered one of the most important educational institutions tasked with preparing the essential human capital for achieving comprehensive development. This study aims to clarify the content of the roles that the university can play by explaining the evolution of these roles, starting from knowledge transfer and scientific research to serving the community, and moving towards a pivotal role that highlights its relationship with the surrounding environment through partnerships with community institutions and providing the job market with the necessary human capital, or what is known as human competencies.

Keywords: University, Human Capital, Knowledge Transfer, Scientific Research, Human competencies, Community Service.

Introduction

Perhaps one of the most prominent features of the contemporary era is the intense competition among various economic institutions for human capital, often referred to as human resources. This resource is considered the most influential factor in an institution's success or failure in achieving its objectives. It is also a source of competitive advantages that can grant institutions a leading position in their respective fields.

Competition among global institutions has shifted from a battle for tangible material resources to a quest for qualified human capital. This is due to the crucial role of human capital in serving development and its status as the foundation of any sustainable and stable development that contributes to the strength and progress of societies. Global interest in human capital has intensified following the international trend toward globalization, which necessitates a quantitative and qualitative accumulation of human capital capable of innovation, development, technological renewal, and information utilization. This has prompted most countries to allocate substantial financial resources to restructuring education and developing its programs to enhance the characteristics of human capital and make it more compatible with the requirements of sustainable development.

In this context, university education plays a vital and distinctive role in the knowledge production system. It is an essential component of preparing qualified human capital for production, research, and development, and for raising the general intellectual and cultural level of education graduates in light of the knowledge and technological revolutions. This is to effectively address these revolutions, which impose on all societies the need to produce knowledge, accumulate it, and increase the number of university students to overcome societal challenges and achieve progress and development.

The university's role in developing human capital, advancing education, and improving the absorption of educational outputs stems from its commitment to developing and improving human resources, which are the foundation of sustainable development. Universities are also among the most important organizations for producing knowledge and forming intellectual leaders and highly qualified individuals in various specialties. They have undergone various and complex developments, particularly in their concept and functions. In this research paper, we will shed light on their role in producing human capital and on how they have transformed from educational institutions that provided religious or philosophical education at their inception to knowledge-producing institutions at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

Based on the foregoing, the research problem can be formulated as follows:

How can universities fulfill their designated role in producing human capital?

Sub-questions:

- What is meant by a university and what are its characteristics?
- What are the challenges facing universities in the contemporary era?
- How do universities contribute to knowledge transfer, scientific research, community service, and the production of human capital?

The problem of the study and its sub-questions will be answered through the following structure:

First: Basics about the university;

Second: The role of the university in knowledge transfer, scientific research, and community service;

Third: The role of the university in producing human capital.

First: Basics About The University

1. The University:

Universities stand at the pinnacle of educational systems worldwide, fulfilling a multitude of roles, particularly in the formation of highly skilled human capital. As the most prevalent type of educational institution, universities comprise a network of colleges and departments, offering programs that typically last three years, although certain fields such as medicine and engineering may require extended study.

A key distinction between universities and institutes lies in the latter's focus on producing technicians and professionals needed to fill specific labor market demands. While universities may contribute to the training of some professionals, their unique mission is to foster a comprehensive understanding of knowledge, promoting its transmission and renewal.

A university's concept is intrinsically linked to the society in which it is established. Educational theorists argue that a universal definition of a university is elusive due to its context-dependent nature. Each society establishes universities to address its specific challenges and aspirations, shaping the institution's goals and directions. Consequently, universities serve as microcosms of their respective societies, reflecting their political, economic, and social philosophies.

The term "university" is derived from the Latin "universitas," signifying unity or community. It was first used in the 14th century to denote institutions of higher learning. In Arabic, the term "جامعة" is a direct translation of "university."¹

The university has been defined as: "An educational institution which provides its students, who hold a baccalaureate degree, with theoretical and cognitive education, accompanied by technical vocational training, to graduate them into practical life as productive individuals, in addition to contributing to addressing the vital issues that emerge at different times in society and affecting the various interactions of these students in their society with the academic and human capabilities they possess"².

From an economic standpoint, the university is defined as: "A productive institution aimed at preparing the human capital necessary to lead economic development in a country at the lowest possible cost"³.

2. Characteristics of Universities

Universities possess distinctive qualities that set them apart from other institutions. These characteristics can be summarized as follows⁴:

1. Universities are fundamentally academic institutions, with a core mission centered on teaching and research. This academic focus requires effective management.

2. Universities serve as the societal link most closely connected to scientific discoveries, knowledge, and developments within their respective fields of interest.
3. Investment in universities is a long-term endeavor, and its returns may not be immediately apparent. Moreover, the impact of such investments is often difficult to quantify using traditional financial metrics. Profit, in the commercial sense, is not the primary goal of universities, especially those funded by governments or non-profit organizations.
4. Universities maintain unique relationships with other institutions, both domestic and international, characterized by collaboration and, occasionally, competition. Their output consists of research, knowledge, skills, and empirical findings.
5. Universities place a high value on knowledge, recognizing its significance in preserving and advancing society.
6. Knowledge is the primary product of universities. To generate knowledge, faculty members collaborate, with research serving as the primary tool.
7. University education operates within a primarily social context, as universities strive to serve society in various domains, working in tandem with other institutions.
8. University education is grounded in a broader cultural perspective, as evidenced by universities' attention to the philosophical aspects of life and their exploration of diverse and innovative cultures worldwide, provided they align with societal principles.
9. University education operates within an economic framework, harnessing various sciences and technologies to achieve high-quality, competitive production characterized by excellence and competitive pricing⁵.

Based on these characteristics, universities can be viewed as productive entities that differ from other organizations in terms of their output, production timeframes, and marketing strategies. A key distinguishing feature of universities, compared to other economic institutions, is their lack of a primary focus on profit in the commercial sense.

3. Challenges Facing Universities

Universities have faced increasing pressures and significant challenges over the past two decades. These challenges include⁶:

- A. **Rapid Growth of Knowledge:** The rate at which knowledge and sciences are expanding has reached unprecedented levels. This growth has become so vast that even highly specialized individuals find it difficult to keep up with all the advancements in their field. This knowledge explosion has led to numerous discoveries and inventions, resulting in significant transformations in the ways we acquire knowledge and live our lives.
- B. **Scientific and Technological Revolution:** The increasing reliance on technology in various aspects of life, coupled with the development of sophisticated, miniature tools and high-energy devices, is expected to bring about fundamental changes to the natural and social environments.
- C. **Rapid Development of Communication Systems and Methods:** Advances in communication technology have made information accessible to everyone, anywhere, anytime. The world has truly become a global village thanks to the rapid development of media and satellite technology.
- D. **Rapid Changes like Jobs in the Labor Market:** The adoption of modern technology has led to the obsolescence of certain professions and the emergence of new ones.
- E. **Economic and Trade Liberalization:** The proliferation of privatization concepts and the emergence of a new model for providing educational services through private (for-profit) universities have transformed higher education into a commodity that can be sold to individuals. The General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS), which focuses on trade in services, including education, has accelerated the liberalization of the education sector. GATS has influenced higher education in several ways:
 - ❖ Increased use of information and communication technology in delivering academic programs both locally and globally.
 - ❖ Increased demand for higher education.
 - ❖ Increased costs of higher education in both public and private institutions.
 - ❖ A growing number of individuals seeking to invest in higher education, and a surge in foreign investment in educational programs and the establishment of university branches.

4. Contemporary Global Trends in Higher Education

Universities today are facing a set of nearly universal global trends. The most prominent dimensions of these trends are as follows:

a. Diversification in Higher Education: Diversification in higher education can be defined as a direct result of ongoing efforts worldwide to introduce necessary changes to the structure and forms of universities, as well as to curricula, training, and education. These changes are driven by a combination of internal and external factors in universities⁷.

- ✓ **Internal Factors:** Most importantly, these include the rapid and increasing development of information and communication technology for use in universities, and the constant pressure on universities to develop interdisciplinary curricula and methods in teaching, training, and scientific research.
- ✓ **External Factors:** These are represented by the increasing demand for universities in society and the need to satisfy the diverse needs of students; budgetary constraints and austerity measures allocated to universities, forcing them to develop new, more economical programs and educational systems; and the ongoing evolution of labor market needs, which has compelled some universities focused on the employability of their graduates to consider training for new professions and specialties, and for new technologies and management methods in a new environment influenced by new conditions governed by regional blocs and global economic globalization.

The convergence of these internal and external factors necessitates the diversification of higher education, which can be more detailed depending on the type and size of the institution, the nature and level of studies, students, funding sources, and structure.

b. Professionalization in Higher Education: While professionalization in higher education is not a new phenomenon—as all higher education has a professional goal—what is new is the prevalence of training for employment in various specializations, leading to the emergence of new branches. The primary reason for this shift toward professionalization in higher education is the social and economic pressure resulting from the needs of the economy and the labor market. Social pressure begins with students who view higher education as a means of obtaining new jobs first and foremost, while economic pressure is evident in the increasing demand for new specializations at the non-university level, such as vocational science and technical training. These specializations seem to be better able to respond immediately to the economic and industrial transformations of countries.

c. Internationalization of Higher Education: Internationalization of higher education refers to the process of integration into a global scope, a global culture, and the functions of education and research. This growing internationalization of higher education is primarily the result of rapid scientific and technological advancements that have transcended national borders; it reflects the global nature of knowledge transfer and research.

Universities aspiring to achieve excellence cannot reach the highest levels in all fields of knowledge, science, and research due to the rapid growth and development of knowledge. Therefore, each institution cannot control all of it, making international cooperation in higher education a common goal for global universities. The increasing number of international research links and the proliferation of various networks connecting universities, professors, researchers, and students all confirm the need for internationalization.

Second: The Role Of The University In Knowledge Transfer, Scientific Research, And Community Service

As previously discussed, the definition of a university has been intrinsically linked to its objectives, which have evolved. Concurrently, there has been an evolution in both the concept of the university and its functions, leading to the emergence of diverse philosophical models of higher education institutions.

Initially, universities were primarily focused on providing education to prepare students for professions like law and university teaching. Consequently, early universities lacked the modern concept of a university, which is grounded in the principles of scientific research and the training of researchers⁸.

During the Renaissance and up until the modern era, Western European universities experienced a crisis characterized by their detachment from society and their sole focus on teaching. These institutions struggled to adapt to the intellectual and

social transformations that marked the medieval period in Europe. However, these changes eventually led universities to redefine their philosophies and adopt two new roles: scientific research and community service.

By the early 20th century, universities had solidified their roles around three primary functions: teaching or knowledge transfer, scientific research and knowledge production, and community service.

1. Teaching: As studies have shown, teaching has been the primary focus of universities since the ancient Chinese academies and up until the modern era in Europe. During this period, universities were characterized by the dominance of religious education, isolation from society, and a pursuit of absolute truth. Education is the most effective way to disseminate knowledge and transmit it from one generation to the next. "It prepares and develops university students, qualifying them for various jobs and activities in different fields. Harbison and Mayer highlighted the importance of this function, especially for universities, stating that a society that cannot develop its human resources cannot, therefore, build anything⁹.

2. Scientific Research and Knowledge Production

German universities, towards the end of the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th century, were among the first to prioritize scientific research. Scientific research is the primary tool for producing and expanding knowledge, and it represents a profound exploration of knowledge itself. Universities, with their concentration of highly skilled and specialized academics, are uniquely positioned to undertake such endeavors and thus devote special attention to research. "The research conducted by universities throughout history has had a profound impact on industry, agriculture, and various aspects of life. Although numerous research centers have been established independently of universities, university research remains, to a large extent, more significant and precise than other types of research.¹⁰"

3. Community Service and the Concept of the Productive University

At the beginning of the 21st century, universities have been actively providing practical services directly to the community in various aspects of life. They strive to solve societal problems, foster development, and provide the human resources necessary to lead society.

From this perspective, the concept of the productive university emerged with a philosophy distinct from that of the traditional university. Its goal is to "positively influence societal progress and fully embrace the achievements of modern technological development by optimizing the use of available resources and achieving high productivity¹¹."

The productive university is an educational institution that seeks to be more closely connected to the community it serves and to be a positive influence on its life. To achieve this, it undertakes a range of roles, including¹²:

- **Direct participation in development and innovation**
- **Expanding continuing education and training programs**
- **Facilitating the utilization of graduate studies to address workplace challenges and propose suitable solutions**

Based on the foregoing discussion, it can be concluded that the work of the productive university, in addition to teaching and research, is linked to a specific role it plays in society. As previously mentioned, this has created a new philosophy for the university, one that is centered on continuous learning to keep pace with all changes in the environment, as well as conducting both academic and applied research.

Moreover, the productive university operates on the principle of commercialization. Its market offerings include specialized training, research, and consulting services, for which it receives funds that it uses to finance its operations, making it resemble a profit-seeking enterprise.

Third: The Role Of The University In Producing Human Capital.

1. Human Capital Development: The Competitive Challenge for Economies

The term "human capital" refers to the sum of knowledge, skills, experience, and all capabilities that can increase the productivity of an individual or a specific group. Investing in this capital means striving to improve its quality and increase its efficiency through basic training, continuous education, and knowledge acquired on the job, among other means. The expected outcome is to generate returns that exceed investment costs.

Although economists began to focus on higher education, its institutions, and attempts to decode it and link it to economic development in the early 1960s, following the explosion of human capital theory, there were thinkers who, before this, had emphasized the importance of human capital development to contribute to achieving organizational objectives at the micro level and to driving economic development at the macro level. Among them was the English writer W. Petty (1623-1687), who analyzed human capital and studied its contribution to national income alongside other factors of production. A. Smith also included education and training among the components of fixed capital, referring to them as the scientific and technical capabilities of individuals.

Studies on the issues of underdevelopment and progress in the world have shown that, at the beginning of the 21st century, the latter has become linked to the extent to which countries possess qualified, highly educated personnel capable of designing and implementing development policies for any nation. "The progress and advancement achieved by developed countries, as demonstrated by thinkers such as Schultz, Becker, and Addison, is attributed to the human capital available to these nations. This is a creative and productive resource in various fields.¹³"

In the United States, during the second half of the 19th century, Addison showed that one-third of the increase in productivity achieved during that period was due to the contribution of education. Education was twice as effective as physical capital in explaining this increase. This leads to discussions about the return on investment in human beings and the possible rates that can be achieved compared to investments in other material areas. Based on data related to the economies of several countries with different conditions and facts, such as the United States, India, and Mexico, studies have shown that the rates of return on human capital investments are usually equal to the rates of return on physical investments¹⁴.

Therefore, human capital is the engine of development and its ultimate goal. Consequently, its development is, in our view, a fundamental factor in enabling it to make the necessary contribution to achieving the desired development. Thus, the role of education in general, and higher education in particular, as specialized education, becomes evident in increasing individual performance effectiveness through the acquisition of various specialized knowledge. If four years of primary education can increase human productivity by at least 44%, according to Shroeder, then what can be said about specialized university education in specific fields?

We believe that, regardless of the diversity of university models worldwide, they remain centers for the development of human capital capable of leading the economic and social development of their countries. The difference between developed and developing countries, in our view, lies not in wealth or poverty, but rather in the difference in the level of knowledge among individuals in these countries. In other words, as previously mentioned, humans remain the engine and goal of development, and they are also the source of underdevelopment. The university remains responsible for their development and thus contributes significantly to building more advanced human societies.

Therefore, universities, as the pinnacle of the educational ladder, bear the greatest burden of building and developing human resources, that is, building and developing the driving force and power of societal development and progress. Universities are responsible for preparing comprehensive human capital and equipping it with the knowledge, skills, and spiritual, ethical, psychological, and social values necessary to be a creative source of wealth and an innovative leader of development.

The economic return that societies can achieve thanks to higher education far exceeds what economic calculations suggest. Higher education, in general, has become involved in "building social capital, and its institutions, especially universities, bear the primary burden of intellectual vitality, that is, developing intellectual capital, and preserving and renewing the nation's culture, that is, building cultural capital through research and intellectual work."

For universities to be able to fulfill their mission of producing highly qualified human capital as effectively as possible, they must possess the necessary prerequisites. In the following section, we will briefly examine these prerequisites.

2. Prerequisites for Effective Human Capital Production in Universities

The prerequisites for effective human capital production in universities consist of a set of fundamental factors upon which the efficiency of this process depends. These include:

A. University Faculty members are the cornerstone of the educational process in universities, serving as the direct supervisors responsible for transmitting knowledge to students. They are thus the providers of information, knowledge, and ideas to human capital. If students are the primary inputs of a university, then faculty are its most important assets. A university needs a distinguished faculty, as a university is defined by its professors, not its buildings. The university is distinguished by the thinking, work, experience, and research of these professors before anything else.¹⁵ In the age of knowledge and information, universities require a distinguished faculty with a broad understanding of the latest scientific developments and the full capacity to utilize the most recent teaching and research technologies, imparting them to students to build evolutionary human capital capable of innovation.

The success of a university in fulfilling its function of producing competent human capital depends on the selection of faculty members and the development of their scientific and professional performance over time so that they possess the necessary qualifications for their job.

For university faculty to effectively build human capital, the following are required¹⁶:

- ❖ The need to pay attention to providing academic and guidance counseling
- ❖ The importance of identifying students' interests and aptitudes and developing them, moving away from the classical transmission of knowledge. University professors are in a position to discover their students' abilities and guide them in a way that serves society.
- ❖ Reliance on flexible curricula and educational programs that respect students' interests, aptitudes, and desires.

B. Curricula and Courses The formation of human capital involves equipping it with various knowledge capable of granting it distinctiveness and creativity. This can only be achieved through benefiting from university curricula and courses that have special characteristics, linking the theoretical and the practical, and providing learners with the necessary information. Curricula and courses are among the most important factors in the success of a university in preparing creative and innovative human capital, which is needed by various institutions in society. Therefore, in our opinion, they should be characterized by:

- ❖ Renewal and development
- ❖ A strong link to the requirements of comprehensive development
- ❖ Emphasis on applied studies
- ❖ Reliance on curricula that take into account the specific mental and intellectual characteristics of individuals in each society, and avoid indiscriminate assimilation of global curricula.

C. Teaching Methods The teaching method is an important factor that contributes to the production of high-quality human capital. Teaching in universities is characterized by a diversity of methods due to the diversity of its subjects. Some subjects require memorization and recall, while others require creativity and innovation, and still others require practical application and field experience. The traditional teaching method, commonly used in developing countries, which is based on lectures, does not allow for the development of students' creative abilities, as it is a method of cramming information and knowledge. Traditional teaching methods reduce the student's role in the educational process, confining them to receiving and storing information in preparation for exams. On the other hand, they increase the student's dependence on others in the educational process. This can produce graduates who lack strategic thinking skills, which negatively impacts the course of comprehensive development in any country. Comprehensive development in any country requires competent cadres capable of assuming responsibilities and taking initiative. This requires relying on modern methods of providing the necessary knowledge, methods that create a sense of responsibility and the ability to analyze and infer and develop a spirit of participation and initiative. This explains why universities in the developed world are adopting modern methods, including, but not limited to, the project method, the problem-based learning method, programmed instruction, and training in real-world situations.

D. The University's Organizational and Administrative Structure The organizational structure of a university is a map that describes its organization at a given moment, consisting of a formal structure linked to the distribution of tasks and roles, the definition of responsibilities and lines of authority, and organizational relationships, as well as an informal structure based on a set of personal relationships between individuals within the university institution. The general organizational and administrative framework within which the educational process takes place in the university is a fundamental and determining factor in the effectiveness of the latter.

The combination of human and material components, and the set of organizational practices at the university level, directly affect the quality of the human capital produced. One of the most important factors in the success of a university institution is the formation of a specialized administrative framework and the construction of a flexible organizational structure without compromising the organic unity between the administrative and educational apparatuses, which contribute together, but in different ways, to improving performance and increasing productivity in the university institution.

The cooperation between these two apparatuses poses many problems that even some of the oldest universities suffer from. Parkinson warned of the bureaucratic encroachment on the educational apparatus, which "threatens to turn the university into a primary service center" similar to an administration or a machine that revolves around itself in the modern state. The university seeks to support its organizational apparatus with administrators who possess the following characteristics:

- ❖ Familiarity with the affairs of management knowledge of the nature of work in institutes and colleges, and technical expertise in all matters related to financial and organizational aspects, as well as the ability to address the material problems encountered by professors and students.
- ❖ Since universities have become crowded with hundreds, if not thousands, of students and teachers, renewing, strengthening, training, and empowering the administrative apparatus, and giving it room for initiative, has become necessary. Because administration tends by nature to become rigid and routine in its performance, if it is not motivated by incentives and penalties, it will fail to perform its function and will turn into a marginal apparatus that hinders the educational process itself.
- ❖ Administrators working in higher education should operate under a system that directly connects them to other bodies involved in the educational process.

E. Other Factors In addition to the aforementioned basic factors, other factors also play a significant role in developing human capital, including¹⁷:

- **Libraries and information centers:** Their role in developing human capital can be evaluated through several indicators, the most important of which are:
 - The availability of a library equipped with essential information resources in all specialties available at the university
 - The availability of audio-visual and modern communication means
 - The qualification of the human apparatus overseeing these services, with supervision over their efficient provision
 - The availability of sufficient spaces for students who are comfortable reading
- **The learning environment:** This relates to the number of students in classrooms, the suitability of classrooms for effective learning, and the suitability of university furniture and other technical equipment (lighting, ventilation, quietness, clarity of sound...).
- **Buildings, facilities, and amenities related to the educational process:** Buildings, facilities, the number of laboratories and workshops, and their various equipment and availability, in addition to accommodation facilities for students and teachers, are all essential elements for the success of the educational process.
- **Student services:** Students need a set of essential services such as facilitating admission and registration systems, with the need to adjust acceptance rates and the number of students to available capacities and societal needs. Providing university loans and grants, and the criteria for their distribution, and providing incentives for outstanding students.

Conclusion

From the foregoing discussion, it can be concluded that universities, at the dawn of the 21st century, play a distinguished and prominent role in producing knowledge and preparing specialized, creative human capital capable of developing and

leading societal development policies, especially with the recent trends in the global economy and its shift from a resource-based economy to a knowledge-based one.

The success of a university in providing society with competent human capital is contingent upon the availability of a coherent set of prerequisites and foundations, primarily including university faculty, curricula and courses, teaching methods, and a flexible and effective organizational structure.

Despite the distinguished role of universities today, they are now facing a crisis that is completely contradictory to the crisis they experienced in Europe during the Middle Ages. Instead of having a starting point defined by its constructive criticism of society and its guidance, it has become subject to it, leading it to neglect its other roles. This has raised the question of its identity. What is the ideal model of university that the world should have in this century, especially since major global companies, amid economic globalization and fierce competition, have turned to establishing research and development centers, moving away from relying on universities for this? Major institutions, through these centers, have begun to offer master's and doctoral degrees. What identity does the university now bear?

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