Una Europa Future UniLab

How can universities promote the well-being of employees and students and help them flourish?

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Thinking of universities as a SOCIAL LAB

The academic community has very special characteristics compared to other organizations such as companies, NGOs, local authorities and administrations. Indeed, the different components are not a priori in conflict for an external objective such as profit or political power but come together to contribute to the production and dissemination of knowledge not only for the success of students but also for the service of the whole community. society, promoting local, national, European, global public commons. In addition, the promotion of critical thinking, knowledge, the democratic ideal, support for people in difficulty, the fight against discrimination are among the fundamental principles that guide the strategic choices of universities. We also experience, on a daily basis, the added value of interdisciplinary collaborations that allow us to step out of our usual spaces to seek inspiration from our colleagues in other disciplines, including collaboration with the arts.

These characteristics make it possible to think of the functioning of the university as **a community acting as a social lab** where innovative social practices and relations are experienced, participatory democratic practices are employed where governance is in support of the initiatives of those members who are valued for their innovative practices. This would include the promotion of social entrepreneurship among the students and the staff.

A laboratory is always open to collaborations with its peers continually through seminars, conferences, cross invitations, joint publications. Thus, the Una-Europa Alliance could be the first melting pot of this social lab thanks to the achievements of these first years of operation and the mutual knowledge of its members. As an extension of the Future Uni Lab, we could set up a regular seminar on the theme of social innovation in our institutions and calls for proposals to generalize local experiences. But beyond this first circle, a social lab must be open to its environment, its city, the companies with which we collaborate, the NGOs, the public authorities or even the major international organizations. The permanent dialogue with critical friends, as presented below, is a fundamental element of building a social lab.

A concrete and short-term achievement of the university as a social lab could be the launch of a participatory science project bringing together all members of the academic community on some of the major contemporary issues such as climate change and sustainable development, ageing, the smart city, inequalities, the promotion of peace, well-being. We could also take inspiration from the methods developed in economics and experimental psychology to better bring out the expectations of the different components of the university community.

The Social Lab University should be an inclusive space for individual development, open to society and inviting critical friends to dialogue:

1. Space for individual development (including the physical space and closeness to nature) with fair material conditions for academics, students and university workers, regarding salaries, secure contracts and balanced workloads.
   - Universities should provide adequate infrastructure (ensure innovative teaching facilities, creative space, relaxation and support facilities, redesign the whole campus, not a single classroom; think green).
   - Universities must provide supportive workplace policies, practices and programmes that will promote career development and ensure work-life balance, employee recognition, financial stability and inclusiveness.
   - Different people need different things: equity doesn't mean sameness
   - Make resting and pausing normal: Start each class or meeting with a minute of silence for everyone to settle in, offer yoga and meditation classes at least every morning (or 5-10 minutes every hour?!)
   - Create a space where people can meet simply as human beings despite their role (i.e. taking time for a check-in every day/sharing how is everyone right now and listen)
   - Holistic approach: Allow people to bring their feelings and needs to university (the connection between: sensing, feeling, thinking, wanting, acting)
   - Create a healthy "thinking environment" (the term is from Nancy Kline) for each other by training the academic staff and students and raising awareness of the importance of listening to ignite instead of listening to respond (10 components for a thinking environment are: attention, equality, ease, appreciation, encouragement, feelings, information, difference, diversity, place)
   - Switch focus for student education from results to giving the mind (and the human being) time and space to explore and to develop
   - Allow playfulness as a way to learn
   - University as a space to develop an academic personality: More mentorship than teacher-student relationship, time, more "guided freedom".
   - University as a **S.A.F.E**. place for an individual and a community to thrive and interact (to experience and enjoy **S**ecurity – **A**cceptance - **F**reedom - **E**cology/**E**volvement).

2. Inclusive space that fosters dissent, where diverse views and critical thoughts towards university are welcomed, listened to and received thoughtfully, where complaints are attended to and harm is repaired, and where power and hierarchy are balanced with accountability, facilitating the emergence of a critical community and critical collegiality. Universities should care and take care, that is, provide caring environments for students and all their employees, where reducing the pressure on all the members of this community becomes the main institutional goal:
   - Diversity and equity committees and units, as well as regulations and protocols to make and follow complaints, should not become a way of blurring the existence and the extension of harassment and power abuse – as if the mere creation of the unit and the protocol means that the problem is already solved.
   - Complaints, critical views and complainants are not the problem. Instead of implementing long and painful procedures that often produce more harm and vulnerability, universities should provide safe and collective spaces for listening to critical thoughts and complaints, and for finding reparation for the complainants in ways that are suitable for them, implementing institutional accountability along organization and academic hierarchy.
   - Universities could create an open and accessible register of the impact of harassment and violence within the institution, so that registering is also the creation of a possibility for being different, instead of promoting institutional fatalism, where the recognition and description of harassment and power abuse become an instruction to accept them.
   - Support student associations and other extra-curricular activities where students are able to learn transversal skills and gain empowering experiences of student-led activities
   - Incentivise societal action by both students and staff, allowing them to define the methods and content.
   - Start a cultural change by lowering hierarchies through communications that address the whole community, creating joint spaces for teachers and students, etc.
   - Involve all groups within the community in decision-making and development projects by restructuring decision-making bodies and creating mixed, representative task forces etc. For instance, implementing working groups on key issues using a panel of staff members and students designated randomly.

3. Being open to society and inviting critical friends to dialogue
   - Create and actively engage with a network of critical friends. This refers to finding external actors from and beyond the university sector who are willing to act as friends of the university and support it with their critical but benevolent eye on the university's action and provide honest, confidential feedback and ideas for the best of the university. This is a potential function for Una Europa, which as an alliance can offer a pool of critical friends both in terms of peer universities and our University-Related Members from other sectors.
   - Building and reinforcing partnerships (local/regional/international/multisectoral) to learn from each other, exchange best practices, improve one's operations,
   - Creating communities of practice to seek new ideas and solutions, ensuring citizen engagement: promoting cooperation between citizens and universities to better/quicker respond to social and economic and/or university needs.
   - Bring people from all areas of the university to the table and let them share their perspectives/ideas and take them seriously (cleaning staff, management, gardener, facility manager, scientists, students, disabled people, people of different skin colour, age, gender, etc.)
   - Find a way to moderate the meetings that guarantee that everyone is treated with equal respect, is equally heard? etc. (i.e. thinking environment, design thinking)

**INNOVATIVE
TEACHING FACILITIES**
[go beyond conventional
lecturing halls, rearrange space,
encourage student-centered
teaching; have in mind that lack
of concentration and attention
come after half an hour of lecture,
scale-up classrooms;
use AI in teaching]

**RE-DESIGNED
OFFICES**
[responding to individual's needs:
health problems, age, etc.
and digital work; ergonomically
designed working areas;
standing desks]

**IN HARMONY
WITH NATURE**
[pocket gardens;
meeting places outdoor;
walking routs on campus,
green technology]

**THE
ECOSYSTEM
FOR A UNIVERSITY
OF THE FUTURE**

**CREATIVE SPACE
TO BOOST IDEAS
AND INTERACTIONS**
[space enhancing networking,
team work, project development,
experimenting, exchange
of ideas, knowledge transfer,
socializing]

**FOOD NOT ONLY
FOR THOUGHT**
[healthy menu choices in canteens;
break rooms to meet for lunch,
e.g with rector/president;
space to prepare simple snacks;
local farmers' food
on campus]

**RELAX,
RETREAT,
SUPPORT SPACE**
[wellness rooms: exercise
rooms for physical activity, relaxation
rooms for joga & meditation; zero
interaction retreat rooms;
mother's/father's rooms;
counselling facilities;
an outdoor multi-sports
court]