

TRANSFORMATIONS OF A TODAY'S UNIVERSITY: VALUES, APPROACHES, AND MODELS



Yurii Mielkov, PhD, Senior Researcher

Chief Research Fellow,

*Department of Social and Institutional Transformations
in Higher Education,*

Institute of Higher Education,

National Academy of Educational Sciences of Ukraine

Kyiv, Ukraine

uka7777@gmail.com

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8186-0357>

To cite this article:

Mielkov, Yu. (2025). Transformations of a today's university: values, approaches, and models. *Education: Modern Discourses*, 8, 55–62. <https://doi.org/10.37472/2617-3107-2025-8-05>

Abstract. *The paper deals with the topic of transformation of contemporary higher education institutions in the context of the current trends of the development of science, economy, and society as a whole. Possible models and approaches to the transformation of higher education under current conditions are analysed, including transformational university and ecological university. A feature of the current situation is shown to be the poly-vector nature of development, so that there are several relevant models at the same time, and not so much in the sense of diversification of national institutions according to different models, but as a variety of models and directions that can act as guidelines for each institution individually. It is argued that when determining the transformation directions, a modern higher education institution should be guided by humanistic guidelines for the development of both its own students and employees, and all people in general, while the “product” of its activities is primarily culture in all diversity of its manifestations – as academic culture, moral culture, ecological culture, and information culture.*

Keywords: *higher education, philosophy of education, development of universities, humanist values, anticipatory education, culture as the product of university activities.*

INTRODUCTION

The topic of defining the strategies and the development of universities is gaining particular importance in the context of the rapid transformation of modern society, including science and economics, as well as considering the needs of the post-war reconstruction of Ukraine as a historical chance to renew the higher education system in accordance with the requirements and trends of the present-day world. In 2022, UNESCO has initiated the program of “reinventing higher education”, designed for the period up to 2030 and declared to be based on such principles, amongst else, as inclusion, equity, pluralism, academic freedom, inquiry, critical thinking and creativity, integrity and ethics, commitment to sustainability and social responsibility; and excellence through cooperation rather than competition (UNESCO, 2022). The more practical relevance of the issue of such a transformation could be shown by the latest report from the World Economic Forum: on average, two-fifths (39 %) of workers' existing skills will be transformed or become

obsolete during by 2030. It is also expected that 59 % will need further retraining and 11 % could risk unemployment, while the rest will either change their job or get some advanced retraining (World Economic Forum, 2025, p. 6).

Thus, the current situation of global transformation of science, economy, and society as a whole, as well as the proliferation of new AI-based technologies promising to change the labour market in a few years, makes it urgent to talk about the values and approaches to transformations of today's universities. If we analyse the propositions by UNESCO, World Economic Forum and other international organizations, we can conclude that the values in question are those of the classical ideas of humanism: "reinventing" higher education means moving from elitist and discriminatory education to the equitable one, promoting the idea of higher education for every person without exception, and by transforming each participant of the educational process into its true subject (Mielkov, & Punchuk, 2024). Still, the question concerning the model of such a university remains: could it be outlined and defined? That's the main problem the proposed article intends to consider, alongside major values and approaches to transformation of today's HEIs.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The paper is based on the publications of philosophers and researchers dedicated to the analysis of possible models of a contemporary university. In particular, the Ukrainian researcher Kurbatov (2014) used to study historical models of universities; other relevant sources include works by Barnett of University College London (2018), who is one of the founders of the whole discipline of contemporary philosophy of higher education. Amongst more recent studies, special attention was given to the reports of UNESCO (2022) and World Economic Forum (2025); considerations on the transformations of Ukrainian higher education system expressed in mass-media in the 2020s by Wynnyckyj, then the government official responsible for the reforms in question; as well as works by such international researchers, as Hrabowski (2024), Lugovyi, Slyusarenko, & Talanova (2024), Friedman (2025), who proposed some vision of the development of a contemporary university.

METHODOLOGY

Analytical and comparative methods were used to consider different models and approaches to the transformation of higher education under present-day conditions. The dialectical method was applied when searching for contradictions that define the ways of the current trends of social development. Other philosophical methods, like hermeneutics and synergetic, we used to comprehend the humanist values of today's development and to reconstruct the poly-vector perspectives of the transformation of today's university.

MAIN RESULTS

The first question we should deal with is whether it is actually possible to name a certain single model, which should be the focus when defining development strategies for a higher education institution, or are we dealing with a range of possible approaches that either complement each other or act as alternatives? According to Kurbatov: "The specificity of the contemporary world makes the existence of an ideal model of the university, which was quite organic for the times of modernity, problematic" (Kurbatov, 2014, p. 185). Although at the same time, the researcher argued about the "World-class university" concept as an attempt to reconstruct elements of such an "ideal model" in the postmodern era.

The "World-class university" in this case appears rather as a simple orientation toward attracting the best students and faculty from around the world, and therefore claims to be present in the top segment of leading university rankings. According to Lugovyi, Slyusaren-

ko, and Talanova, a World-class university is an institution that belongs to the group of 1–500 according to the Shanghai Ranking (Lugovyi et al., 2024, p. 70). The creation of such a “world-class university” in Ukraine clearly requires the involvement of financial resources of the corresponding level – under the conditions of war and post-war recovery, such a framing of the issue seems rather unrealistic.

However, the lack of resources is not yet a reason to abandon further development; on the contrary, it should act as a catalyst for the search for new ways of transformation, which would rely both on existing traditions and experience as well as on the best global examples. At that, a guaranteed model to follow may prove not only unattainable but simply non-existent. The latter corresponds to the thesis about the impossibility of a single model of the modern university. As one of the former Deputy Ministers of Education and Science of Ukraine noted: “There is no universal university model anymore, and it is unlikely to emerge in the future” (Wynnyckyj, 2021). However, in this case, it was meant rather what Altbach wrote more than ten years ago: under conditions of mass education, possible decline in the intellectual level of the average student, and increasing inequality in the global educational space, there arises a need for diversification of the education system according to market demands and population needs. Here, we are talking about the “poly-vector” development not of an individual institution of higher education but rather about the necessity for each university to find its own “niche in the market” – that is, to have as a model one of several possible ones (Altbach, 2013).

In particular, in Wynnyckyj’s interpretation, the diversification of the Ukrainian higher education system may consist of some institutions focusing on dual education forms and transforming into institutions of “vocational higher education”; classical universities will transform toward research-oriented ones, with prospects of merging or at least close cooperation with institutes of the National Academy of Sciences and other academies; polytechnic institutes will move in an applied direction preparing specialists for high-tech sectors of the economy. Meanwhile, the bleakest scenarios are outlined for “mass” institutions such as agricultural or pedagogical universities, which in this future vision have almost no place – in contrast to the so-called “small prestigious universities,” which will probably only remain as the last strongholds of classical, universal education focused on the formation and development of the individual, not just specialists (Wynnyckyj, 2022).

It is difficult to agree with such a vision, and not only because any top-down transformations are doomed to failure, provoking resistance from both administrative and academic staff who seek to maintain their academic autonomy. But also because the development of human personality emerges as an urgent need for higher education in general, regardless of its sphere or its most attractive model. Humanist values, breadth of *Weltanschauung*, and the ability for independent, critical, ethically balanced thinking are no less needed in the field of high technology than in the humanities or in public administration.

Moreover, orientation toward the applied sphere is not such a new trend: nearly a quarter of a century ago, Aronowitz criticized the reorientation of US universities from helping students master key knowledge areas like history, literature, science, philosophy, and critical thinking skills – into “knowledge factories” with a narrowly focused “college-to-work” mentality. According to the researcher, leading universities had practically turned into training branches for large corporations, merely preparing students for the labour market (Aronowitz, 2001). Such an approach looks outdated today, not least due to the development of the economy and technological innovations. Preparing students for the labour market and guaranteeing them employment with a decent salary (which, according to Aronowitz, is perhaps the decisive motivational factor for obtaining higher education as it becomes more and more expensive) is practically impossible because the market itself changes at an extremely

rapid pace. In the era of AI-based technologies, no institution and no specialist can accurately predict which professions, knowledge, and skills will be in demand not just in 50 or 20 years, but probably even in five years (Dürr & Furer, 2024).

Thus, it can be argued that one of the most relevant ideas for determining approaches to the transformation of the higher education system is *anticipatory education*. Its essence lies in ensuring the content of education based on factors that define and predict the current and future socio-economic and cultural development of science, economy, and society as a whole. However, as one can only speak rather conditionally about the more or less distant future, the humanization approach should come to the fore. It is about graduates acquiring not just narrow professional knowledge and skills, since those become obsolete quite quickly in the contemporary labour market and will thus require either complete change or significant improvement in the future, but rather universal human qualities and competencies.

Of course, an emphasis on critical thinking and similar matters has probably already become commonplace in any discussions about the goals and content of today's higher education. However, that in no way diminishes either the relevance of university development precisely in this direction or the problematic nature of implementing such a task in practice, despite its familiarity as a slogan. After all, this also concerns quite pragmatic matters such as the readiness of a university graduate to work in today's industry. For example, as noted in a recent study by Friedman, the effectiveness of existing higher education in preparing students for professional life, including social skills, is a cause of serious concern: employers' surveys reveal a significant gap between academic training and workplace requirements. According to various data, only 60 % of employers believe recent graduates possess the necessary skills and knowledge for even entry-level positions; nearly three-quarters (73 %) of US employers report difficulties in finding graduates with essential soft skills, including critical thinking, effective communication, and active listening (Friedman, 2025).

It turns out that it is much more desirable to have university graduates capable of independent critical thinking and communication with others and to teach them new skills (such as using new technologies and tools that literally did not exist just a few years ago when they obtained higher education even in the most reputable university) than to have narrow specialists and to teach them a very ability to learn and those quite universal human qualities. Moreover, the greatest harm to graduates is caused by a tendency toward simplified, "binary" thinking (like "us/them", etc.), as well as what can sometimes be called "thoughtless" (or uncritical) thinking – which should not actually be called thinking at all since it is but an unreflective repetition of clichés, propaganda opinions, and so on.

To avoid the thesis about the necessity to focus university transformations precisely on preparing graduates with such human qualities becoming just another cliché, let us stress the more general need to guide the development of a higher education institution by the human development of its students and staff, primarily based on value orientations, or simply *culture*. Undoubtedly, shaping the cultural identity of a student or a faculty member is an even more complex task than fostering critical thinking or cultivating other so-called "soft skills." Freeman Hrabowski III, former President of the University of Maryland – an institution that, under his leadership, underwent a successful transformation into a modern research and innovation university – highlights in his recent work *The Resilient University*, the central role of the university as a driver of cultural change. In his view, while representatives of different departments and faculties adhere to distinct values and norms, leaders can nevertheless encourage the identification of shared core values, norms, and behavioural models "that form a core culture, such as student success, inclusive excellence, shared leadership, community, and putting people first" (Hrabowski, 2024, p. 3).

Considering the university as a factor of human development, Boni and Gasper argue that such an approach resists, above all, the prevalent modes of evaluating universities: by the number of Nobel laureates among faculty, by position in the Shanghai Rankings, or by citation indices. It equally challenges the reductionist understanding of the university as an institution whose sole function is to generate knowledge for the state or corporations and to train personnel for them. Relying on Freire's work on humanist pedagogy and Sen's writings on human-centred economics, Boni and her co-authors conceptualize human development as oriented toward the diversity of values and the wholeness of personality, in sharp contrast to the economically and market-centred notion of "human resource development" (Boni & Gasper 2012; Boni et al., 2016).

The human development approach as a strategy for university transformation resonates with another prominent concept: the holistic approach to education. Emerging in the 1980s, it represented a form of decolonization and de-Westernization of education, drawing inspiration from traditions outside Western Europe and the United States, particularly those of East Africa and Southeast Asia. Holistic education "is about educating the whole person – body, mind, and spirit – within the context of an interconnected world" (Miller et al., 2019, p. 5). While originally directed primarily toward secondary education, the notion of holistic education is no less vital in higher education as well, as it represents a distinctly human-centred approach aligned with the contemporary imperatives of sustainable development and the transformation of higher education in synergy with science, the economy, and society. I would argue that in the context of the present-day paradigm of scientific rationality, where knowledge becomes value-laden and human-centred, science indeed speaks not only to the "mind" but also to the "heart" – a category long central to Ukrainian philosophy. Thus, higher education is called not merely to inform about global crises such as climate change or biodiversity loss, but to urge action toward their prevention. At the same time, it is critical to highlight the synergy of "mind, emotion, and will": an exclusive appeal to emotions risks being even more detrimental than an overemphasis on mind alone. As Christian Fuchs, a leading scholar of "digital humanism," noted, the contemporary challenge lies in widespread distrust of research, facts, and experts, as too many people tend to believe that truth is anything they can find emotionally comforting and ideologically acceptable for them (Fuchs, 2022).

This brings us back to the question of university models: is it possible to articulate a new model, either alternative or complementary to classical paradigms (such as the research or entrepreneurial university), that fully reflects contemporary trajectories of development and the transformation of higher education in synergy with broader societal change? In this regard, Guzmán-Valenzuela proposed the model of a *transformational university*. This concept calls not for the "third mission", but even for a fourth one: the cooperative creation of a sustainable world through the implementation and governance of socio-technical and ecological transformations within specific regions. As Guzmán-Valenzuela describes it: "The transformative university is a reflective and critical university that attempts to transform the world so as to live under democratic values of freedom, inclusion, equality and justice. It is a university that contends with the status quo and the establishment and that promotes within and outside its walls a more equal society in which citizens can express a diversity of visions and values. ...Such a university is open to all of society, offering higher education to everyone without restriction; it produces knowledge as a public good, serving the broadest possible constituency rather than commodifying it for profit..." (Guzmán-Valenzuela, 2016, p. 673–675).

While generally agreeing with this vision of a "fourth mission," I would still suggest that the transformational model should not be regarded as a separate type of institution alternative to the research or entrepreneurial university. Just as the "third mission" – focused on social responsibility and service – does not replace earlier missions of teaching and knowledge production but enriches them with a new ethical dimension and purpose, so too

the role of the university as an agent of social transformation is best understood not as a separate identity but as a qualitatively new aspect of the classical university.

Perhaps this idea is most compellingly expressed by Barnett, who proposes the term *ecological university* to describe the new paradigm. The ecological university emerges, quite dialectically, from the evolution of earlier models: the research university exists “in itself”, autonomous and dedicated to science alone, like the classical elite institutions of Britain (or the “small prestigious universities” some Ukrainian officials dream about); the entrepreneurial university exists “for itself”, focused on corporate service and utilitarian goals; whereas the ecological university exists “for others”, open to all and oriented toward the world as a whole.

Barnett stresses that the ecological university is not merely an aspiration, but the university of the 21st century, already present and emergent in our days: “The world may yet come to realize what the university has to offer it and to seek a wide interpretation of its place in the world... The ecological university is utopian, but it is a feasible utopia” (Barnett, 2018, p. 9–10). We can say that the very etymology of “university” with its connotations of universality and the Universe, reveals its mission as an institution responsible for the Earth, even the cosmos. The university has become a complex, interconnected institution, acquiring a form of social ontology. By virtue of its orientation toward knowledge, it has accumulated resources and power, enabling it to care for the ecosystems in which it is embedded: knowledge, institutions, people, economy, learning, culture, and the natural environment.

In any case, *ecological* here is just a conditional title: it does not limit the university to the environmentalist dimension, but appeals to a much broader philosophical sense. The contemporary university can and should position itself not merely as a centre of economic or social or even ecological development, but as a locus of human development, above all. In this perspective, I can argue that all the global challenges of today’s society – from the ecological crisis (if not catastrophe) to the escalation of armed conflicts, whose tragic manifestations we have long observed here in Ukraine – are rooted in a deficit of humanity and human qualities. These include the lack of intellectual foresight that prevents individuals from perceiving the long-term consequences of their actions and leads them, often unconsciously, to disregard the interests and needs of others, including future generations and the natural world; and the inability to move beyond binary categories of thought, which in turn results in a lack of tolerance – arguably the foundational principle of moral relations with representatives of other nations, countries, religions, political orientations, and so on.

It is in fact culture and cultural values that appear as the result and the product of university activities after all, and not just industry workers or new technologies. I would propose the following aspects of such a culture a today university should adhere itself to:

- *Academic culture* based on rational inquiry and organized scepticism, the ability to substantiate, and the skill to methodically, consistently, and reasonably investigate any issues;
- *Moral culture* as the foundation of any activity and relationships in a group, based on ethical and tolerant attitudes toward other people and their interests and views, and the ability to actively and responsibly participate in discourse;
- *Ecological culture* based on recognizing nature and the world as intrinsic values, having a broad cultural outlook, and the ability to consider long-term perspectives and consequences of activities;
- *Information culture* based on the ability to use and control new technologies and devices, including AI-based technologies and neural networks, with a conscious and balanced attitude toward such technologies as means of human activity.

CONCLUSIONS

We can now summarize the short study in the following way. In accordance with the trends of today’s transformations of science, economy, and society, a contemporary higher educa-

tion institution should be guided in its transformations by humanistic values for the development of both its own students and employees, and all people in general. A kind of “product of activity” of such a university is not just specialists (“first mission”) or new knowledge (“second mission”), and not even social changes or a knowledge society, with which its “third mission” can be identified – the product of activity is culture in the broad sense of the word and in all the diversity of its manifestations. That includes academic culture (the ability to conduct research and to follow rational inquiry and argumentation), moral culture (ethical and tolerant attitude towards others), ecological culture (recognition of the world as an intrinsic value and having the desire to preserve it), and information culture (the ability to use and control new technologies and devices).

At the same time, it is practically impossible to specify one universal model of development of a today's higher education institution, like the models of “research” or “entrepreneurial” university of the age of Modernity. A feature of the current situation is the poly-vector nature of development, and therefore “poly-modelity”, and not only and not so much in the sense of diversification of the country's institutions according to different models in terms of their ranking (especially according to the plans of the central executive authorities), but as a variety of models and directions that can serve as guidelines for each individual institution itself. It is possible, following the latest ideas of researchers, to call the new institution a “transformational university” or an “ecological university”, but such a name will in any case be conditional – given both the significant number of substantive characteristics that can be included in such a concept in accordance with different vectors of development, and the fundamental openness of the contemporary university with respect to any previously determined model.

REFERENCES

- Altbach, Ph. G. (2013). *The International Imperative in Higher Education*. Sense Publishers.
- Aronowitz, S. (2001). *The Knowledge Factory: Dismantling the corporate university and creating true higher learning*. Beacon Press.
- Barnett, R. (2018). *The Ecological University: A Feasible Utopia*. Routledge.
- Boni, A., & Gasper, D. (2012). Rethinking the quality of universities: How can human development thinking contribute? *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities*, 13(3), 451–470. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19452829.2012.679647>
- Boni, A., Lopez-Fogues, A., & Walker, M. (2016). Higher education and the post-2015 agenda: A contribution from the human development approach. *Journal of Global Ethics*, 12(1), 17–28. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449626.2016.1148757>
- Dürr, A., & Furer, J.-M. (2024). *The documentary Film “The End of Humanity”*. Schwarzfalter. <https://endofhumanity.film>
- Friedman, H. (2025). The education irony: when college degrees lead to unemployment, mindless thinking, debt, and despair. *Academia Mental Health and Well-Being*, 2(2), 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.20935/MHealthWellB7661>
- Fuchs, Ch. (2022). *Digital Humanism*. Emerald Publishing.
- Guzmán-Valenzuela, C. (2016) Unfolding the meaning of public(s) in universities: Toward the transformative university. *Higher Education*, 71(5), 667–679. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-015-9929-z>
- Hrabowski, F. A. (2024). *The Resilient University: How purpose and inclusion drive student success*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Kurbatov, S. V. (2014). *Phenomen universytetu v konteksti chasovykh ta prostorovykh vyvlykiv*. Universitets'ka Knyga.
- Lugovyi, V., Slyusarenko, O., & Talanova, Zh. (2024). Tirana EHEA Ministerial Conference: a posteriori analysis of gains and losses. *Education: Modern Discourses*, 7, 67–79. <https://doi.org/10.37472/2617-3107-2024-7-07>
- Mielkov, Yu., & Pinchuk, Ye. (2024). Humanist foundations for the transformations of higher education under supercomplexity. *Philosophy of Education*, 30(1), 90–109. <https://doi.org/10.31874/2309-1606-2024-30-1-6>

-
- Miller, J. P., Nigh, K., & Binder, M. (Eds.). (2019). *International Handbook of Holistic Education*. Routledge.
- UNESCO (2022). Beyond Limits. New Ways to Reinvent Higher Education. *Working document for the World Higher Education Conference*, 18–20 May 2022. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000389912>
- World Economic Forum (2025). *Future of Jobs Report 2025*. https://reports.weforum.org/docs/WEF_Future_of_Jobs_Report_2025.pdf
- Wynnycky, M. (2021). Vyshcha osvita v Ukraini: yakisni znannya, ale bez eruditsiyi. *Dzerkalo tyzhnya*, November 30th. <https://zn.ua/ukr/EDUCATION/vishcha-osvita-v-ukrajini-jakisni-znannja-ale-bez-eruditsiji.html>
- Wynnycky, M. (2022). Yak rozvyvaty osvitu pislya viyny. *Dzerkalo tyzhnya*, August 7th. <https://zn.ua/ukr/EDUCATION/jak-rozvivati-osvitu-pislja-vijni.html>

Received: 28 Sept 2025; Accepted: 31 Oct 2025; Published online: 29 Dec 2025