

## **The responsibilities of higher education: Community engagement towards social justice**

lecture on Tuesday 28/11, 18h30-20h30, by Prof. Bojana Ćulum Ilić

### **Why university-community engagement matters**

This lecture aims to offer a platform for presenting and discussing some of the key questions around the notion of higher education institutions' (HEIs) responsibilities in a contemporary world – *Why does university-community engagement matter in the first place? What and who is it for? Is there a cacophony of university missions?* I will try to (plausibly) claim that civic and community engagement should constitute a “new paradigm” in the development of the institutional mission of universities.

Universities are known as anchor institutions, meaning they have been here for a while, and they are here to stay. Throughout their history, HEIs have frequently been recognized for their role of serving society. Recently, HEIs have been associated more with cities and regions that dominate the economic, social, cultural and political life of countries. The multifaceted needs of these cities and regions increase the pressure on HEIs to participate as active members of their communities. Particularly in the context of the knowledge economy, universities hold tremendous potential for improving the economic, social and cultural 'status' of 'their' cities and regions.

But Universities/HEIs should not lose sight of compelling and immediate social issues in their surroundings and need to become aware and increasingly concerned with e.g. alleviating widespread poverty and homelessness, achieving universal primary and secondary education, improving public health, enabling locally controlled economic development, giving a voice to the marginalized, etc..

University-community engagement should have (at least) two broad purposes. First, it should unreservedly aim to mobilize and combine relevant university knowledge and community experience to address social disadvantage and exclusion, to promote the idea of a fair society and to actually act upon it, by engaging the platform of its own academic pillars - teaching and research, academics and students. Second, it should complement and collaborate with various community and non-academic actors, by focusing on all those areas of our daily lives that are of profound civic importance but which are typically seen as “non-economically productive”, such as caring, sustainable development, self-management of health and well-being, inclusion, equity, voluntary activity, the development of citizenship, etc.

If universities don't wake up and shake up to behave in a more socially responsible manner, they are facing the risk of becoming socially irrelevant. HEIs should develop their profile as civic universities by integrating local, regional and societal issues into their curricula and involving the local community in teaching and research projects. This is where service-learning pedagogy comes in as it integrates academically relevant service activities that address human and community needs into a course, so that students connect knowledge and theory to practice by combining service with meaningful and guided reflection in a structured and safe learning environment. We should educate our students to recognize pitfalls of our society, and to use their knowledge to address systemic issues and rising inequalities, whatever their chosen profession.

This is not a narrative that diminishes the value of university evergreen teaching and research. On the contrary, it is a narrative that reframes and reclaims the purpose of university teaching and research. It means to be a truly engaged and socially responsible actor in and for the 21st century! Can we imagine such a university? Can you?