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3 January 2006

J.V. Snellman – Herald of the Civilising University

An article by J.V. Snellman published in the newspaper *Saima* on 29 August 1844 on the need to expand an upper elementary school, founded in Kuopio in 1788, into a gymnasium or upper secondary school, reads as follows:

“... Finland’s first upper secondary school in Turku was founded just over two centuries ago, and went on to become our national university. This clear demonstration of the humble origins of civilization kindles similar aspirations for the progress of the institution now inaugurated, perhaps to be fulfilled in two centuries or somewhat earlier... If the Finnish population continues to grow as rapidly as in the last one hundred years, in two centuries the number of inhabitants in Savo and Karelia alone will represent almost double the current, national census. And yet, this country had a university when its population was only a third of what it is today. With the appetite and need to learn increasing day by day, most European countries agreeing that education is a matter of national survival. For this reason, these nations now [in the 1840s] seek educational provision fit to meet the needs of our time.”

This text was written by J.V. Snellman during his second year in Kuopio, following his own university studies, a lectureship and active participation in student activities. Hence, he possessed in-depth knowledge of universities, their workings and significance. His studies in Stockholm and Tübingen also remained fresh in his memory, alongside visits to many of the cradles of European civilisation.

J.V. Snellman was an international figure, his work abroad somewhat distancing him from Finnish affairs, thus enabling his deeper engagement in philosophical and political scientific thinking. This reinforced his vision of education as the cornerstone of society and a national barometer. It was on this basis that he developed his views on the promotion of the Finnish language, whose magnificent fruition is marked by his 100th anniversary, since one hundred years ago the mass finnicisation of surnames took place.

Thus, Snellman envisaged the future need to expand Finland’s university system, even in the eastern provinces of Savo and Karelia, regarding this as the logical corollary to upper secondary school proliferation, which created equal opportunities for all. The egalitarian provision of education and culture comprised a major factor in such thinking.

What would the hero of our bicentenary celebrations think of today’s nationwide Finnish university system? Young people can now educate themselves on an equal basis, even in financial terms, by and large, to a level corresponding to their abilities and interests. The secrets of the arts and sciences lie open before our scholars, who can reach the pinnacle of the teaching and research world. Our universities constitute the flagships of our internationality, their day-to-day work crossing national boundaries.

This would surely have delighted Snellman, perhaps exceeding his wildest dreams. On the other hand, even in 1840 he was already concerned about the spirit of the universities.

J.V. Snellman: On University Studies, Stockholm 1840:

“We are now approaching the most delicate phase in the present era of university education. Namely, how many young men, upon leaving university, go forth with convictions resting on their research and studies, which they are prepared to fight for? Indeed, how many even feel the need for such convictions, or seek them? On the contrary, the spark lit at the beginning of university studies, the desire for knowledge and ardour for what is right, often dies in a young man before he leaves university.”

Snellman revisits this concern upon being appointed to a chair, in his inaugural lecture of 1856: “... we should remind our students that love of knowledge is no more than lip service without the desire and capability for self-sacrifice. ... Similarly, love of one’s fatherland requires more than mere sentiment, however ardently the young heart beats under its thrall. Here too, work and self-sacrifice have no substitute.”

Thus, Snellman’s anxieties reflect those of parents throughout history, in pondering students’ commitment to their studies and education. This concern has arisen once again in debates held during the last decade, even involving Ministry of Education workgroups and mulling over delays in completing degrees, time wasted in the attempt to attain several degrees at once, the simultaneous reservation of multiple study entitlements and so forth. The main concerns are now financial waste and satisfying labour market requirements, whereas Snellman took the broader view of working for the good of the nation.

This issue comes to life in the light of various solutions, the current one perhaps taking universities down the path towards becoming academic vocational schools, preparing graduates for the professions. In terms of course content, the significance of an all-round, humanist and philosophical education is decreasing. While it is a moot point in the academies, we may ask whether studying to a fixed schedule leaves time for the proper attainment of a cultivated mind.

However, Snellman remains true to his convictions, stating the following in his memorandum to the Governor General in December 1856, on the intended closure of the university:

“It is the principal task of the University of Finland to bring the arts and sciences to our people, a task which is only more pressing the further behind Europe’s civilised nations we are.”

He made a similar statement to the University Council on the same issue, referring to proposals to replace universities with vocational institutes:

“If the state confined itself to training civil servants, it would still have to attend to the arts and sciences and their application. Where would we truly educate our young? ... traditional, specialist knowledge is not enough to make a scholar. ... A universal, humanist education still merits our respect as the perennial seedbed of law-abiding, faithful citizens. Study cause and effect within the intellectual sphere, and you will acknowledge and demand the continuous progress being made therein...”

Snellman concludes with the following:

“If these reforms deprive us of our university, we will be sacrificing all we have for the unknown, at the price (at least for this writer) of our nation’s civil degeneration.”

Thus, Snellman gives no ground on the question of the liberal education provided by the traditional university model, demanding that no current exigencies be allowed to threaten this centuries old approach. Snellman prized raising national educational levels, and the expansion of the system, above all else. Of course, this had implications fundamental to his notion of a civil society.

For students, Snellman stresses the difference between school and university, the latter placing additional obligations on students, in these words to the Ostrobothnian Students' Association in 1875:

The transition from school to university is ... "that from duress to freedom. - At school, you are obliged to complete your homework and abide by school rules, whereas university gives one the freedom to study, both in terms of subject choice and their order and timing. Correspondingly, you can also, within certain limits, decide on your way of life."

Snellman holds duty and sacrifice on a par with freedom, i.e. taking responsibility for one's education and cultivation.

"... the student who draws the strength for arduous, self-sacrificing labour from love of his country, thus rising to the obligations of his position in society, will soon feel the moral and rational conviction which form the bedrock of a manhood benefiting both country and humanity in general. As the flower of our nation, these students are also its hope for the future."

The times have changed. Our independence is now secure, our universities are at the global cutting edge, our economy is strong, our businesses prospering, our economic policy in good hands and we are more strongly integrated into Europe than ever before. Are Snellman's ideas behind the times? Can we lay them aside following this celebration?

Much remains to be done in Finnish society. Our country is positively drowning in future and innovation strategies and reports, reflecting our uncertainty about the future, about our competitiveness, about the viability of the welfare state, and about employment and labour shortages.

In Snellman's time, civilisation was often a synonym for cultivation, being well-read. But it also means much more, such as the ability to manage holistically, being innovative, having social skills and moral rectitude. This broader sense of the word gives us cause for concern, since we too often think of the education of our people in terms of cold and clinical erudition. Snellman might have worried about this, pondering the adverse effect of this notion on the family and parenthood.

He would most certainly have been worried by the controls being imposed on university education. On the other hand, as a financial thinker, he would have understood the realities of university finances and the thankless task facing officials and faculty in eking out their public funding. Nowadays, such strictures also apply to the educational sector and universities.

Universities are now viewed as national sources of innovation and economic competitiveness, while their regional importance is also greater than during Snellman's lifetime, often in ways which differ greatly to Snellman's notion of regional and social equality. Universities are regional dynamos, but must also take their place among the top-class research and educational institutions of the world.

The role of our universities requires clarification. Quite rightly, their fundamental duties have been extended to a regional and social role as well as pursuing research and teaching. While national guidance of universities is often viewed as contradictory to local needs, the regions often expect too much of their universities in terms of regional development. Thus, our universities shuttle back and forth between taking advantage of national opportunities and being regional players, should the latter conform with their own strategies and the required resources be supplied by the region. This is some balancing act.

If we accept the above criteria for regional influence as a basis – i.e. world class teaching and research, we can create what is perhaps a less controversial, more balanced and developed model

for universities, based on partnership. Would new models be feasible, within the limited company ownership framework recently permitted to universities? Could we establish regional units jointly owned and managed by the city and university to handle critical areas?

We often marvel at our failure to create more innovative products, investment flows and stronger foundations for our welfare state, based on our innovativeness and skills, given that our country is ranked top of the world in competitiveness surveys and educational comparisons. Could part of the solution lie in the abovementioned new, more balanced commitment to a partnership that pays closer attention to regional potential?

The ambitious visions of the nation's future economic development which characterised Snellman's age have given way to a need to consider the whole world's population trends, food supply and the environment. However, civilisation knows no such bounds, since it creates well-being and the intellectual prerequisites for the good life. Our universities must inspire our young to roam within these unlimited vistas, which I daresay will also yield economic benefits.

Could the answer therefore be sought in the zeal, enthusiasm and self-sacrificing spirit of the traditional university model, in the personal acquisition of education and its application? Could Snellman's message still be relevant? Perhaps we should go back to basics, holding cultivation, freedom of thought, a generalist approach and the accompanying mental labours in a new, or perhaps their old, esteem.

I would like to conclude with my conviction that an internationally successful university with regional influence and providing inspiring teaching can be, and should be, housed under a single roof, such as that of the University of Kuopio.