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POSTHUMANISM – AN EMERGING PARADIGM SHIFT IN HIGHER EDUCATION?

T. Konst

Turku University of Applied Sciences (FINLAND)

Abstract

In addition to COVID-19, we are facing huge challenges such as climate change, loss of biodiversity, and scarcity of natural resources and food supply. The pandemic has accomplished a lot of discussion, research and practical solutions and actions in education. However, sustainability crisis and ecological challenges do not seem to have a similar impact on education development, although the consequences of these issues can be overwhelming in relation to the current pandemic. Sustainable development is mentioned in the objectives of educational policies in Europe generally, but it is not detectable in higher education and its everyday actions. The research shows that sustainable development is not visible in higher education or it is mentioned in general objectives but not in the practices or contents of the studies

Posthumanism means seeing human beings as a part of nature and nature must be considered in all actions; human beings have no right to destroy nature or set themselves above it in ethical considerations. The posthumanistic approach can easily be justified from ethical, environmental, economic, health and well-being, and equality viewpoints, and thus it should not be neglected in educational discussion and education development. Curricula in higher education have a significant role both conceptually and politically to forward values, attitudes and ways of thinking. However, the approaches in education are traditionally very human-centric, ignoring posthumanistic viewpoints. The attitudes and ways of living, which are harmful for the climate and nature, are transferred from not only families to children but also from education. Schools and educational institutions educate children and young people according to working life needs and expectations, which are usually based on market economy requirements. This is why the educational system needs reforming and a paradigm shift.

In this article, we discuss why posthumanistic viewpoint is needed in higher education and what does it mean in practice. The planet can survive without us, but we cannot survive without the planet.

Keywords: Posthumanism, higher education, education development, sustainable development, curriculum.

1 INTRODUCTION

In the current situation, we are facing huge challenges. The pandemic caused by Covid-19 virus seems to lead the discussion, but there are even bigger threats just behind the corner, such as climate change, loss of biodiversity, and scarcity of natural resources and food supply. The pandemic has accomplished a lot of research and practical solutions and actions in society and in education too. However, sustainability crisis and ecological challenges do not seem to have a similar impact on education development, although the consequences of these issues can be overwhelming in relation to the current pandemic. If we are not able to solve sustainability crisis and climate change, we will most certainly face pandemics also in the future. There is evidence that increasing human pressure on the natural environment may drive epidemic emergence. Strengthening the protection of the natural environment, biodiversity and wildlife, and a stepwise process of shutdown of intensive livestock farming, should reduce the risks of future outbreaks of other new diseases. The same actions can remarkably help in mitigating the climate change and solving sustainability crisis.

Education plays a significant role here. It must react on this challenge and bring sustainable development both to studies and to everyday actions. Sustainable development is mentioned in the objectives of educational policies in Europe generally, but it is not detectable in higher education and its everyday actions. The research shows that sustainable development is not visible in higher education, or it is mentioned in general objectives, but not in the practices or contents of the studies ([1], [2], [3], [4]). Themes such as climate change or sustainable development have not been common either in the educational discussion on future competences and life-long learning. However, education should be able to provide knowledge and skills to solve these questions. ([5], [6], [7]).

In this article, we discuss why a paradigm shift and redesign of educational thinking towards posthumanistic approach is needed especially in higher education, and what does it mean in practice. The research methodology focuses on literature review, document analyses and participatory observation. The documents used consist of authentic documents, such as, the documents and research reports about education development on national (Finnish) and European level, and educational policy papers and initiatives in Finland and in Europe, and curricula in Finnish higher education institutions.

2 SIGNIFICANCE OF POSTHUMANISM

Educational discussion in higher education has traditionally been focused on humanism ([8], [9]). Posthumanistic thinking challenges traditional humanism, though tends rather than refutation to update it. Posthumanism is based on humanism, but it differs from it by relocating human beings back to being one of the natural species and rejecting all claims based on anthropocentric dominance. Thus, new perspectives produced by posthumanism attempt to build a more favorable image of reality for different forms of life. Posthumanism is not an unambiguous concept, and there are several different approaches and attempts to define it. Sometimes it is connected to transhumanism, achieved through the application of technology in order to expand human capabilities. In this article, we define posthumanism as follows: posthumanism means seeing human beings as a part of nature and nature must be considered in all actions; human beings have no right to destroy nature or set themselves above it in ethical considerations. ([8], [9], [10]). Posthumanistic views relate mainly to relationships between humans, other animals and nature, and pursue a world that would disconnect from the so-called speciesism (defining the value or rights of beings on the basis of the species one belongs to). Still posthumanistic theories focus on the assumption of human specificity. While cultural norms are criticized, man nevertheless defines moral meanings for other beings. So, for example, the equality of animals and humans is justified by the ability of other animals to experience emotions, to behave morally, and to form communities resembling our own ([11]).

The posthumanistic approach can be justified from ethical, environmental, economic, health and well-being, and equality viewpoints, and thus it should not be neglected in educational discussion and education development. However, the approaches in education are traditionally very human-centric, ignoring posthumanistic viewpoints. The attitudes and ways of living, which are harmful for the climate and nature, are transferred from not only families to children but also from education. Schools and educational institutions educate children and young people according to working life needs and expectations, which are usually based on market economy requirements ([12], [5]).

Why is posthumanism needed especially in higher education? There is simply no longer time to rely on early childhood education and primary education developing awareness, skills and ways of thinking and acting, and ensuring that the future generations are more responsible and make more sustainable decisions. We must act now to slow down the climate change and loss of biodiversity, and therefore students in higher education, the actors and decision-makers in societies in near future, play a key role on how to make the required changes. In practice this means focusing on posthumanistic values and incorporating them to the aims of all education and ensuring that all study fields must be able to generate attitudes and competences to act towards a more sustainable future.

In the transformation of higher education and values there, concrete actions are important. Values do not create changes in policies automatically; rather, values are formed only through tangible actions. Implementing posthumanistic values turned into practices can mean, for example, that when students get knowledge and skills and understanding in sustainability issues and are encouraged to solve authentic problems in multidisciplinary learning environments, their motivation, empowerment and agency to act is strengthened. The outcomes generated by this kind of learning can help to generate new technical, social and economic solutions constraining climate change and protecting the nature, novel food innovations, innovations improving public health etc.

3 TOWARDS POSTHUMANISM IN EDUCATION

The key question is how we can educate people for transformation towards a sustainable future. This requires transformative learning, which involves experiencing a deep and structural shift in the basic premises of thought, feelings and actions, a shift of consciousness, which permanently alters our way of being in the world ([13]). Transformative learning involves having a holistic view seeing numerous alternatives and restructuring basic assumptions enabling a different way of seeing the world,

questioning the current lifestyle and way of actions. Transformative learning is challenging, but it is encouraging to remember those numerous research results on that satisfaction and happiness are not generated by material and continuous growth of consumption but by meaningful work, collaboration and participation, and social relationships.

Transformative learning is needed not only among students, it concerns us all. In higher education, this means that changes in the mindset of university staff and students are required, in other words efforts to cultivate personal growth and develop so called growth mindset. A growth mindset is necessary in order to recognize opportunities for improvement, to believe that one can successfully improve and that one has the ability to make changes take place. ([14], [15]). In practice this means that the motivation to change must be brought into discussion e.g. on climate change, need to decrease animal-based food supply, the scarcity of clean water, the extinction of species, environmental problems, the mutual dependency of sustainable development goals (Agenda 2030), so heavily that people become motivated to change their behaviour. However, this must be implemented in such a way that it does not unfreeze people to act or makes them close their eyes but empowering them to feel that they are able to make changes which really matter.

Usually it takes a long time to develop attitudes and ways of thinking. However, transformative learning may be impressive even after a shorter time period when implemented in a right way. In a comprehensive study published by the science publication *Cognition* ([16]) it was shown that by bringing ethics briefly as a part of studies, significant changes in the learners' conduct can be obtained. In this example, a short study period of ethics of the meat eating was provided for a vast number of students. The study period was carried out so that the students read one article, participated in the discussion which lasted for an hour, and watched an optional video about intensive animal farming. The contents of the article gave a few simple moral arguments: It is wrong to cause suffering without a good reason; the meat industry causes huge suffering for the animals; the plant-based diet is healthy for humans; and the taste of meat is not a sufficient justification to cause suffering so the meat eating should be given up. The researchers perceived a surprisingly big dropping in the students' meat consumption after having followed it for several weeks. This example is an encouraging example that it is possible to influence the learners' actions surprisingly easily with even short ethics studies.

Staff training plays a key role in moving towards posthumanism in higher education. It is necessary to provide training for the university staff and especially include discussion on posthumanism in teacher education and further training. Teachers cannot provide knowledge, skills and attitudes based on posthumanism if they do not have them themselves. The teaching staff needs to know facts about sustainable development, understand the systemic nature of climate change, get acquainted with animal research results on animal consciousness and treatment in current intensive livestock farming etc. The values and competences of teaching staff can only be changed with new information and further training but as stated earlier it is also needed time and discussion on why the changes are necessary.

Posthumanism has been quite invisible also in education research and curriculum studies. However, curricula have a significant role both conceptually and politically to forward values, attitudes and thinking models. Currently schools and higher education institutions too are expected to respond to the social and economic needs of society by facilitating graduate employability, contributing to economic growth and development, assisting innovation, encouraging entrepreneurship and globalization etc. The curricula aim to generate competences in order to answer to these expectations. However, the curricula usually ignore or neglect the competences needed to solve problems such as sustainability crisis, climate change, or loss of biodiversity. In other words, the values and mindsets behind curricula are not posthumanistic although the sustainable future requires the competences to answer to these challenges. The objectives of the curriculum should ensure that students get the knowledge, skills and attitudes to participate in creation of a sustainable future. In contents, the curriculum could incorporate basic knowledge of sustainable development in studies, and to ensure the impact this should be done in all study fields or disciplines.

Curriculum development to the direction of sustainable future involves changes in curricula content, methods, assessment, and in staff and student involvement. The content should be able to provide the knowledge and skills for sustainable development. In addition, the methods by which the content is conducted should support learning. The content and methods together can guide learners in their own decision-making and critical thinking, and to make them aware of the consequences that their decisions may have. The assessment guides learning, and therefore criteria and methods for the

assessment need reconsideration too. With involvement it is referred to the active role and participation of students and staff.

A posthumanistic approach is a strategic choice and as its best, it represents a philosophy that permeates the whole organization and is visible in all activities. Managing real changes in an educational institution requires strong commitment from the management as well as strategic decision-making. Changing the ways of thinking and acting is a complicated task that has to be initiated by the top management ([17], [3]). When earlier, often traditional ways of action and thinking are questioned, making changes requires that many operations must be involved. It is important to create an open and permissive atmosphere, forums where people can meet and learn to from each other, and space for criticism and for innovative and solution-oriented thinking as well. Open discussion can help in determining how to conduct change without people feeling threat, because it can help people to see new perspectives and viewpoints and to consider new alternatives without being made to feel that that they have acted somehow in wrong ways earlier ([18]).

Neither students can be left to cope by themselves without having special emphasis put on equipping them with all the essential competences needed. They need to be able to develop competences forming the basis for their own professional or study-field specific expertise, as well as generic competences required at future work, such as having problem-solving and critical thinking skills, a growth mindset, understanding of sustainable development goals and how they are interconnected, and all these being based on posthumanistic values that make their professional expertise and competences sustainable, successful and durable.

4 CONCLUSIONS

Education is the key if we want to respond to the challenges of climate change and sustainability crisis and build a society that is resilient and innovative. Higher education institutions have the opportunity and obligation to serve as value leaders and change makers towards a sustainable future. The desired sustainable changes in societies will be achieved through co-operation and open interaction, through measures by individuals, communities and the legislative and administrative parties together. By bringing posthumanism to educational discussion and research, and by renewing structures, managerial approaches and curriculum work in education, we can get new relevant tools with which to build a sustainable society and future for all species.

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