Places of Engagement

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Introduction

Rob van der Vaart and Armand Heijnen

Some universities offer graduate programmes in Futures Studies: the University of Turku in Finland, the University of Stellenbosch in South Africa, or Tamkang University in Taiwan, just to mention a few. The University of Houston has an MSc course in Foresight. Aarhus University in Denmark offers Corporate Foresight at the graduate level. And there is much more. But programmes in futures studies are certainly not mainstream in the higher education landscape. Although the field has a low profile in academia, the domain of Futures Studies has many of the assets of any accepted field of knowledge: journals, conferences, professional organizations, and, more importantly, a conceptual basis and research methods (see, for example, the classical texts by Wendell Bell 1996). Futurists speak about possible, probable, and preferable futures; engage in forecasting and trend analysis as well as in scenario design and ‘backcasting’; or study the worldviews and assumptions underlying people’s images about futures. Maybe it is a handicap for the development of their field that there is so much ‘pop futurism’ around — popularized writing about the future of practically everything, from work to sex and from leisure to school — not to mention Hollywood science fiction or the gurus of utopian vistas of green, technologically advanced or otherwise healthy and happy futures.

This made it all the more courageous of Utrecht University’s vice-chancellor Bert van der Zwaan to dive into the future and write his book Higher Education in 2040 — A Global Approach (2017). There is always the risk when making a book about the future of becoming the victim of prejudice and being accused of pop futurism, preaching, bias, utopianism, or moving beyond the requirements of academic rigour. But Van der Zwaan designed his book in such a way that all such criticism would be unjustified. He presents a thorough analysis of societal trends that have an
impact on higher education: trends in the global economy and in politics, such as the global shift and a changing balance between state and market in our current neoliberal climate; technological trends, in particular the rise of information technologies and their multiple effects on education; social trends such as polarization and increased civic disengagement. He sketches the effects of such trends that are already visible in higher education and makes reasoned guesses about what will happen next when these trends continue to make an impact. He does not design scenarios of different possible futures depending on how trends will evolve in the coming decades. In our view, he remains close to the probable future and gives his vision of how to keep the probable future situation of universities as close as possible to the preferable situation of universities: as essential and preferred places of learning — in the interaction with students, in research, and in community engagement. Van der Zwaan believes that this will require drastic changes that involve radically diversifying higher education systems with flexible offerings of programmes and courses including provisions for lifelong learning, giving a central place to societal needs in research and study programmes, developing new types of coalitions with external partners, offering a campus experience that is relevant for the student’s personal development, making a difference in the city or region where the institution is located, et cetera. All this is not only based on personal experience and literature but also on many interviews conducted with peers and other higher education specialists in Europe, North America, Asia, and Africa.

Van der Zwaan’s contribution to our thinking about the future of higher education is inspiring and thought-provoking, but we should keep in mind that the diversity of voices and visions with regard to this topic is enormous, as is the case for any issue related to the future. Discussion requires a diversity of perspectives and visions, and therefore we will give a few recent examples of publications and events that have a different focus than the one in Van der Zwaan’s book. To begin with, the New York Times sponsored a Higher Ed Leaders Forum in June 2016, which was
attended by many academic leaders from the United States.¹ The topic was the future of higher education. The participants were extremely worried about the problem cluster of affordability, access, equality, and completion. This cluster of money-related issues dominated the discussion completely, followed by the issue of digitalization and how it revolutionizes thinking about the classroom experience. The views of the participants at this forum on the future of higher education were dominated, no doubt, by the desire to obtain more substantial government funding. Preferred futures reflect how one is situated geographically, politically, and culturally.

The second example is a special article in the 2015 Christmas edition of *Times Higher Education*, in which seven academics — from vice-chancellors to lecturers and researchers — gave their ideas about the university in 2030.² The visions presented in this article could not be more diverse. One author claims that because of computerization and rapid progress in artificial intelligence, very soon there might be few jobs left that require proof of academic ability. And with no students to teach, universities would have no future. Other contributors predict that technology will ‘land’ in universities in productive ways but not change anything substantial, or that lectures and seminars will again become key because they help to sharpen analytical skills — the skills needed most in the ever-changing labour market. A fourth contributor believes that devices will replace academic faculty, campuses will disappear, and year-round learning will replace the traditional academic calendar with its semesters. All seven contributors provide arguments and sources that underpin their vision. All ideas about higher education futures can be made plausible to an extent through the art of selecting relevant trends or sources. It is not important whether or not such futures are

realistic or will ever materialize. Their function is to stimulate our imagination and to make us think about our own preferences, and what we should do to realize them.

As a third example, we could look at relatively recent scenario studies about the future of higher education. Scenario studies start from the observation that societal trends may develop in different directions. The four OECD scenarios for future higher education, developed around 2010, are a good example. Globalization as a trend might stabilize or intensify in a direction of even more openness, flexibility, marketization, and global orientation. But it is equally imaginable that so-called de-globalization will gain momentum in more and more sectors, resulting in an increased focus on the national or regional context and lower levels of openness. A related but separate question is how nation-states relate to each other or how institutions function together: in a competitive mode or rather in a collaborative mode. If we take these two dimensions of global versus national and competition versus collaboration and plot them on two axes, we would get a matrix with four very different scenarios of the future of higher education. One of the OECD scenarios is ‘Higher Education Inc.’ (global outlook, competition) and another one is ‘Serving Local Communities’ (national, collaboration). The point here is that different assumptions lead to different conditions, opportunities, and threats for higher education institutions and systems. And this implies that we should always imagine futures in the plural and never a ‘fixed’ future that we are supposed to prepare for.

As a final element of the wider debate on the future of higher education, we would like to point out some of the recent books about the subject that give additional perspective and detail to some of the elements discussed by Van der Zwaan. In his book,

4 The term deglobalization is not only in fashion in comments about Trump’s ‘America First’ agenda but a concept that has been in use in academic studies for almost a decade now. See, for example, the recent article by Peter van Bergeijk.
Van der Zwaan pays much attention to geographical variations in the current state of affairs and future perspectives of universities. He shows how trends and perspectives in higher education are partially different in various parts of the world, as a function of political, economic, or demographic conditions. Van der Zwaan's colleague at the University of Melbourne, Glyn Davis, focused on the specific case of Australia in his book *The Australian Idea of a University* (2017). He would agree with Van der Zwaan that radical diversification of the higher education system is urgently needed, along with experimentation and innovation, in order to survive in a context of fierce global competition from public as well as private providers of higher learning, both within and outside universities. Van der Zwaan also writes extensively about Asia. His observations about Asian universities and about how their mission and practices are embedded in the public and business interests of their respective national states are elaborated in much more detail in the 2017 book *Envisioning the Asian New Flagship University* by John Aubrey Douglass and John Hawkins.

This brief excursion has hopefully demonstrated that there is a significant amount of thinking and debate about the future of higher education and that Van der Zwaan's study is part and parcel of a much wider phenomenon of keen interest in and concern among key actors about future pathways for higher education institutions. The reason might be that there are so many discontinuities — in the sense of Peter Drucker's famous book *The Age of Discontinuity* (1969) — in today's world that business as usual is no longer an option. The debate about future directions for higher education is urgent and needs to be continued, particularly for the alignment of short-term and medium-term priorities and decision — such as in universities' strategic plans — with longer-term horizons. Here we come to the *raison d'être* for this volume of essays. At the end of March 2018, Bert van der Zwaan stepped down as Rector Magnificus (vice-chancellor) of Utrecht University. His 2017 book *Higher Education in 2040* has been received well and discussed intensely both within Utrecht University and beyond. Conversations with Bert van der Zwaan
had made clear that he was not finished with the subject after the book was published but was eager to continue the debate. All this gave some key members of his staff — the university's Secretary-General Leon van de Zande and the Director of the Academic Affairs office Hans de Jonge — the idea that a book with reflections on *Higher Education in 2040* by academics at home as well as abroad might be a very welcome farewell gift for the departing vice-chancellor. The two initiators asked us, the editors of this volume, to develop the idea, and this book is the result.

We identified potential contributors to this collection of essays on the basis of the list of international experts who were interviewed by Bert van der Zwaan for his book, taking into account a fair geographical distribution and adding a focus on Dutch colleagues. Academic leaders and other key players in higher education in Asia, North America, Africa, and Europe (outside the Netherlands) wrote nine of the twenty essays in this volume. Among them are the (former) presidents or vice-chancellors of New York University, the University of Arizona, Nanyang Technological University in Singapore, the University of Strasburg, Helsinki University, plus other academic leaders from the University of Stellenbosch, National University Singapore, University College London, and the League of European Research Universities. Eleven essays were written by Dutch colleagues: three from sister institutions in the country, four from relevant Dutch institutions (the current and former presidents of the Dutch National Students Association, the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences, and the Association of Universities in the Netherlands), and four from within Utrecht University. We gave all contributors a very open assignment: to write a short essay focusing on any aspect — to be chosen by the author — of the future of higher education, preferably related to a section, point of view, or theme from Van der Zwaan's book. The result is a mosaic of themes and points of view, all of which represent valuable angles for thinking about higher education futures.

Van der Zwaan devoted the seven chapters of Part 3 of his book to ‘Contours of the university of the future’. In this volume
we have organized the twenty essays under five broad themes, which are loosely related to some of the chapters of Part 3 of Van der Zwaan’s book. The first three essays offer ‘Reflections on the core values of the university’. Sijbolt Noorda discusses autonomy, Alain Beretz focuses on the pursuit of excellence, and Carel Stolker writes about the freedom of speech. All three argue that these values are contested in practice. They contextualize the values by putting them in the perspective of current and future pressures that universities are facing or by confronting them with other — sometimes seemingly conflicting — values.

The next four essays are organized under the heading ‘Reflections on core tasks’. James Kennedy focuses on the question of learning outcomes: what ought we to wish from university graduates? The student perspective comes next: Rhea van der Dong, president of a national Dutch student organization, presents some of her ideas about the student in 2040. Frank Miedema’s essay is about research. The focus is on medical research but the issue is, of course, more general: to whom are we answering? To a closed academic community, or to societal needs? Joop Schippers writes about universities’ role in lifelong learning, which he argues will become more important in the near future due to changes in the labour market.

Part 3 of this volume has four essays that focus specifically on learning and teaching and the changes that will be required in the coming decades. José van Dijck offers some thoughts about how universities should diversify the menu of what they offer to their students. Jukka Kola and Sari Lindblom remind us of the fact that teaching and learning in research-intensive universities should be based on what we know from research about effective learning and teaching practices. Dilly Fung rethinks the curriculum of university programmes in the light of rapid changes in student characteristics, knowledge development, and societal context. Anka Mulder focuses on information technology and asks how universities could and should be (or if necessary become) communities of learners in the digital age.

Part 4 of the book has four essays that together demonstrate the key importance of geography and geographical variation in higher
education systems. John Sexton describes New York University's efforts to become a real global player, a global network university. Bertil Andersson, positioned in Singapore, sketches the rise of Asia in academia. Peter Vale offers his thoughts on the South African university and what he believes should be the specific characteristics of such a university given local conditions. Kurt Deketelaere takes us on a tour through the highly institutionalized European research and education landscape.

Finally, Part 5 focuses on current and future issues of higher education governance or, in Michael Crow’s words, institutional logic. Michael Crow and his co-authors discuss ‘academic enterprise’ as a new institutional logic for public universities, particularly in the American context. Barbara Baarsma writes about the flexible labour market, the emergence of private as well as public providers of postgraduate training for lifelong learning, and how universities should relate to this context. Huang Hoon Chng, speaking from the Singapore context, believes that universities as institutions do not necessarily have to choose between being national economic assets and being independent centres of learning and discovery; in her opinion, the two can be combined. Karl Dittrich shows how good intentions turned into bad practices in his essay about quality assurance, and he indicates how the situation could be improved. Finally, Leen Dorsman highlights a typically Dutch aspect of institutional logic or rather the lack of it: the dual higher education system with research universities and universities of applied science.

One thing that shines through in all these essays is that the authors are passionate about their institutions or organizations and about the changes they believe should be made into the future. Engagement is an ingredient in all the contributions: engagement with students, with discovery, with the needs of our societies, with the future, and with the key role of higher education institutions in the future. That is why we chose the title ‘Places of Engagement’. We hope that all the engagement and expertise of this collection of essays will not only please our departing vice-chancellor Bert van der Zwaan but also inspire
many others who reflect on and discuss the future of higher education.

Bibliography


