Places of Engagement

Heijnen, Armand, van der Vaart, Armand

Published by Amsterdam University Press

Heijnen, Armand and Armand van der Vaart.
Amsterdam University Press, 2018.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/76703.

⇒ For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/76703

🔗 For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2654997
The student in 2040

Rhea van der Dong

Looking into the future is something scientists have yet to figure out how to do. What we can do is make educated guesses about what the future will look like. This is what Bert van der Zwaan did in his book *Higher Education in 2040*. He put a lot of research and knowledge in a crystal ball and asked himself: what would higher education look like in 2040? Considering all the changes that universities have gone through in the past centuries and the speed at which things are changing in our century, this is an intriguing question. What does the future have in store for us? In his book, Van der Zwaan tries to give some answers to this question. He mentions important challenges that universities are facing, the most important one being the decline in government funding. He also suggests some solutions to these challenges — solutions that can have a big impact on higher education, our society, and students. This last group is the one that intrigues me. When I fill my crystal ball with what I know about students and investigate 2040, what do I see? What will the future of students look like? Just like everybody else, I am not able to predict the future. But like Van der Zwaan, I can make some educated guesses. Looking into my crystal ball, I see that students face at least two threats, which I would like to call meteorites. I call them this because these threats are serious and near but not yet definite. Parts of it might have already reached us, but they could also burn up completely on their way towards us. If our atmosphere is thick enough, these meteorites will not reach us. But if we don’t build an atmosphere thick enough, I am afraid that by 2040 we will be hit. And then our universities could be populated by at least the following two types of students: the privileged student and the burned-out student.

*The privileged student.* In my opinion, one of the main threats to higher education is its lack of accessibility. Some people might
feel that this is an outdated threat. They will point to all the efforts of recent decades to make our system of higher education accessible to not just the children of doctors and dentists but also those of bakers and builders. I certainly realize that our (Dutch) system is significantly more accessible than it was fifty years ago, and I am proud of that. And that is exactly why I regard what is happening in our decade with fear. My national student organization observes many developments that can have a negative impact on the accessibility of higher education in the Netherlands. What are these developments that threaten accessibility? Looking at individual policy measures, these may not seem to be extremely alarming or problematic. From the perspective of a civil servant at the ministry of education, or in a university board meeting, the negative effect of individual new measures might seem minor and surmountable. But for the people who are facing the full package of recent policy changes, the effects are substantial. Students do not face just one hurdle but many different ones.

Let us take a closer look at these hurdles. The biggest one is a financial one. A few years ago, the Dutch government dramatically cut back its financial support for students. Instead of receiving a monthly scholarship payment from the government, students must now take out a big loan to be able to study. For most of the students, this does not have to be a problem, but for some students it is.\(^1\) Another issue is the growing tendency to make higher education selectively accessible, something that has also been advocated by Van der Zwaan. Again, this may not pose problems for many students, but it does for those same students for whom the financial hurdle is an issue.\(^2\) The last challenge I will mention here has to do with the growing internationalization of higher education. I am a proponent of sensible internationalization, but I find it painful to see that study abroad is often out of reach for

\(^1\) See Anja van den Broek et al. (2017) p. 170.
those same students who slip through the cracks when it comes to the financial and selection hurdles.\textsuperscript{3}

Our system of higher education is accessible to most students but contains hurdles for different potential student groups: students with parents who did not study themselves, students with an immigrant background, students with disabilities, and students with limited financial means. From a distance, the system might look accessible and the hurdles might seem to be solvable, but when we look at it through the eyes of these student groups, it can be a hell of a job to get in and complete a study successfully. The result of this — the erosion of equal opportunity and the squandering of talent — should be unacceptable to all of us. I am afraid that these hurdles will only grow bigger in the years ahead. Unfortunately, most of the solutions suggested for the decline in government funding affect the accessibility of our education in a negative way. This is a threat we must take seriously, because otherwise in 2040 we will have gone back in time and our universities will be populated once again by a very select group of privileged students.

\textit{The burned-out student.} The second threat is one that is already approaching and is nearly upon us. For years, politicians and higher education leaders have been complaining about the lack of ambition and the lax attitude of Dutch students.\textsuperscript{4} If we were to translate some of the policy texts into common language, it would boil down to this: students were lazy. What I see around me right now is something completely different. I see students who are experiencing an enormous amount of pressure: pressure to perform at their best, to make good and sensible choices, to not make errors, to have a perfect life to show their peers, and to live up to the expectations that society has of them. Students are also being pulled in two different directions: they must finish their studies as quickly as possible because it is prohibitively expensive to study for a longer period of time, but at the same

\textsuperscript{3} See Royal Netherlands Academy (2017) p. 76.
time they are expected to do as many extracurricular activities as possible to enhance their career opportunities. Students are often told that the labour market expects a curriculum vitae with at least one internship, a study abroad, leadership experience, extra courses, honours, a job, and a lot more. Just studying is not an option any more. Of course, some degree of pressure is not bad and is sometimes necessary, but the pressure I am talking about is too much and unhealthy. For many students, it results in mental and psychological problems. The number of burnouts has increased dramatically in recent years. This problem is well documented in research.\(^5\)

What frightens me is that the number of students who are experiencing enormous pressure is growing rapidly. Within just a few years, this has become the number one problem for young people. That is why we need to act on it now. Looking at the speed at which burnouts and psychological problems among students have been emerging and growing, the situation might deteriorate further if no action is taken. One of the main reasons this problem is not getting the attention it needs is, I believe, the gap between generations. When I speak about this subject as a representative of Dutch students with policymakers, university leaders, or politicians, they don't really seem to understand the seriousness of this issue. Most of them — there are exceptions to this rule, of course — draw parallels with their own studies and conclude that contemporary students should not complain and just take it easy. Or they kindly bestow their insight that life is hard and that they should just get used to it. They don't seem to realize that the times and the situation for students have changed considerably. This lack of empathy and awareness is problematic: if the generation that has the power and means to come up with solutions does not see that this is a real problem, the issue will only become more and more urgent.

\(^5\) Jolien Dopmeijer 2017; Maartje Conijn et al. 2015; Wilmar Schaufeli et al. 2002; Nikki Gubbels & Rutger Kappe 2017.
With the rapid pace at which things are changing nowadays, it can feel as if we students don't have a say in it. One of the great things that Van der Zwaan shows us in his book is that this is not true and that we can influence what the future will look like. The things we do today will shape 2040. We are the ones who decide what we see in the crystal ball and how we act upon that. In the end, it is all about choices: what do we want 2040 to look like? I hope that in our journey towards 2040, in our battle with decreasing government funding, and in our efforts to improve the situation, we will not throw away what is already good. To all those people who shape the future, I would like to say: please be careful and proud of what we have, especially the accessibility of our education. Because what Van der Zwaan also shows us is that the way back from elite education is extremely difficult, if not impossible. And I hope that in 2040 students also just get to be students and enjoy that, instead of working themselves into a burnout in their effort to be perfect. I hope that in the coming years we will build an atmosphere thick enough, and that these meteorites that threaten our accessibility and mental wellbeing will burn up completely.

Bibliography


Nikkie Gubbels and Rutger Kappe, Stress and engagement. Exploratory study into the levels of stress and engagement among