1. The idea of a university

At first sight, universities are doing better than ever. Never before have there been so many good institutions of higher education, which conduct what is often fantastic research and where students receive better teaching than ever. On closer inspection, however, the bitter wind of a fundamentally changed society is whipping around the university’s ancient, originally twelfth-century, form. Many believe that the old university has been transformed into a teaching factory, where students, as modern consumers, protest against the value for money they receive. The compact institutions of the past have become large businesses in which many scholars no longer feel at home. The image of focused study in silent libraries has largely been supplanted by a deluge of complaints about the pressure of work, in a setting that is more reminiscent of the care sector than a peaceful temple of learning.

The arrows of discontented lecturers and students are aimed at administrators, for steering universities in a way comparable to the captain of the Titanic hitting the iceberg, or at the government, which is blamed for ever-increasing levels of bureaucracy in the universities. In essence, the question that is often tabled in these frequently passionate debates is: to whom does the university belong? Lying behind this, however, is also the question: what is the university, in fact? These questions of ownership and identity have deep roots in

1 Ginsberg, B., 2014: ‘College Presidents – New Captains of the Titanic’. Minding the Campus, July 2014. For the Dutch debate, see: Verbrugge, A. & J. van Baardwijk, (eds), 2014: Waartoe is de universiteit op aarde?, Boom, 296 pp. Provides a lot of background and information on the developments within the Dutch system, including what is often critical reflection, such as on the performance agreements that the Dutch universities concluded with the government in 2012.
the past, meaning that it is essential to have an understanding of the past in order to understand the modern predicament.

Whilst the roots of the modern university undeniably stretch back to the Middle Ages, the university in its present form is largely a product of the Enlightenment. It was in that era and after that ideas about the utility and necessity of university education were formulated. Many of the conflicts that are currently coming to light can be traced back to the question of whether these ideas are still valuable or will hold out in future. Within the university, a considerable number of lecturers and students wish to return to the ideals of the past: a significant role for teaching, and the academic atmosphere that is typical of relatively small universities. But society is demanding a number of other things as well, such as contributions to social, and above all, economic needs. It is with these and other diverse views that the university is currently grappling.

Two core nineteenth-century ideas can be seen as having played a major role in the development of the modern university: one proposed by Newman and the other by Von Humboldt. Given that both are frequently cited in the debates, it is almost self-evident that we should begin our quest with them. Building on the ideals of the Enlightenment, over 150 years ago, Cardinal John Henry Newman² put forward a number of pioneering ideas in his celebrated book, The idea

² Newman, J.J., 1852: The Idea of a University. It is important to emphasize that the differences between the systems in North America and Europe are also attributable, to a significant extent, to the Land Grant Act that was passed in the US, which defined the social contract of many universities in the nineteenth century. This established a university mission that was strongly oriented towards society, whereas in Europe, particularly under Napoleon’s influence, the connection with the state became progressively stronger. As a result, the core mission of American universities has traditionally been focused on contributing to the common good, much more so than in Europe.
of a university, that are still cited approvingly today. It is striking, though, that these approvingly-cited passages are often lifted unilaterally from his work by people who have obviously barely read it, as the modern university has now moved very far from the ideal picture painted by Newman – and that is a good thing! For Newman promoted the notion of a university that was totally focused on teaching, and even went so far as to describe the transfer of knowledge as the ultimate goal: ‘If its [the university] object were scientific and philosophical discovery, I do not see why a university should have students.’ In other words: students are the justification of the university’s existence and research has no part to play.

As a good Roman Catholic, Newman was part of a long-established ecclesiastical tradition, stemming from the Middle Ages, in which the university was seen primarily as a teaching institution and the guardian of knowledge; an idea that no one would endorse today. Newman’s argument remains important, though, due to his conviction that the first years of university should feature a broad educational curriculum in which students develop on the basis of their talents. Newman defended this as follows: ‘All branches of knowledge are connected together, because the subject-matter of knowledge is intimately united in itself, as being the acts and the work of the Creator.’ Although this would hardly be conceivable today, given the religious bent of his words, Newman’s ideas had a major influence on the Anglo-Saxon model of liberal education, which aimed to provide a broad educational foundation within higher education for a career in society or possible further study in a more specialized area or discipline. And it is this notion of a broad, general education that is rapidly gaining currency in the European debate, in the wake of a long period of increasingly specialized university teaching. The textbox
sets out the key similarities and differences between Europe and North America in this respect.

**Key similarities and differences between the university systems in Europe and North America**

In North America, the higher education system is based on colleges that provide a broad preparatory academic education, partly analogous to the Bachelor’s phase in Europe. Traditionally, this phase has been highly developed in Liberal Arts and Sciences colleges; the latter distinguish themselves by providing students with a wide range of subjects from both the sciences, and the social sciences and humanities. There is great variety among the colleges. This phase of education is known as the undergraduate phase.

A limited number of the students in North America go on to the Master’s programme, which is mainly seen as preparation for gaining a doctorate during the PhD phase. The entire Master’s and PhD phase is known as the graduate phase.

In continental Europe, the university Bachelor’s degree is not usually seen as an endpoint (at least, not yet), whereas this is often the case in North America. In Europe, the great majority of students go on to a Master’s programme after obtaining their Bachelor’s diploma.

There is less variety in university education (public/private, forms of education such as that provided by the colleges, different types of university) in Europe than in North America. Whereas universities in Europe often combine teaching with research, in North American we find the research university, or the comprehensive research university: the broad research university. This is in contrast to the teaching university, which focuses mainly on teaching, comparable with for instance the ‘university colleges’ in the Netherlands.

In terms of form, higher education in England lies between the European and the American systems.

There are significant differences in relation to what is understood as a university: whereas in the US and England, there is a gradual
transition between higher vocational education and the university, in the Netherlands and the rest of Northern Europe, there is a sharp division between institutions of higher professional education, or so-called universities of applied sciences or polytechnics, and the university. In Southern Europe, too, the distinction between higher vocational education and the university has traditionally been narrower, because universities in Southern Europe have traditionally had a greater focus on preparing students for the professions than those in Northern Europe.

The form of modern Asian universities is often similar to that found in the Anglo-Saxon system.

These days, Von Humboldt is also frequently cited with enthusiasm, although here, too, the suspicion would be justified that virtually no one has actually read his work. In Europe, particularly in the Netherlands, this nineteenth-century Prussian education minister is described almost affectionately as the founder of the modern university and the inventor of the concept of ‘Bildung’. But the form of education that Von Humboldt introduced as a minister in the then Prussian system was not new; it built on longstanding traditions in Western Europe. His contribution, however, was to institutionalize these traditions by arguing that good university education was characterized by the constant linking of teaching and research, whereby students had to be educated and trained (‘Bildung’) in a system that prioritized the acquisition of new knowledge. As he wrote in 1810:

Es ist ferner eine Eigenthümlichkeit der höheren wissenschaftlichen Anstalten, dass sie die Wissenschaft immer als ein noch nicht ganz aufgelöstes Problem behandeln und daher immer im Forschen bleiben, da die Schule es nur mit fertigen und abgemachten Kenntnissen zu thun hat und lernt. Das
Verhältniss zwischen Lehrer und Schüler wird daher durchaus ein anderes als vorher. Der erstere ist nicht für die letzteren, Beide sind für die Wissenschaft da.³

In other words, this was about much more than merely transferring existing knowledge – something for which Newman was still calling some forty years later.

Four problems with historical roots

The university has undergone a complete transformation since the days of Newman and Von Humboldt, and many of their ideas are simply no longer relevant. Despite this, they are frequently invoked in the current debate about ‘why we have universities at all’. In Europe, in particular, a sizeable movement can be seen and heard that believes that the university is focusing too strongly on research to the detriment of teaching. In his book, What are universities for?, Stefan Collini,⁴ for example, argues for a return to old values and a greater emphasis on teaching. Others, such as

³ Von Humboldt, W., 1810: Über die innere und äußere Organisation der höheren wissenschaftlichen Anstalten in Berlin. The quote could be translated as follows: ‘It is furthermore a quality of higher scholarly institutions that they treat science as a problem that remains unsolved as of yet, and therefore always should remain inquisitive, because (normal) schools are only concerned with and teach cut-and-dried knowledge. The relationship between teacher and pupil is thus very different from how it was in the past: the former is not only there for the latter, but both are there for science.’

Crow and Dabars,⁵ argue to the contrary that it is vital to preserve a strong emphasis on research in the context of the modern research university. It is this question of the balance between the two that lies at the heart of the modern debate.

The second question, which gives rise to sharp differences of opinion, can also essentially be traced back to nineteenth-century views that are now coming under heavy pressure. Von Humboldt was an outspoken defender of a well-ordered polity, something for which Prussia was famous at the time. Within this tradition, in Germany and many other European countries there was for many years no debate about who should pay for the university: this was obviously the task of the state. Thus it is perhaps no coincidence that Newman, who wanted to found a Roman Catholic university – a private university, in other words – enjoyed so much influence in the US and in England: in these university systems, the state has traditionally played a much weaker role, and has even been notably absent in many respects. Take the American universities, which are privately funded to a great extent and where the government plays a modest role in funding higher education. This means that universities in the US and in England, to an extent, face very different problems from those in continental Europe. On both continents, however, and probably in Asia as well in future, how to fund the university is an extremely important and growing problem.

While the third focus of discontent within modern universities cannot be traced back directly to the Enlightenment, it is related to it; for it was from this time onwards, in principle, that the democratization of access to the university,

⁵ Crow, Michael M. & William B. Dabars, 2015: Designing the New American University, John Hopkins University Press. Analysis of the situation of the universities in the US, paying significant attention to rising costs, government withdrawal, and the implications for the social divide in the US.
or ‘education for the many’, in modern jargon, became anchored. Since the days of Von Humboldt and Newman, the university system has been subject to constant growth. It took many years, however, for the growth in student numbers to become established. Only since the Second World War has participation in university education increased explosively and at the same time the university’s role as a research institution become more and more prominent. As a result of these developments, universities have become so large that they are starting to resemble businesses, meaning that they are often managed as such: one increasingly hears terms such as professional management, professional fundraising, valorization and efficiency. Hardly anyone would doubt that given the size of the budgets involved – in many cases, ranging from half a billion to one and a half billion euros – good, professional leadership is essential. But this same need for tighter and more efficient management is causing great dissatisfaction among many lecturers and students. Again, it is Stefan Collini who comprehensively expresses the oft-heard complaint that traditional academic freedom has largely disappeared and that valorization has come to the fore: ‘universities have been transformed to the point where many are now principally centres of scientific and technological research and, increasingly, of vocational and professional training.’

Although Collini enjoys much support within the academic community, such statements present the university as an otherworldly institution; one that is difficult to reconcile with the challenges facing the world, and one from which society is simply demanding visibility and commitment.

The dissatisfaction felt by Collini and many others becomes clearer, however, when we consider the fact that as a consequence of market demand, there is a danger that the research carried out by the ‘entrepreneurial university’ will
shift unilaterally towards those areas where the greatest opportunities for valorization lie. Indeed, it is not difficult to show that since the Second World War and especially since 1980, the volume of research in the medical, biomedical and natural sciences has increased exponentially all over the world, often to the detriment of the humanities and social sciences. It is thus no surprise that these latter disciplines have been particularly harsh critics of the modern system: many pages of *The Guardian*, *The Economist*, *The New York Times*, *Trouw* and *NRC* have played host to scholars complaining about the lack of attention paid to the humanities, the liberal arts and sciences or the social sciences, in contrast to (from the perspective of those doing the complaining) the massive attention lavished on technology and the natural sciences. It is in this context that reference is often made to the ideas of Von Humboldt, and there are loud calls for universities to give more space to *Bildung*, without realizing that it was precisely the Humboldtian concept of the link between teaching and research that gave rise to the current situation in the first place.

The fourth and final major problem likewise shows how the university is wrestling with its modern identity. Rather than originating in the Enlightenment, this is a problem that has, according to the critics, become much more defined in recent decades, under pressure from the factory-like production of knowledge that changed the university beyond all recognition from the late 1980s onwards. For centuries, the university had a widely recognized duty to disseminate the knowledge that had been gathered. Scholarly treatises and publications are as old as the university itself, and served primarily to maintain an exchange of knowledge and above all, to record knowledge in a public archive. For hundreds of years, scholars published only in order to exchange
knowledge and to establish their reputations; publication was hardly a commercial phenomenon. With the explosive global growth of the universities from the 1970s, however, the volume of research increased sharply. With this came rising demand for and a supply of publications, and what had previously hardly been a commercial market for scientific journals was rapidly commercialized. Whereas university publishers or learned societies, such as the Royal Society in England or the Royal Academy of Sciences in the Netherlands, had first served the market, large publishers assumed leadership of the professional organization of the whole process – for a fee, of course. The growth in publications was and still is explosive, but the university was only truly caught in its grip when publication output was measured on a constant basis. From that time onwards, a spiral of pressure to publish developed, and increasing costs for access to publications – publications that, ironically enough, were reporting the results of what was often publicly-financed research.6,7

The debate today

These four problems together form the main ingredients of the debate that is dominating the universities in different countries, to varying extents. In America, there is talk of


the university in crisis, but in Europe, too, an increasing number of voices are claiming, often in vehement terms, that there is something wrong with the entire system. It is an international debate, in other words, with different emphases. Usually, though, it is about the tenability of old values and structures, and the question of whether these remain adequate in the twenty-first century. The debate also questions the core values of today’s university; these, too, were largely inherited from another age, meaning that we also need to ask whether they are still relevant. Viewed the other way, it is often asked, especially in Europe, whether we should not take a step back from modern developments, and a case is made for a return to old values.

In addition to these themes, which touch on the past, there are also many questions about the future; about what the university will be like in the coming decades. Although there are many common elements, this future seems very different in all of the countries and on the three continents of North America, Europe and Asia. The university does not exist and there are many differences in the national contexts. In the Netherlands, for example, the debate about the problems with which the university is grappling has been more intense than in many other countries. In the spring of 2015, riots broke out in Amsterdam, with students explicitly protesting the state of affairs within contemporary universities. They occupied important buildings on the University of Amsterdam campus for quite some time, along with buildings belonging to other universities in the Netherlands, as movements

emerged that came to be referred to under the banner of ‘The New University’.  

Why have the general problems in the Netherlands come to light in a more vehement fashion? It seems that this is related to a convergence of international and national events. The discontent about the pressure to publish and the almost-autonomous conveyor-belt of research against which the ‘Science in Transition’ movement in the Netherlands and comparable groups elsewhere are protesting, are widely recognisable phenomena at the international level, particularly in scientific and medical university departments. The complaints about valorization and the entrepreneurial university are also widely recognisable, now especially on the part of the social sciences and humanities. In the Netherlands, however, this broad international debate appears to have been put under further pressure by the performance agreements that the universities concluded with the government in 2012. Agreements were made by the then Cabinet on numerous elements that, taken together, were meant to lead to a significant improvement in the quality of education. Due to their detailed nature, however, they severely curtailed universities’ freedom. This, in any case, is what underlies the numerous complaints about ‘output-driven thinking’: the freedom is gone, and many believe that the university has degenerated into a teaching factory.