19. The global university and the knowledge ecosystem of the future

‘Internationalization’ is currently a buzzword in every university, regardless of where it is in the world. In the coming decades, too, there will be increasing collaboration between universities at the global level, whereby the academic global village seems to be becoming a reality. But is this really the case? It is clear that talent will find it easier than ever to search for the best opportunities worldwide, and global student exchanges offer possibilities, but will the role of universities change fundamentally with this, or will they always play important national and even regional roles?

John Sexton¹ has described the importance of the period between 800 and 200 BC as an era in which in a whole series of cultures, fundamental questions were asked by all of the great philosophers: from Confucius in China, the followers of Zoroaster in Persia, the great prophets of the Levant, to the Greek philosophers such as Pythagoras, Plato and Aristotle. Following the German philosopher Karl Jaspers, some describe this period as the ‘first Axial Age’. Sexton suggests that the new millennium marked the beginning of a second Axial Age in world history, one characterized by total globalization. He argues that a global civil society is emerging that will lead, in stages, all cultures to come together and interact. In this context, Sexton aptly cites the Greek philosopher Diogenes of Sinope, who, when asked

where he was from, is said to have answered: ‘I am a citizen of the world’; a cosmopolitan.

The naivety of this belief in unlimited globalization is revealed by a UNESCO study entitled ‘Towards 2030’. On the one hand, the study clearly shows that there is increasing international mobility within academia, and moreover, that scholarship is taking place within a truly global network. On the other hand, a more important observation is that this increasing globalization is being influenced more than ever by geopolitical events, such as the relations between the major economic blocks, but also, for example, those in the Middle East. In the coming decades, Southeast Asia will become a formidable knowledge region as well as an economic block, which will no longer function as a point of departure for people, but will attract them. A knowledge region is also emerging in Africa, one that will develop separately from the EU and Asia. It appears that exchange with Russia, including scholarly exchange, will remain limited for some time. Globalization is thus occurring, but at the same time, we are seeing the formation of major knowledge blocks in which mobility and the exchange of knowledge appear to be becoming more autonomous.

Globalization and internationalization will nevertheless form powerful motivations for the changes that universities will experience in the coming 25 years. There is an urgent need to keep up with the global developments and thereby retain access to talent and innovation. But all too often, there is a tendency to think first in terms of student mobility. Although this is very important, attracting top lecturers and researchers is at least as important. Besides staff and student mobility, in the long-term, possibly the

most important phenomenon will be the growing distinction between universities that operate at the local, regional, national or supranational levels, or even at a truly global level. This last category of universities will attract the top talent, not least because this is where the major funding flows will circulate.

Funding flows will also determine the sites of very large facilities that will play a decisive role in the natural, medical and technological sciences, for example. In this respect, Asia – followed by the US, and Europe at a distance – will almost certainly take the lead. In order to retain a prominent position nevertheless, it is essential that countries that are struggling to finance increasingly expensive equipment can agree on partnerships and national roadmaps that promote coordination. This is already the case in most European countries, but not only national, but also supranational coordination is rapidly becoming necessary, given the huge rise in the level of financial investment that is needed for increasingly expensive equipment.

The rankings, for example, are already revealing the degree to which international collaboration can play a decisive role in a university’s visibility and position. European and Asian scholarly production is often rated highly, but ratings for reputation, internationalization and the proportion of international staff and students are considerably lower. This lost ground is often attributed to language: traditionally, Anglo-Saxon countries have simply had the advantage of being English-speaking. The relatively closed culture of European countries, for example, which are less open to foreigners, can also play in role in this, however. Over time, this may prove a threat to their position among the top research nations, which are still dominated by Anglo-Saxon countries on the basis of language and tradition. In the
coming 25 years, being able to offer a real international classroom will be one of the decisive factors that counts at the international level.

If universities wish to remain at the top, it will be essential to have access to the global reservoir of talent. And this will mean having a truly cosmopolitan gravitational pull, or at least a good network in which talent circulates. In the US, a number of universities have invested considerable sums, in different ways, in expanding their access to this international pool of knowledge and talent. New York University has gone the furthest in this respect by opening three international portal campuses, together with a large number of study-away sites. Universities such as Yale and Duke have also opened international campuses. Since the trend took off at the start of the millennium, however, it has become clear that this is an expensive and not universally profitable form of globalization. Profitable, in this sense, refers not so much to money, as it is clear that such approaches cost a great deal of money, but also to the intellectual benefits, which are not always great. After a period of expansion and commitment to opening multiple international campuses, British universities have also taken a step back from this approach.

For the American universities, it is critically important to internationalize, all the more so given that the number of international students in the US is already lower than in the EU. We can thus expect North American universities to remain active in this respect through mergers, stakeholding and opening campuses, first in Asia, and second in the Middle East. In view of geopolitical developments, however, this latter region will continue to be risky in the coming years, and China in particular is distancing itself more and more from foreign universities that ultimately
attract more Chinese talent than they collaborate with Chinese institutions.

Internationalization is also crucial for Europe, of course, but here, efforts to establish branch campuses have been on a much more modest scale than in America. In view of the financial risks, the emphasis, in addition to maintaining a limited presence in Asia, will lie primarily on boosting student mobility and attracting students from outside the EU. In addition, the EU will invest considerable sums in improving collaboration between universities within the EU, and in particular in stimulating a better distribution of excellent institutions between Eastern and Western Europe: much will undoubtedly be invested in programmes such as the ‘Stairway to Excellence’ in the coming years.

The picture in Asia completes that in America and Europe: there will be a lesser degree of acceptance of the establishment of branch campuses, particularly in China. This has much to do with the strengthening of national institutions, but also with governmental politics, which views academic freedom as problematic. We can also expect that sooner or later, problems of freedom of expression and academic freedom will become major issues in China and in other parts of Asia and the Middle East. This will eventually become a decisive factor inhibiting the development of further branches in these countries. We can expect partnerships to be encouraged, however, especially with illustrious institutions in the US and Europe. As suggested above, the flow of talent will slowly turn in the direction of Asia. This will pose a threat first to the US, and then to Europe, in the form of the loss of talent.

The least risky form of globalization in future will take place via networks of collaborating universities, such as the League of European Research Universities (LERU), for
example, or the European University Association (EUA). There are increasing numbers of formalized networks such as these, and their impact is also becoming more and more visible. In this respect, LERU is an example of a network that has been successful politically in the past decade and has acquired much influence within the EU. What such networks often lack, but will increasingly gain, is substantive partnership and structural mobility. The European Research Area is the key to this in Europe, and in future, the creation of a global research area could also guarantee open borders for scholarship at a global level. LERU has a number of rapidly growing platforms for disciplinary cooperation, in which expertise is also shared. It is a matter of time before structural mobility also gets going, particularly in relation to students, but possibly also to staff in future. In this sense, collaborating within networks could be Europe’s answer to opening of branch campuses or holding stakes in other universities, as the mainly privately-financed universities in America and England have done. The network university appears to be becoming the model for the coming decade. One variant of this is the ‘triangle university’: a triangle of collaborating universities on three continents that aim to profit optimally from various developments.

As we saw at the beginning of this chapter, in the coming decades, the university will increasingly find itself split between two levels, best summarized as ‘think globally, act locally’. Globalization will largely entail the exchange of knowledge and, even more so, of talent. The universities that are most active at the global level will shape the academic landscape and the international agenda. At the same time, the regional knowledge system is becoming more and more important. Every university will become increasingly dependent for its development on urban areas
that combine a concentration of talent with significant opportunities for innovation. At present, all of the world’s top universities form part of a global knowledge hub that is embedded in the context of large urbanized areas, and this will certainly also be the case in future. In the coming decades, urbanization in Asia alone will result in a hundred or so mega-cities: although not every one of these will have the same prospects for developing into a global knowledge hub, it is clear that there will consequently be a significant shift in the direction of Asia.

Over the next few years, the internationalisation of the universities in the Western world may be affected by the growing political trend towards nationalism and populism. These changes are exemplified by the statements of politicians in Europe and the US who are advocating nationalist political agendas with closed borders and severely limited immigration. But in a lot of cases, it goes further than this, with their statements having all the hallmarks of ‘taking care of our own people first’: the labour market must be protected against foreign workers. In addition to economic motives, these views are often coloured by other sentiments, related to ethnicity and a certain nostalgia for the past and the comparative safety of relative isolationism, of being ‘among one’s own kind’.

The most immediate effects of isolationist politics can already be seen in the decline in the number of foreign students at universities in Australia, but also in Europe and the US. The election of President Trump and Brexit are sure to contribute to a further reduction in international exchange in the academic world in the US and the UK, respectively. For universities, some of which derive more than 30% of their income from foreign students, this could have a massive impact – especially for the top universities, which
currently have the largest share of students from Asia, for example. In 2014–2015, the 1,000,000 foreign students in the US and the 312,000 foreign students in the UK jointly paid billions of euros’ worth of tuition. The fact that foreign students are ‘big business’ is further evidenced by the fact that Australian universities annually invest 250 million AUD in the recruitment of foreign students alone. But the impact will not only be financial: a large proportion of the talented young minds that flock to these universities every year, especially in the US, come from abroad. A reduction in this influx is sure to affect the quality of these institutions in the decades to come.

In Europe in the coming decades, there will also be considerable momentum towards further regionalization, including under the influence of EU policy. In addition to London, for example, which will certainly obtain its place as a global knowledge-hub, powerful regional knowledge systems will emerge in Southern Germany and possibly Scandinavia, and there will certainly be opportunities for the Dutch Randstad to join them. Reports by the WRR and the Dutch Advisory Council for Science, Technology and Innovation (Adviesraad voor wetenschap, technologie en innovatie, AWTI) rightly point to the importance of regionalization and regional clusters in the knowledge ecosystem, but they may be viewing these on too small a scale. On this smaller scale, in any case, there will be significant opportunities in the west of the Netherlands, possibly in connection with Amsterdam, and in the centre of the Netherlands, in connection with the southern Netherlands (the Brainport initiative).

Universities need to cooperate more in order to create truly regional knowledge-hubs, and the government should give much more encouragement to this mutual collaboration. The rule of thumb here seems to be that clustering what are in principle mutually competitive institutions of equivalent value is often doomed to fail, although there are indications that this will increasingly happen in future. Despite this, the approach can be useful, because equivalent institutions can also build up powerful networks that have a regional impact and are more visible at the global level. One example of such collaboration is that between Strasbourg, Colmar, Basel and Karlsruhe, of which only the last is a technical university, whilst the first three are broad general universities. In addition, we will see a great increase in forms of cooperation or clustering in the coming decades, and these may well be more successful: cooperation between groups of universities that differ from one another, such as a research university with teaching universities and digital universities. Clusters of completely unlike knowledge institutions (universities with colleges of professional and vocational education) may also have potential, however, as the example of Arizona State University shows.

It is not inconceivable that in a number of cases, we will also see demand for more national-level collaboration within smaller countries such as Denmark, the Netherlands and Switzerland, and within larger regions, such as Scotland or the German federal states. The American state system, such as the California or Ohio university system, can serve as an example for this. In this, a flagship can profit from the whole network, whilst the network benefits from the top position of the flagship university. Although the system brings advantages, its preservation requires active state involvement, and we cannot expect to see the rapid
emergence of a similar top-down collaborative structure in the Netherlands, for example, or other countries. In this sense, Denmark offers the most recent European example of a partnership at the national level that has been compelled by the state, in which the first cracks are now becoming visible. The American state systems also appear to have had their day: the individual universities want to raise their own profiles rather than get lost in the whole system, leaving all the glory to a single top university.4