Higher Education in 2040

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Conclusion: the transition to 2040

The university has definitively left its ivory tower, where it had remained comfortably hidden until the middle of the previous century. It is no longer possible to return, despite some nostalgic calls for it to do so. Today’s university is situated rather reluctantly in society; being rather unsure of its role, it is navigating between the entrepreneurial university and the medieval academia. This book opened with the question of whether the university would make it to 2040. It has become clear that it will certainly be unable to do so in its current form. We can expect great changes, not only in the form and content of teaching and research, but also in the physical make-up of the campus university.

The contours of this transformation are becoming clear all over the world, although the university is often passive, in the sense that it often operates, to a striking degree, with reference to a mission that is rooted in the past, and rarely looks ahead to the future. Knowledge for knowledge’s sake often forms the dominant tone, whilst little attention is paid to societal needs. This appears to be truer of Europe and Asia than Anglo-Saxon countries, because in the latter, universities are already playing a more prominent role in society. This is linked to the need for private funding: as governments have taken a significant step back in recent years, private financial contributions have become essential. Viewed the other way round, it is precisely this decision on the part of the state to take distance that has created a time-bomb in these countries, because access to higher
education is associated with a growing financial burden, with a stark social divide as the result.

Much attention still needs to be paid to the university’s new role, and there is much work to be done. It is clear that the university needs to play a larger role in society in order to retain broad social support. This means that the university will need to carry out a whole range of activities in society that clearly demonstrate what it stands for. This could involve setting up community services, for example, but also the way in which the university as a whole distinguishes itself from the surrounding community and relates to a city or region in order to make a real and valuable contribution there. The deeper significance for the university is that it will thereby become part of a broader system in which knowledge circulates and therefore brings higher returns: whilst the university has an impact on the regional or even the national economy, at the same time, it seeks to achieve broader social returns for its own performance. This could even lead to universities forming associations with large organizations such as the United Nations, or parts of them, such as the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), or with NGOs, regions and governments, so as to provide large programmes with the essential knowledge they need to solve weighty social problems. Much more than is now the case, this should be seen as just as important as, or even more important than, the economic valorization that the university will also inevitably continue to need in the coming years, in order to compensate for shrinking state funding.

All of this will demand radical reform of the teaching and research programme, which should be tailored much more closely to the conditions of the future: the university should become a sanctuary for experimentation and reflection on all kinds of issues that will affect society and the labour
market in the years ahead. Ideally, research programmes should focus on the cutting edge of major societal and fundamental questions. Interdisciplinary research will inevitably play a large role in these programmes; after all, the questions that will be addressed in future will transcend disciplines, and the solutions to major problems will be found, more so than in the past, in interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary knowledge. Universities will need special qualities to structure research around convergences – that is, completely new partnerships between disciplines – especially when it comes to technical and administrative support, but this will potentially bring major innovations and scientific progress.

Teaching is likewise experiencing a gradual shift from disciplinary or multidisciplinary education to the real training of students as ‘T-shape professionals’. In every conceivable working environment, it will become essential to collaborate with professionals from various disciplines, whereas at present, teaching almost everywhere is based on the dominant mode of mono-disciplinary education and expertise. Although it will still be necessary to provide students with a thorough disciplinary training, in any case, there is still far too little emphasis on interdisciplinary learning, working and thinking at present – and that is true of virtually every university worldwide.

Finally, there is a last aspect to the role of the socially engaged university of the future, and this has to do with the students. Much more than is presently the case, the university should pay serious attention to preparing students for their future roles, not only as university graduates in all kinds of professions, but also – for a considerable number of graduates – in their roles as leaders in the society of 2040.

In order to achieve all of the changes that are needed, the government and the universities should engage in a
deeper dialogue about the future. Universities often keep the government at a distance, but it cannot be denied that the government has a great responsibility for the future, and this means that it simply has a role to play. It is also clear that detailed performance targets, such as those agreed in the Netherlands in 2012, provide a bad framework for dialogue, because they focus almost exclusively on production: numbers of students, degree of excellence, numbers of publications. Also the Teaching Excellence Framework in the UK is hotly debated and could potentially deeply affect the university landscape.¹ We need new paths for dialogue and, above all, new kinds of agreements. The latter should focus less on the details and leave more room for change and development within institutions. Above all, it would be good if ambitions were formulated for the longer term that could be re-assessed on a frequent basis, rather than a process of almost constant policy revision. For teaching, in the light of all these major challenges, it will be essential to have stability and a long-term vision that is not changed time and again by rapidly shifting political majorities.

There is an urgent need for a less corporate approach to managing universities, although efficiency and expediency are essential and are not bad qualities _per se_. But in Europe and the US in particular, this approach has penetrated very deeply. This has often led to the unnecessary erosion of lecturers’ and students’ freedoms, reinforced by a climate of having to be constantly accountable, including to government. In this context in particular, the image of the entrepreneurial university is a hindrance: economic returns

are quickly labelled as the only valuable form of benefit, which seriously undermines the major contribution that the university can and should make to society.

In their vision of the future, universities should focus on having a diversity of forms, rather than striving for a uniformity that is grafted onto the Anglo-Saxon model. Governments, including in the Netherlands, should be aware of the fact that stimuli in the system often encourage such uniformity; for example, if the system strongly rewards the production of articles or the winning of prizes in particular. But this also requires the universities themselves to pay less attention to the rankings, and more attention to various social issues. Notwithstanding all of this, it is essential that a limited number of universities in every country strive to achieve the absolute top positions in order to stay connected with the global reservoir of top talent and knowledge, which will again benefit the national system. In the diverse university system of the future, there must be room for each university to develop its own individual profile, leading to the emergence of a multiform and flexible system that is able to adapt to almost every change.

Although wide access to education in Europe is a great good, it will not be possible to solve the problem of what are likely to be increasingly scarce financial resources by allowing funding per student to fall. In the long term, this will undermine the quality of the whole system. It would be better, for example, to make access to the research university selective, while strengthening other, cheaper forms of higher education, such as higher professional education in the Netherlands, and making it more accessible. The government will play a vital guiding role here; as shown by the situation in the US, by stepping back, the government
can pose a threat to the whole system. Within this guiding role, the key thing will be to ensure that students end up in the optimal place for them, in line with their talents.

Teaching will always be a core task for the university, but it plays a specific role in the research university, namely in relation to research. The funding of the two should therefore be linked. In almost every country, there is a system of separate funding flows, and so long as special value is attached to research, this will automatically result in the under-appreciation and under-funding of teaching. In the European context in particular, there is a need to bring an end to the enormous divergences in funding for education: the arts, natural sciences, social sciences and medicine all deserve the same norm for financing, and a comparable intensity of teaching. Major differences in funding should result from the use of research resources and facilities, which can be specified in the lump sum.

In order to make higher education more efficient, there is a need within Europe to strive actively to achieve a university Bachelor's programme with a clear social impact; that is to say that immediately upon completing their Bachelor's, students should be ready for the labour market and a career in society, and only those with the greatest aptitude for research continue to a Master's or doctoral programme. If necessary, this could be achieved by transforming the Bachelor's programme into a four-year programme, in contrast to the mostly three-year Bachelor's programmes that are commonly run today.

The government and the universities should promote regional systems where deliberate connections are forged between institutions of higher education and with other educational institutions, in which facilities and resources can be optimally used, students are able to find the optimal
place to study, and expert institutions are optimally embedded.

Knowledge institutions should strive to develop their academic programmes through constant interaction with stakeholders. In the Netherlands, the National Research Agenda is an example of a reasonably successful approach to co-programming through interaction with the public at large: based on 11,700 questions an agenda finally was made with 140 scientific challenges. But a good mix of research should also be preserved by giving stakeholders – universities, governments, civil society actors – equal power in setting the agenda. Europe is far ahead of Asia and North America in this regard, something that could ultimately prove to be a key advantage.

The university will make it to 2040 – but reflection, debate and above all hard work will be required in order to give shape to all the necessary changes.