

# **are universities on the right track?**

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Unica 2015 Vrije Universiteit Brussel

# the good news is

- universities are in high demand, they cannot complain about a lack of interest in what they have on offer
- there is a multitude of benefits, claims, expectations, requests, stakes, uses, wishes about the university and most of these are increasing in most places
- apparently universities are seen as useful by many and for many uses

# growth in student numbers

- as Education at a Glance 2014 found, education systems *continue to expand* and levels of educational attainment continue to rise throughout the world
- across OECD countries in 2012, 32% of 25-64 year-olds – over 220 million individuals – held a tertiary degree: *never before have so many people attained that level of education*
- tertiary attainment rate in most countries is not likely to slow down anytime soon (OECD blog)

# growth in research publications

- articles, blogs, journals, patents, proceedings, reports - all are growing in number at various rates
- very high in new fields and countries with a huge expansion of the sector, more moderate elsewhere
- research data collections are mushrooming
- search machines have become standard tools

# growth of institutions

- in number (although in many countries it is hard to keep pace with growing demand)
- in type (in terms of programme, delivery mode and/or ownership)
- and in size (few public universities are able to control their expansion properly)

# growth of external demand

- e.g. in research:
- since the 1980s *private* corporations have substantially downsized their long term, risky research establishments
- to a large extent they decided, implicitly or explicitly, to rather rely on the results of state funded research efforts of others elsewhere
- so all eyes are on universities

# at the same time (1)

- we are seeing a *decreasing* added value for individual graduates in the job market
- gone are the days when graduation meant high level job security
- see Phil Brown cs *The Global Auction: The Broken Promises of Education, Job and Incomes* Oxford 2011
- in many countries graduate *unemployment* rates already are very high
- so the old story is no longer true

## at the same time (2)

- the long trend of academic *elites* and the admiration and aspiration they conveyed has come to an end
- so has *the long period of growth in public interests and taxpayers' support*
- universities have become each other's rivals, competing for scarcer public budgets
- at the same time *market* models (requiring visible “returns on investments”) have been introduced in education and research



## at the same time (3)

- research-intensive universities are struggling to adapt their traditional ways of organizing research, in terms of planning, peer leadership, academic independence and integrity, and last but not least in terms of sustainable funding
- *it is not easy to keep one's balance, integrity and freedom in situations where direct impact, quick wins and golden solutions are key issues.*

# so the not-so-good news is

- a multitude of demands reflect *competing* claims
- and *rivalling* concepts on the university
- with a *variety* of claims of ownership and buying powers
- and a *broad* range of underlying values
- and a high degree of *changeability*

# crossroads

- all this results in a situation in which universities are at a *crossroads*
- of *various interests* (often contradicting each other)
- and *stakeholders* (ever more independent and demanding)
- while *support* often is opportunistic and unstable

# role of networks

- in the present situation universities are looking for networks of *likeminded* sisters of comparable age and beauty
- for protection and defence
- for better visibility
- for lobbying purposes
- for status

this is entirely in line with our  
favoured response mechanisms

- *accept accountability all sorts* [everything countable]
- *use market models* [clients, stakeholders]
- *do impact measuring* [reductionist value modelling]
- *embrace communication corporate style* [constant beauty contest, a reputation game including inflationary side-effects]

# but do these mechanisms work?

- if universities seek to short term satisfy all interested parties and all stakeholders,
- they'll end up becoming a general store serving present short term demands
- in stead of the *independent, future-oriented creative force* they are supposed to be

# the undervalued core

- it seems to be absolutely crucial that **we know and live *our core identity and mission in relation to society***
- accepting the realities of outside perceptions isn't (shouldn't be) the same as copying them
- besides, by doing just that universities become something else than they are (should be)

# the underrated ingredient

- our responsive attitude and outreach towards society, students and the corporate world should not be mistaken for identity and mission
- *an independent, open and forward looking community of scholars* is what we are and should be (this is why universities exist to begin with)
- we must better base our style on and remain truly faithful to our independent identity and mission, not out of self protection and as a privilege, but rather as a duty, a service to the benefit of society



# implications (1)

- what does this analysis imply for university strategies and practices?
- *we must practice key virtues* (in institutional and personal terms)
  - crucial to not just preach the norms and pretend to stick to them
  - but discuss real dilemmas and mistakes made, and exercise individual and group attitudes and decisions

# implications (2)

- what does this analysis imply for university strategies and practices?
- *we must practice key values*
  - in-house *shared* beliefs about what is important and acceptable, and what not
  - but as a base for role and responsibilities in society as well (profile and position)

# implications (3)

- what does this analysis imply for university strategies and practices?
- *we need trust* [cannot be bought, must be given]
- the road to trust starts at respect [for institutions acting with integrity and truthfulness, in short: being trustworthy]

# a plea for exceptionalism?

- are universities a special case, an enclave in society in this plea for integrity and social engagement?
- to the contrary, many more institutions and organizations face similar challenges
- in my view universities, also in this respect, can be playing a crucial and beneficial role to our societies and their future development (if they would perform well)

# the role & value of networks

- it is very hard for *individual* institutions to counterbalance common trends and powers
- and establish a counterculture of sorts based on our truly constitutional role that we be *an independent, open and forward looking community of scholars* (which is why universities exist to begin with)
- this is where **networks** come into the picture
- as a means of creating neighbourhoods of idealism 2.0 and choirs of new harmonies *communities* can attain what individuals cannot

# the role & value of networks

- in a way this is also why in 1987 Magna Charta Universitatum was presented and signed by 400 European universities
- and why by now the Magna Charta Observatory has become a worldwide presence, with over 800 signatories
- *to protect and defend crucial university values, enabling them to function well in all sorts of societal settings*

# in conclusion

- this is not (going to be) easy
- but potentially very rewarding
  
- not just to please present leadership and present participants
- but to the benefit of future causes and generations