

universities at the crossroads of stakes and values

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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

the not-so-good news is

- this 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*

so what can we do?

- will universities suffer because of their success?
- expected to mean too much to too many?
- too big to fail, too big to prevail?
- torn between rivalling lovers?

- I shall be drawing some major trends
- and then go on to offer some thoughts on how to find a way to survive amidst these conflicts of interest

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.* Just 12 years earlier, only 22% of 25-64 year-olds had a tertiary education. The 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 research efforts of others elsewhere. So all eyes are on universities

at the same time

- 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

in the mean time

- 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

meanwhile

- research-intensive universities find themselves in the centre of modern societies and future-directed businesses. At the same time they 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.*

footnote

- not infrequently public universities are suffering from adverse financial conditions because states decide to reduce their budgets for Higher Education and Research
- often intervening with great precision in the tasks and priorities of universities
- thereby putting considerable strain on relations between universities and society

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

at the end of the day

- within and around universities many have high expectations, few are satisfied by what they get
- causing some of us to dream of past *glory* or future honours,
- others to jump ahead to *modernization of some sort*
- and again others to go for *private* success and public cynicism

new coping mechanisms (1)

- *accountability all sorts*
- in open and egalitarian democracies there seems to be no end to accountability and control, both in-house and in relation to government and other budget providers
- the main downside of this trend:
- if not quantifiable it doesn't count

- ✓ admissions & recruitments
- ✓ ranking lists & reputation scores
- ✓ performance indicators
- ✓ bibliometrics, including impact scores
- ✓ financial figures (\approx S & P status)
- ✓ awards & grants
- ✓ patents & licenses,
- ✓ et cetera

new coping mechanisms (2)

- *market models introduced*

in a fragmentary way the language, concepts and practices of profits, benefits, impact, incentives, investments, return rates, bonuses, royalties, shareholders, consumers et cetera have been introduced

and with them came the attitudes of market behaviour

the newest fashion: impact

- in recent usage the focus is on higher education's impact on the *knowledge economy* (another popular concept) and on the graduate labour *marketplace* (student's career success)
- overshadowing other aspects
- and outshining the intrinsic worth of inquiry and study

over time concepts of appreciation change

function

public / private good benefits

value

purpose

impact

assessment

markets

effect

relevance

use

significance

mission

accountability

trust

usefulness

performance

quality

ranking

new coping mechanisms (3)

- *communication “market style”*
- the reputation of HE institutions eroded, like with almost everything in contemporary societies,
- so active marketing and communication efforts came up to make up for these losses
- causing floods of inflated language and unwarranted claims (e.g. in terms of excellence, world class, top and guaranteed success)

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 (web shop style of course) serving present demands
- in stead of the independent, future-oriented creative source they are supposed to be

below the surface

- to better understand our situation let us look *below* the surface of what is happening and *beyond* the timeframe of what we are daily working on
- at *longer* waves of change, at *structural* challenges and above all at the *core* of what a university should be

what's our role and what for?

- it seems to be absolutely crucial that we know and live *our core identity and mission in relation to society*
- pleasing society, pampering students and delivering research results on demand is not what a university is supposed to be doing in the first place
- accepting the realities of outside perceptions isn't the same as copying them

what's our role and what for?

- 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 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?
- *in terms of 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?
- in terms of *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?
- in terms of *trust* [cannot be bought, must be given]
- the road to trust starts at respect [for institutions acting with integrity and truthfulness]

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)

common and continuous efforts wanted

- Magna Charta tries to find ways to promote serious thinking, talking, working on values and virtues
- *it's not the answer to all questions and challenges*
- *but a conditio sine qua non, something crucial and indispensable*