

Report on the ‘European Universities – Critical Futures’ inaugural conference

European Universities – Critical Futures

A combined inaugural conference and PhD course for the project, ‘European Universities – Critical Futures’ (funded by the Danish Independent Research Council) was held at the Danish School of Education, Copenhagen, Denmark, on 6-8 May 2019

Focal question

The project’s focal question is: *What are the future roles of universities in creating social and regional integration in Europe, in a shifting global context?*

To address this, an international network of senior and early stage researchers will hold a series of workshops incorporating PhD training events to share existing knowledge, develop new research and rethink the role of European universities in a situation of political, social and geopolitical upheaval. The aim of each event is to generate small groups who want to work together on interrelated projects.

The network explores its focal question in three sub-themes:

1. The roles of universities in social and political integration.
2. The roles of universities in European integration.
3. European universities in a shifting global context.

The objectives are collectively to reshape the research agenda on European university research and generate ideas for engaging with national and European policy makers on future higher education and research strategies. The results will be presented in a final conference in June 2021.



The Search Conference

The first two days of the kick off conference were organised as a Search Conference. The Search Conference uses a structured, systematic approach for selected people to form a learning and research community, and to discover how to advance their respective interests toward desired futures. The Search centred on the search question:

“How can we rethink and restructure the roles that European universities can/should play in countering increasing socio-economic inequality and consolidating European research and education efforts in a dynamic global context?”

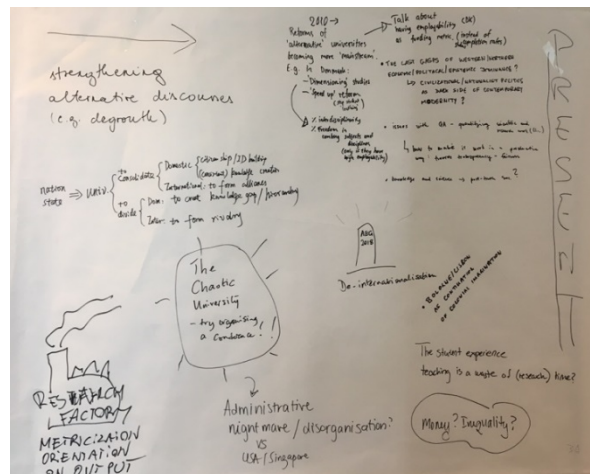
Professor Davydd Greenwood (Emeritus, Cornell University) facilitated the process through a sequence of phases that first established a mutual understanding of people’s diverse experiences and knowledge of higher education through the creation of its recent history. The second phase considered probable futures if the current trends continue undebated. Finally, the group shared their visions on the ideal future. Based on this mutual understanding, the participants created three lists that described which parts of the current university is worth keeping, which parts should be dropped and what has to be created to

reach these ideal futures. The participants then synthesised the lists into themes and voted for each theme according to priority. The participants selected themes to form groups around to make a force field analysis. The groups identified driving forces that could move the selected issue in an ideal direction and the restraining forces that inhibit this movement. After completing the force field analysis, the groups formed Action Planning Groups to bring the issues to a more concrete level and make plans for future action.



Results from the process

A wide range of perspectives and understandings of the universities came about in the first phases of the process. The participants did not turn out to be a clear and chronological depiction of the university's history, but rather a history with several different starting points and developments. However, key historical points centred around four periods: The 13th -15th century; the Humboldtian vision of the university; the 1960's confrontations with the elite university systems; and the current massified universities with increasing student diversity, a burgeoning administration and precarious employments for early stage researchers, and an increasingly dominant economic discourse. The history also portrayed the emotional experience of being an academic in these changing environments with excitement, fear, and frustration. What further surfaced was alternative visions on the university's history, for example discussions of the Bologna process or the Lisbon treaty as continuation of colonial imagination.



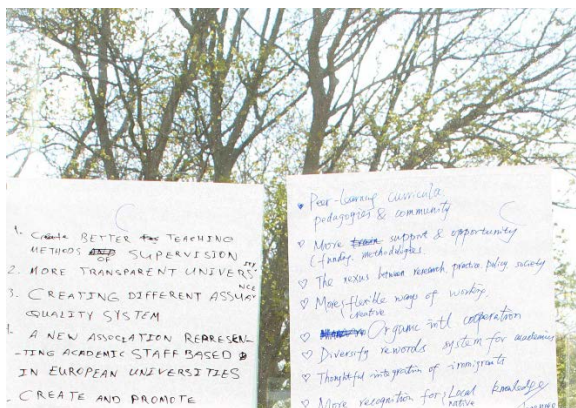
Continuing on to the probable future, two main predictions, in different versions, were discussed: If we do nothing to change the current developments, will universities keep expanding their economic rationalities, administrative staff and managerial systems, and neoliberal ideologies - Or will the system eventually break down?

The ideal university futures were then described as: collaborative rather than competitive; open and inclusive rather than dominant and exclusive; de-commodified rather than competitive and marked-oriented; a safe and stable work environment for academics; accountable and trustworthy in service to society; and a balanced relation between educational practices and research practices.

What was carried forward as important to keep in the current system was amongst other things both frustration and excitement as important drivers for change, and the link between research, teaching and service to society. Some participants voiced their support for the higher education community being created by this project, marked by diversity and mutual respect amongst Ph.D. students and other participants

What needed to be dropped was top-down administrative and managerial structures, uncritical and irresponsible internationalisation with a Western centric focus, universities acting as

'Ivory towers' with disciplinary silos, steep hierarchy structures, ranking systems and destructive competition, overworking academics and the perception of students as consumers preparing for the job market.



What is needed is a system that creates full “human beings” in addition to skilled workers; a free, transparent, and accessible university; better dialogue between students, academics, administration, and leaders; an exploration of the epistemic issues around the university; better teaching conditions; stronger social responsibility and social service, for example in matters such as environment and integration of immigrants; a better academic career structure; inclusion and recognition of multiple languages; recognition of diversity; a new evaluation/quality assurance system; and extending a culture of collegiality for example through a new academic staff association.

The participants gathered these important issues in themes and selected which ones they wanted to continue working on, according to their priorities. The next session presents the themes selected and the objectives ascribed to them.

Future work

Themes and workshop groups worked on the following issues:

1. Governing by numbers as a problematic way of demonstrating accountability
 - Objectives: Research article / provide alternative models how to demonstrate accountability and built up trust without relying on numbers
2. Disfunctional administration/organisation'
 - Objectives: To expose, document and treat disfunctional institutions
3. Irresponsible internationalisation
 - Objectives: Ideas: Re-imagining internationalisation: Disrupting dominant ideas of internationalization to create space for new ways of thinking/doing it
4. Separation of academic tasks and functions
 - Objectives: To come up with concrete ideas and practices to integrate academic tasks
5. How to ensure diversity gets embedded into the DNA of higher education institutions?
 - Objectives: Higher Education as a tool for universal integration and setting
6. Encouraging learning by creating diverse organisational forms/ learning organisations
 - Merged with 4)

The self-identified groups then created action plans with lists of activities and deadlines for their completion. Three further sessions at the inaugural conference reviewed and collected the participants' ideas on the three themes. These groups will be given opportunities to report on progress at coming workshops. It is planned that during these workshops, the groups will form around topics that they identify as important and that they will continue to work together in whatever way they feel appropriate to develop new research agendas for the roles of universities in Europe. The results will be brought together in a conference in 2021.

Presentations

The conference included two lectures:

Changing values of European Universities

By Dr. Sijbolt Noorda, President of the Magna Charta Observatory, Bologna

Methods of future making(?)

By Prof. Dr. Marijk van der Wende, Utrecht University

Future events

Workshops are planned to take place on following dates and locations:

Theme 1 workshop – Kassel, 26-27 Aug 2019

Theme 2 workshop/PhD course – Copenhagen, Spring 2020

Theme 3 workshop/PhD course – Copenhagen, Summer 2020

Final conference – Copenhagen, Summer 2021



Further information

For a full report on the conference or for more information, please visit the project website: <https://projects.au.dk/european-universities-critical-futures/>