What would a society without universities look like – and how could the university and its societal responsibilities be reimagined?

A themed webinar organised by the DUN SIG 'Higher Education Policy and Practice' (HEPP)

Time: May 3, 2021, at 14.00-17.00 CET
Place: A Zoom-link for the webinar will be shared closer to the event

The organizing team consists of:
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Over the last fifty years or so, the size of universities and enrollment numbers have grown rapidly, and their institutional power and societal entanglements have increased as well. In the wake of this rapid growth, questions about the societal responsibility of universities and the higher education curriculum emerge. Ideally, we would hope to see universities provide a 'buffer zone' (Nixon, 2008) or a 'safe zone' (Rider, 2018) between the political interests of the state and the self-interest of individuals and the market economy. But are universities contributing to offering such a safe space? And if so, do they do it equally to all, or are they, perhaps unintentionally, only granding it to certain privileged groups?

Recently, it has been argued that four pillars are upholding the institutional ethos of universities: Knowledge, truth, critical thinking, and culture (Bengtsen & Barnett, 2020), and that these pillars co-define the historical, cultural, and institutional responsibilities of universities. However, and at the same time, critical voices argue that new discussions and measures must be taken around issues of epistemic justice (de Sousa Santos, 2016) and social justice (McArthur, 2013). The responsibility of academics sometimes referred to as 'academic citizenship' is (at least partly) about how academics contribute to society. The question is how we can articulate our contribution without installing and/or reinforcing hierarchical relations between academic citizens and other citizens, including both hierarchies in terms of who is allowed to claim that they know more than, or more about, the other - together with hierarchies in terms of the privilege of being allowed to get caught up in self-formation and Bildung and pursuing one's own interests.

One exercise that could help us think about how the societal contribution of academics can look like in the future is to try to imagine what a world without universities would look like, or what universities would look like if we imagined having to reinvent them today. If we imagine a world without universities, what other institutions would or should emerge? What would the practices of knowledge production, certification and dissemination look like? Will we publish our results on personal blogs or will commercial publishers extend their

monopolies? Where to find literature if you cannot rely on your university's (online) library? Will we do peer review via Twitter? And will citizen science become the standard in all research disciplines? Of particular interest would be whether this would make science more 'open' or whether it would rather lock it in. Would it make science more democratic or more elitist? Would it facilitate academic freedom or commercial interests? And is a world without universities more conducive to critical dialogue or will polarisation take over? In short, how could it lead to a more societally embedded, and perhaps more culturally sustainable, sense of 'academic citizenship'? A somewhat similar exercise was recently conducted by the European University Association, resulting in their future perspective of a ´University without Walls´ (EUA, 2021).

This HEPP-meeting begins with three short scene-setting perspectives from the three organisers, followed by a facilitated workshop in which participants engage in a collective thought-experiment through answering the questions: 'What would a society without universities look like – and how would we envision their reinvention?

The HEPP-meeting concludes with a keynote talk by Professor and Associate Vice-President David J. Hornsby, Carleton University, Canada – followed by Q&A and an open plenary discussion with the audience.

The first part of the HEPP meeting is a closed meeting (14.00-16.00), whereas the last part including the keynote talk by Professor Hornsby (16.00-17.00) is an open event for all interested. It is possible to sign up for one of the parts of the meeting only, or for both parts together.

References

Bengtsen, S. & Barnett, R. (2020). The Four Pillars of Philosophy in Higher Education. *Oxford Research Encyclopedia, Education*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, DOI: 10.1093/acrefore/9780190264093.013.1467

de Sousa Santos, B. (2016). *Epistemologies of the south: Justice against epistemicide*. London & New York: Routledge.

European University Association (2021) *Universities without walls – A vision for 2030.* Brussels, Feb 4 2021, Publications (eua.eu)

McArthur, J. (2013). *Rethinking knowledge in higher education: Adorno and social justice*. London: Bloomsbury.

Nixon, J. (2008). *Towards the virtuous university: The moral bases of academic practice*. London & New York: Routledge.

Rider, S. (2018). Truth, democracy, and the mission of the university. In S. Bengtsen & R. Barnett (Eds.), *The thinking university: A philosophical examination of thought and higher education*. Cham, Switzerland: Springer.