

THE URBAN UNIVERSITY AND THE IMAGINED GLOBAL ACADEMIC COMMUNITY

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INTRODUCTION

The university is one of the core institutions of western society. In its long history it has enormously changed but there is still a family resemblance between at least the ethos of the early medieval institutions in places like Bologna, Coimbra, Paris, Louvain and Oxford and the leading universities in the western world that are part of their respective national education systems. In addition there are new university-like institutions that originate from other considerations like the state induced implantations of higher education in peripheral areas (this applies all across Europe: it has been the case since the Second World War and is now particularly vivid in France) and the private initiatives to complement or supplant the higher education systems in the former Soviet empire. But also in these cases, the basic model of the university is still often upheld as an ideal. This certainly also applies to cases like Lleida, where an old university tradition is now powerfully rejuvenated by means of a sustained decentralization policy in higher education. In universities there should be an atmosphere of free debate where well established truths can be disputed in order to arrive at deeper insights and there is at least the pretence of contributing to the education of those entering prestigious vocations. Universities should therefore be distinct from society at large, providing free space for intellectual debate, having their own autonomous governing bodies, and remaining in touch with the institutions that control access to the higher vocations e.g. through certification, in which their alumni will become active. This applies to classic cases like medicine and law, but also to professions that were instituted much more recently like architecture and psychology.

In their long history, individual universities have always had to cope with at least three outside forces: other universities, the local context, and national policy. Universities have been continuously engaged in cooperation and competition with their equals. The medieval theologians and renaissance humanists looked for freedom and the best opportunities for discussion and to challenge colleagues to debate basic questions, 19th century scientists looked for the best laboratory facilities, while today's university professors perhaps focus on sourcing grants and identifying the brightest students. Some

university professionals have always been footloose and travelled around a network of institutions that hung together on the basis of an intriguing mixture of competition and cooperation. In the Dutch context, we may think of the humanist Erasmus roaming across 16th century Europe from his native Rotterdam, or a few famous chemists and physicists, like Van 't Hoff and Van der Waals (both Nobel prize winners), who spent extended periods at German universities in the late 19th century, or the political scientist Lijphart and philosopher Staal, who moved to California in the 1970s.

Universities have also continuously had to secure their independent existence vis-à-vis the local context in which they operate. This was particularly true when they were located in cities, which was a moot point as urban life and the university were inextricably intertwined. Professorate, student bodies and support staff were often part of the residential population. Cities provided goods and services to “their” university. The university population gave a particular flavour to the economic, cultural and political life of their cities. Town and gown were different, but mutually enmeshed. However, a profitable relationship is easier said than done, even when cities, particularly in the 19th century, made a point of establishing their own university as an investment in the future. This applies to the red brick universities established in the major British cities in the late 19th century, which were based on civic pride and also to the re-establishment of the University of Amsterdam in 1876, at the outset of what was later called the “Second Golden Century”, in reference to the leading role that Amsterdam had played in the United Provinces that separated from Spain in 1648.

From the early 19th century onwards, universities also became increasingly linked to state policy. The reform of Berlin University set the tone. This was a conscious effort, not only to provide a forum for free debate and the pursuit of knowledge, but also to provide a device to enhance Prussia's position as a modern state in the new, post-French Revolution, Europe. The subsequent development of the research university was also aimed at boosting national development and, in the case of the USA, would eventually give rise to the central role of some universities within the military-industrial complex that helped to strengthen the USA's hegemony during the Cold War. The recent mass market university has been one of the many facets of welfare state development in which tertiary education, through generally rather modest tuition, and student grants have made universities accessible to ever larger numbers of students with the appropriate qualifications. In the Netherlands, universities became heavily involved in colonial policy from the late 19th century onwards and the Technical High Schools that were later reclassified as universities were instrumental in the state's ambitions to industrialize the country. However, it eventually took quite a long time to fully establish the nature of relations between the Dutch state and its universities. In the case of the University of Amsterdam, the institution's re-emergence as a modern University in 1876 implied the acceptance of state rules, but the university was primarily a municipal initiative and, until 1960 when the state took over, its funding came from the city of Amsterdam (Knegtman 2000, 358,376).

After the Cold War, the state recast its role in the field of technological development. In Europe, it seemed that the European Union would become increasingly important as a research funding agency for both technology and also a wider range of academic fields. The welfare state has been under attack since the late 1970s, but it has by no means been abandoned. However, its provisions suffered cut backs in many places and any expectations of ever growing expenditure for university education from collective funds have long been forgotten. In consequence, in the future, the university will probably have to learn to be less dependent on state funding and regulation than it was in the recent past and the main conditioning factors will be the way in which it manages to connect up with other universities and how it is able to embed itself in the local context. By way of example, it should be stated that the state contribution to the University of Amsterdam's budget has, in recent years, decreased from virtually complete coverage to covering about two thirds of the total budget. The university has consequently had to fine-tune almost every aspect of its activity to adjust to state prerogatives. The university is now actively engaged in developing policies aimed at its peer institutions and its immediate environment and establishing official agreements and more informal policy networks.

In the rest of this paper I will concentrate on the positioning of universities within academia at large. In section 2, I will add a few observations about the local context, and in section 3, I will close with some conclusions as regards the coming set of conditions within which universities will have to operate and discuss what they may have to do in order to cope. I will continue to use the University of Amsterdam as an example, but will also draw on work and other examples that are more extensively reported in Van der Wusten (ed., 1997, 1998).

UNIVERSITIES IN ACADEMIA AT LARGE

In debates on globalization it is often said that globalization has existed for a long time and that, looking at certain indicators, globalization was no less apparent in the years prior to 1914 as it is now. This particularly refers to the openness of national economies to international trade (Hirst & Thompson 1999). A somewhat similar case is found when we look at universities. As already mentioned in the previous section, they have always been involved in international networks of learned individuals and institutions. But there are some differences between then and now, as is the case with international trade. Time-space compression in the modern world makes instant contacts between widely distant university sites possible at an unprecedented scale and also allows far more intensive and direct contacts for massive numbers of people. University development has also resulted in a vastly expanded number of universities and of people engaged in academia compared with earlier generations. The current international network of universities is therefore much larger in terms of the number of universities and the number of people involved with them and it

is also, at least potentially, much more tightly linked. It remains to be seen to what extent this potential has been and will be realized.

The enlargement of academia is one of the preconditions for the ongoing specialization and fragmentation of the production of knowledge. This trend has important implications for the functioning of the place-bound institutions that most universities still are. "I am world famous" is a qualification that any academic can now rightly claim. Some unfortunately, however, do this on the basis of something as obscure as an interest in the aquatic archaeology of the mid-Bronze age, or some similar interest shared with perhaps only two colleagues in Brazil and Australia with whom they frequently exchange email messages. This allows researchers to function to a large extent in a situation in which they are effectively cut off from their immediate environment within the university and the local milieu in which it is situated. This can, but not necessarily does, further endanger efforts to establish universities in communities in which scholars create and maintain an intellectual climate in which the pursuit of knowledge is paramount. Locations are still rated and the most attractive tend to attract talent in a competition between different sites, whereas those that lose out in this battle have greater difficulty to survive as creative milieu.

Universities are academic organizations and the professionals that are at the core of these institutions and their respective student bodies all react in their own particular ways to opportunities for internationalization and for strengthening their academic networks. In general, many faculties have already been engaged in international contacts for quite a long time, but of late the numbers of such contacts have grown dramatically. In recent years, university administrations have become far more active in this sense and student bodies have also effectively internationalized. We should, however, beware of interpreting the outward signs of this internationalization in an overly dramatic light. For example, the mere existence of web site of the University of Amsterdam and its appearance may give the impression of an institution that is open to the wider world. It is, of course, but a large majority of the visitors to the web site in late 1998 came from within the institution itself, while only a small percentage of these visitors was non-Dutch (Webtrends October 1998, provides information on the most active organizations and most active countries).

Over the last decade, the central board of the University of Amsterdam has started to establish official links with other universities throughout the world and has encouraged faculties and students to take part in new European programs. It has also made an effort to bring together university administrators from the OECD countries to discuss the future of academia with respect to this issue. Serious efforts are currently being made to sign up with several other institutions in a consortium of European and American universities in attempt to further this process of internationalization. The idea is to start joint teaching and research programs, share professorships and facilitate student exchanges. The express purpose of this initiative is to create a stronger common position within the international network of universities

and to reach beyond the purely national context in which much of academic politics tends to be currently engaged (Bremer & de Wit 1999).

Many faculties have already been engaged in international relations for quite some time. In some disciplines, international associations of scholars date back from as long ago as the 19th century, when they began as gatherings or contacts between people interested in a particular field, though without there necessarily being any formal academic links and credentials. Scholarships like those in the Fulbright programme have been important in speeding up this type of process. This has been accompanied by the promotion of international publications and the participation in internationally funded research networks. In the course of this period, academic standards have evidently become increasingly international, with the ground rules mainly being set in the USA and the UK. This does not, however, by any means, imply that all academic work is now geared to an international audience or that all teaching programs have lost their local and national flavour. In many disciplines these traditions are still strong: even so, they cannot completely dismiss or ignore the international dimension and its possible impact. Consequently, we now see hybrid forms of academic work in which local traditions and international standards are mixed and combined together.

In the case of the Netherlands, the direction of this international orientation and its change over time is amply demonstrated by an analysis of honorary degrees conferred by different universities and in different disciplines and in the use of textbooks. As far as honorary degrees are concerned, there has been a general shift from a European to a more, but not exclusively, American orientation, with considerable differences in timing between universities and disciplines. Judging by this indicator, the strongest bout of “Americanization” occurred just after 1970, whereas the influence of British academia has remained remarkably strong since the early 20th century. As for textbooks, a culture shift was observed in medicine and the sciences in some leading universities between 1930 and 1955 when German textbooks were replaced by books of Anglo-American origin. Even so, the majority of honorary degrees were conferred to Dutch nationals and text books remained, to a considerable extent, national productions (a third of texts in medicine and the sciences and a much higher percentage in fields like law) (Rupp 1996).

The internationalization of the student body has also progressed in recent decades. On the one hand this has meant that sizable numbers of students now gain at least a couple of months of international experience during their undergraduate courses. In some faculties within the University of Amsterdam, about 10% of the students are involved in international programmes every year (which indicates a much higher degree of exposure for each cohort of students). It is university policy to extend this situation to all of the faculties and to encourage these numbers to rise even higher. This could, however, be a difficult task. On the other hand, sizable numbers of foreign students coming into the university are also forcing the institution to

internationalize the way in which it operates. The main issue here concerns the language of instruction (which is very important for cases like that of the Netherlands where only small numbers of incoming students are expected to become acquainted with the local language), but there is also a need to examine ways of coping with increasingly diverse groups of students within the classroom. Furthermore, as the institution attracts foreign students according to commercial tariffs, the way in which the institution and the student body interrelate is different from under the traditional system. The Dutch university system is, despite its massive growth, still full of remnants from an earlier time, when numbers were student smaller and personal relations abounded. In the contemporary mass-market university, such relations tend to erode and to be replaced by benign mutual neglect. The new ethos introduced by the commercialization of university education is much more consumerist in its orientation. An attractive balance has yet to be found.

Although the policy of the central board of the university and the current activities of the faculties and students point in the same direction, this does not necessarily mean that they stem from similar motives or are could be considered part of a common project. In a recent dissertation, a comparison was made between the arguments supporting a policy of internationalization that have been accepted by faculties and students in several Asian universities and those adopted by the universities of Amsterdam and Louvain (Kornpetpanee 1999). It turned out that the policy arguments in favour of internationalization could essentially be grouped into two categories: those subscribing to the notion that internationalization should strengthen the position of the university within its own country (nationalization dimension) and those arguing that internationalization should be supported on account of its general contribution to knowledge and learning (universalization dimension). Staff and students from Singapore and Malaysia stressed the universalization dimension, the academic population of Thailand underscored both dimensions, the people from Leuven supported the items that pointed in the direction of nationalization, and those from Amsterdam failed to subscribe to either dimension to any significant extent. In general terms, this means that the academic population of Amsterdam expressed an apparent lack of interest in the way in which university policy was directed in this area, yet at the same time was quite actively engaged in international contacts. There was virtual unanimity as to the positive connotation of internationalization, but university policy should leave such dealings as strictly voluntary undertakings; facilitating but not imposing internationalization. It should also be stressed that the differences observed between universities (or rather between attitudes tied to national traditions) were certainly more important than those observed between fields of study. There was also an appreciable difference in attitudes regarding nationalization between students and staff, with students being more supportive of the nationalization argument. On the other hand, positions regarding universalization hardly differed (Kornpetpanee 1999, 55, 67, 70).

From a very recent study, we know a little bit more about the nature of the identification and commitments of faculties and staff in part of the University of Amsterdam and particularly where these commitments were more local and cosmopolitan. With regard to the question of to what extent people felt committed to the different institutions in which they were engaged, the population of the Faculty of Social and Behavioural Sciences answered as follows. They felt the highest level of identification and commitment to the narrowest working environment and to the people with whom they dealt on a daily basis. This was followed by the worldwide academic community of their particular discipline. This was particularly strong in the case of professors and tended to diminish with academic rank. They felt least committed to the university and to the faculty of which they formed part. This shows quite clearly that academic staff tended to have a quite disengaged relation to the larger institution of which they formed part. They felt identified with and committed to a small immediate circle within the institution and to an imagined community of scholars engaged in the field with which they are acquainted (based on data kindly supplied by the author of Meyer 2000). This imagined international community—as in the case of the imagined national community proposed by Benedict Anderson (1983)—is not known in its entirety, but feels no less real for this reason. In fact, commitments tend to simultaneously polarize in the local and cosmopolitan directions, disengaging from the middle levels of localized organization that, in fact, represent the exterior image of “the university”.

In this respect, a university—and indeed a particular faculty, for that matter—functions a little like an airport. They both occupy a certain position within a wider network, providing a facilitating environment for a number of activities that take place both inside and outside the institution itself. An international airport now competes with other similar institutions for the best possible position as a hub. It has to satisfy its carriers and their passengers by offering local facilities and transfer options. A successful international airport is now also one of the most important factors determining the location of a series of other highly appreciated functions (relating to the production and services sectors). Most carriers—and certainly their passengers—do not have a deep commitment to a particular airport, although in some cases there are special links on account of shared financial interests and landing rights based on state treaties.

Universities are also looking for similar hub positions and, if successful, function as magnets for the location of other types of investment. This comparison should obviously not, however, be taken too far. It certainly does not apply to a clear majority of the faculties, although it does portray an appreciable trend, which does not augur well for universities at the lower end of the university prestige scale or for those occupying peripheral positions in, or effectively located outside, the international network of universities. It also exerts pressure in favour of the quality of relationships between universities and their local contexts. These can easily be

neglected, but that would—in the long run—undermine one of the main assets in this international competition. The previously mentioned consortium, in the case of the University of Amsterdam, is one way in which to engage the problem of competitiveness within the international network. It is a strategy that airports also follow. It remains to be seen, however, how airports and universities will link up with their more immediate environments.

UNIVERSITIES IN THEIR LOCAL CONTEXTS

Town and gown cannot completely ignore each other, their mutual relationships are multidimensional, but their exact mutual impacts are difficult to fully establish and analyse. A series of studies has been conducted into the economic significance of universities within their local economies. Their comparability suffers from many methodological and data problems, but one of the major messages to emerge would seem to be that researchers should concentrate on a university's contribution to the innovative potential of its local economy, though this is something that is particularly difficult to quantify (contributions by Lambooy, Huggins & Cooke, Armstrong, Darrall & Grove-White in Van der Wusten (ed.) 1997). In turn, universities undoubtedly benefit from attractive surroundings, but the evidence for this is highly anecdotal. In the same vein, we can be certain that universities provide audiences for the arts and often artistic performances and produce new talents as well. Universities also have an impact upon local politics, by providing voters, demonstrators, participants in public debates and politicians. As an important land user, universities are also significant actors in the local political arena and suffer the consequences of badly maintained urban environments (chapters by Claval, Musil and Burnett in Van der Wusten (ed.) 1998).

The relative sizes of the towns and universities in question are fundamental to this debate and particularly with respect to the urban setting in which each university is located. Universities can practically disappear in really large cities or just leave their imprint upon quite specific parts of the cityscape, whereas in other cases a town may be so small that the university becomes its principal *raison d'être*. This makes for very differently coloured town-gown relations. A related question concerns the specific location of the university within a particular city and its relative concentration or dispersal. Some universities were initially established when their city was small and have remained there either out of their own preferences or because the municipal authorities have asked them to stay. The extent to which they have to manage their own property, their location and immediate environment may be a very important factor for their future viability. In this regard, inner city universities may have a vital role to play in the revitalization of inner city areas and may heavily invest in maintaining good relations with their environment. This particularly applies to a number of important American universities. Many universities have also moved to other, more

suburban locations, for reasons such as the price of land, possibilities for expansion, or obtaining better access to their student populations.

A fairly pretty general trend amongst universities that have decided to remain in inner city areas is the selective dispersal of some of their activities. Medical hospitals and hard science facilities have often moved out of the centre, while social science and humanities faculties have generally preferred to stay behind, as has the central university administration. This has also been seen in the case of the University of Amsterdam. The consequence is a widely dispersed university in which the different parts of the university find it hard to cooperate and coordinate their actions. Other major Dutch universities show the same pattern, but this has also happened with the Hebrew University in Jerusalem and the University of Miami, to name just a couple of international examples (see chapters by Groenendijk, Shachar, Nijman in Van der Wusten (ed.) 1998).

Some of the major questions concerning the physical planning of universities over the coming years have to do with the consequences of the mass introduction of the internet and internet-related technologies as their possible consequences for face-to-face teaching and the storage of information and particularly the positions and locational requirements of what used to be called libraries.

Certain economic activities have often been situated close to universities, with publishers being just one example. During the last few decades, however, there has been a renewed interest in the synergies that universities and new high tech companies might potentially exploit. Examples from the USA can be seen around Stanford University in California and also associated with the cluster of universities near Boston in Massachusetts. The Science Park of Cambridge University, in the UK, is another example. But efforts to emulate these successes have not always fallen on fertile ground. In Amsterdam a large new project is now in its early stages of execution. This involves moving the sciences faculty to a new location on the outskirts of the city and where space will also be available for new business activities in related fields. The first results of this experience seem encouraging.

As the economies of the highly developed world apparently move into a new stage, there is increasing emphasis on knowledge intensive activities and this has meant that locations close to universities have increasingly come to be considered as niche positions, because they enable a continuous flow of face-to-face contacts which, despite the compression of time-space, is apparently still regarded as vital for research and development activities. Within the whole gamut of knowledge intensive industries, the culture industry is one of the latest and most rapidly growing. New products are now being developed and marketed that are based on mass entertainment and traditional expressions of high culture and this may be one of the largest growth areas of the new economy. Peter Hall (2000) and Thomas Bender (1998) were among the first to foresee a future trend for cultural industries and universities to craft new bonds, based on the experiences of Los Angeles and New York.

The question of to what extent a university is affected by its local context is very difficult to answer. It goes without saying that the University of Amsterdam has been very fortunate in this respect. The accessibility of the city has enhanced its chances of attracting first rate talent to at least visit its facilities. The question now is whether it can use this external asset to maximum effect. We simply do not know the answer to this question yet. The local context is real enough, but its influence upon the quality of the university may be ephemeral, though no doubt significant. A recent research study compared economics faculties in the Netherlands and Britain in terms of their local connections and the significance of their local environments with respect to a number of aspects that influenced the ways in which they functioned. The study showed that faculties situated in cities located in the upper part of the urban hierarchy were more widely and more informally connected with local partners (such as companies and the public sector). On the other hand, in other cities, such contacts had to be developed and maintained through more formal means and institutions and with greater difficulty and the faculties in question also did their best to remain well-connected to agents in the main urban centres. Those who graduated from these faculties also tended to move to the larger centres, whereas graduates from larger centres tried to stay where they were (Van der Meer 1996). In the case of the University of Amsterdam, in addition to a multitude of informal contacts within its local environment, the central authority is prominently present in the “Kenniskring”, an open network administered by the local Chamber of Commerce in which important local players meet regularly to discuss matters of common interest related to the local economy.

CONCLUSION

The university, age old though it is, now finds itself confronted by a new set of circumstances. In a period of internationalization, university administrations are now vigorously engaged in international activities and students are following suit. In contrast, the ethos of the academic staff has, to a large extent, already been international for quite some time now. Academic staff tend to be primarily engaged in immediate working relations within the university and as part of the perceived wider, worldwide community of scholars who share the same disciplinary heritage. This community is, however, more imagined than real, and this orientation on the part of academic staff gives rise to problems in providing local roots. A university is, at one and the same time, embedded in its local environment in a multitude of ways, but it is difficult to know its exact contribution or the precise consequences of its location. The trend towards the local dispersal of universities within their respective cities does not, however, bode well for the university as a local community of scholars. Finally, universities are tending to become less closely monitored by national authorities and to become more autonomous members of the international sphere of education. Nonetheless, this does not apply equally to all countries and it certainly does not mean that the national influence upon universities—which was

evident during the last two centuries and particularly at the height of the welfare state era, in the 1960s and 1970s —has necessarily subsided. In fact, far from it: undoing this influence is a slow process that may take decades, though it will possibly be assisted by efforts to create more European-wide frameworks for universities and their educational mission.

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