

*Inventing Tomorrow's University - Who is to take the lead?*  
by Jon Torfi Jonasson

**Comments by Eva Egron-Polak, Secretary General, International Association of  
Universities (IAU)**

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure to take part in this 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Magna Charta Universitatum and to see how it has flourished in the past two decades, proving how well in few words it succeeded to distil the fundamentals. Despite the challenge I knew it would be, I welcomed the opportunity to comment on Prof. Jon Torfi Jonasson's Essay '*Inventing Tomorrow's University – Who is to Take the Lead?*', published by the Observatory for Fundamental University Rights and Values. In part, this is because it was my honour to chair two of the workshops or dialogues that served as the partial source for the Essay that Prof. Jonasson has written. I can certainly attest to the richness but also relative inconclusiveness of those discussions as the issues we grappled with were many and complex. As in any good conversation or dialogue, there were many points of view raised, at times contradictory, and it was not always clear where our thoughts were taking us. I would therefore like to congratulate Prof. Jon Jonasson sincerely for pulling the various strands of thought together into a coherent and balanced Essay, which is not only an analysis of where the university has come from but also tracing a clear path forward, urging the university itself to take the lead to chart with its stakeholders its future destiny.

In his book the '*Ideal of the University*', Robert Paul Wolff, who also served as partial inspiration for Jon's reflections, states 'when a social institution such as the university is in the process of being reconstructed, it is not easy to tell friends from enemies.'<sup>1</sup> I believe this statement reflects the complexity of Jon's task and the overall project that served as its background.

I like the title of the Essay, though it stands somewhat in contradiction with the content and conclusions he reaches. In fact, the Essay neither calls for, nor predicts the invention of a starkly different new institution. It does however urge each university, as an individual institution, together with its stakeholders, to define and redefine its role and mission and to do so with courage, while embracing fully those intrinsic academic values and principles of the Magna Charta Universitatum of free pursuit of truth and dissemination of knowledge even when these may go against current orthodoxy. As he states, '...academics and their institutions should take a proactive stand on many issues, ...exercising their freedom, vis a vis technological and financial interests.'<sup>2</sup>

The Essay takes us on a historical and philosophical journey, in search of the essence of 'the' university or the meaning of the Magna Charta Universitatum's concept of a true

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<sup>1</sup> Wolff, Robert Paul, *The ideal of the university*, Transaction Publisher, New Brunswick, USA, 1997, p. xxxiv

<sup>2</sup> Jonasson, Jon Torfi, *Inventing Tomorrow's University*, Bononia University Press, 2008, p 137

university. It ends on the notion of a differentiation of missions, not as an imposition by public policy (as it is in many parts of the world), but as actively pursued and defined by the institutions themselves, while integrating and influencing stakeholders' perspectives. Jon places the fundamentals of what defines a university squarely on the terrain of values and principles rather than utility or even service and purpose.

Despite the difficulty I encountered in preparing a commentary on such a well-structured, comprehensive and erudite Essay, which touches on all the important issues being debated in higher education today, I am also very pleased that the International Association of Universities has been involved in this exercise. The Association's leaders have had numerous, and at times endless, definitional discussions about which institutions of higher education should or should not be admitted to membership. Furthermore, the Association and has had to grapple with such questions in the context of tremendous diversity of institutions coming from a variety of academic traditions and evolving in profoundly different situations around the world. The Association's choice to become as inclusive as possible is, I believe, in line with this Essay, especially since this shift in IAU's admission policy, was accompanied by a decision to require each newly admitted institution to express its commitment to a number of key values including, among others:

- academic freedom in the dissemination, creation and pursuit of knowledge;
- institutional autonomy balanced by social responsibility and responsiveness;
- excellence and merit as the standard measure of performance;
- opposition to all forms of discrimination based on gender, race, religion or ethnicity;
- respect for divergent opinion;
- promotion and development of intercultural dialogue and learning;
- freedom of academic mobility and enhancement of the internationalization of knowledge; and
- promotion of human rights, justice, freedom, human dignity and solidarity<sup>3</sup>.

Universities and higher education as a sector are certainly attracting unprecedented attention, analysis, assessment and questioning from policy makers, the media, industry, and the general public let alone from academic researchers and leaders of the universities themselves.

'Inventing Tomorrow's University' constitutes a valuable contribution to the many debates about the future of the university and of higher education. It is crucial, that the Magna Charta Observatory and organizations such as IAU, which in some respects are 'disinterested', continue to nurture such debate because the views about the future of the university and the higher education system more generally are very diverse and often ideologically polarized. As in other areas of debate, so in higher education the neo-liberal vision of the world where 'markets know best' is often pitted against the conviction that for a more pluralist, socially cohesive society to flourish, other values and

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<sup>3</sup> See: [http://www.unesco.org/iau/membership/pdf/commitment\\_Institutions.pdf](http://www.unesco.org/iau/membership/pdf/commitment_Institutions.pdf) and 'Academic Freedom, Institutional Autonomy and Social Responsibility', in IAU Speaks Out - Policy Statements, 2006, also available online at [www.unesco.org/iau](http://www.unesco.org/iau)

thus other ways of regulating change, must be present to balance the economic competitiveness imperative.

Why the intense focus on the universities and higher education more generally? The institutions and the sector, are being questioned, and often challenged on many fronts, among which I would stress the following few:

- Student and societal expectations and needs are continuously growing and diversifying;
- the State or public authorities are unwilling or unable to cover the costs of responding to those expectations or, more importantly, to respond only to some, yet feel they have an even greater stake in universities than before;
- in many ways, due to globalization, the frame of reference of the institutions of higher education and especially for the universities is shifting from national to regional and international without a parallel shift in regulatory mechanisms, with the only notable exception perhaps in Europe;
- information and communications technologies have given rise to a knowledge industry, increasingly global but highly asymmetrical, in which universities are only one actor among many.

All of these and many other trends tend to reinforce the general questioning of the value, the proper role of universities and by extension the ways in which it is governed, whether and if so, how it prioritizes its disciplinary focus and research pursuits, who within society it should serve.

In fact, there is a rather spectacular consensus almost worldwide with regard to why the university should change. Yet, there does not appear to be the same consensus about the model of higher education – at the institutional or systemic level - towards which to move in the future, nor what paths the transformations should follow. In fact, in this regard there are some strong ideological cleavages which become quite stark as studies and scenarios for the future are developed. In such future oriented studies, the end-product or the higher education institution model designed, seems most largely dependent on the weight that is placed in each scenario on the different forces that are likely to prevail and exert most influence in the future. Thus, it is the values and priorities that determine the model.

If we agree that universities and higher education are a public responsibility, as stated by Mr. Sjur Bergen based on the deliberations at the Council of Europe, and consider that they serve the public interest, – even if not fully publicly funded, than the debate on the future of the university is a debate about the kind of society we find most desirable. We must first determine what value we place on equity, on competitiveness, on social justice and on fulfilling the needs of society. In this regard, I agree with Robert Paul Wolff when he points out that societal needs are not the same as market demand and that by meeting demand, universities may still fail to be responsive to societal needs.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Wolff, 1997, pg 39

What makes the debate so particularly heated at this time is that the university has gained an unprecedented pride of place at the heart of national and regional economic competitiveness strategies and agendas. Often, the university is seen as a proxy for the future well being of the economy based on knowledge and innovation.

The importance gained though, is a double-edged sword, placing the university on a tight rope rather than on solid ground. It seems to me that such centrality to the economic health of nations brings with it equal measure of potential benefits and potential risks and dangers for university development.

Perhaps somewhat anti-climactically but also unsurprisingly, *Inventing Tomorrow's University* concludes that the only future for the university is to be multiple and diverse, as long as the institution retains as the core, invariant function to cultivate learning in particular through scholarly teaching and research. Beyond this core, the diversity can flourish. But Jon also stresses that both the form and the substance are to be considered when defining a university – what he calls the task and the conduct what the French call ‘le fond et la forme’. It is also in the manner in which the university – faculty, students and institutional leaders, often with highly diverse views, work together to create and protect their space of freedom, in other words institutional autonomy. This space of freedom is essential and critical for making choices to define and pursue the mission and deal with competing and contradictory viewpoints. According to Robert Berdhal, president of the American Association of Universities, it is this environment that enables scholars and scientists to be free of past dogma, to liberate themselves from the stifling deference of inherited authority and advance the frontiers in all fields. Berdhal feels that it is this openness to new ideas that enables students to challenge their teachers, to become critical and creative thinkers in their own right.<sup>5</sup>

Clearly, this ‘space of freedom’ is not located on the moon. The Essay under review offers a thorough examination and analysis of the many stakeholders and moulding forces that are and will likely continue to shape these institutions. It sets out three categories of drivers exerting influence on university development, each category belonging to a different sphere: the world of education, the world of politics and those drivers issued from prevailing social culture – commercialisation globalisation or technology. On these, as we have seen earlier, there is strong consensus.

I would argue though, that all these forces are in fact coming together in a rather new and interconnected way through the growing influence and impact of comparisons and the output measurements and indicators that allow for such comparisons to be built. Increasingly, it is these indicators, as they structure the league tables and rankings both nationally and internationally that are dictating the model and establishing the values which university leaders are to follow. The popularity and widespread use (despite the equally widespread criticism) gives these processes a far more pervasive impact than might at first be perceived. They are moving well beyond the establishment of

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<sup>5</sup> Berdhal, R. ‘Higher Education Outcomes: Quality, Relevance, Impact’, paper presented at IMHE General Conference, 2008.

‘reputational differentiation’ and are, as demonstrated in Ellen Hazelkorn’s recent research, influencing internal policy making and planning in universities as well.<sup>6</sup>

This trend, could and may have a tremendous steering effect on the future of universities in the short and medium term. By largely failing to include indicators that look at university work in a holistic manner, focusing rather on research intensity, research outputs and even assigning different weights to research fields, these comparisons are defining rather than just describing the model. Their growing importance becomes a tool for policy makers who determine funding, a reference point for stakeholders and for faculty, students and university leaders .

Despite the widespread discussion of the weaknesses of such rankings as the Shanghai Jiao Tong Academic Rankings or the Times Higher Education World University Rankings, or many others more recently designed in Germany, in Leiden, and elsewhere, the influence they exert, needs to be taken into consideration. Because, even as incomplete and far from perfect instruments for steering university development as they are, evidence is mounting that they do steer.

This demand for readable comparisons is both a result of and a response to the exploding number of and diversity of institutions. Their popularity with policy makers and governments is a consequence of the importance of universities for national economic development and the desire to determine how to invest public funds to get good value for money. The public likes them too because they are clear, scientifically defensible, yet simple to understand. Of course, they are often cited by those that do well giving them even more credibility as the top ranked institutions are usually world-renown.

In a very good paper entitled ‘A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the K-Economy; the New World Order in Higher Education, Research rankings, Outcome measures and Institutional classifications’, Simon Marginson explains the reasons for the meteoric rise in importance of international rankings.<sup>7</sup> He also lists several dangers in what he calls the Knowledge Status System which they have brought about. In relation to our discussion, one of the most important risks he points out is that this system will not favour diversity and plurality as institutions will be under both formal and informal pressure to change objectives and activities towards those that may lead to league table success.

And in these indicators, what place is given to a mission focusing on equity or widening participation, on quality of teaching, on student-centred education, on social inclusiveness or community engagement, cultural or artistic contributions? These are very hard to measure in quantitative terms, are often highly contextual and also reflect distinct values and mission choices. So far, too little attention has been paid to them.

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<sup>6</sup> Hazelkorn, Ellen, ‘Are Rankings Reshaping Higher Education?’, paper presented at IAU 13<sup>th</sup> General Conference, Utrecht, July 2008.

<sup>7</sup> Marginson, Simon, ‘A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the K-Economy; the New World Order in Higher Education, Research rankings, Outcome measures and Institutional classifications’, IMHE 2008 General Conference papers (to be published)

How many universities will have the courage, capacity and support to go against the dominant trend? To be innovative, to fix other goals, to focus on missions not rewarded through the rankings and status comparisons? What can be done to mitigate these potentially negative steering effects of national and global comparisons which, by the way do little to encourage a collective or systemic approach but rather push towards a market-like competition in which the number of winners is always finite and always much smaller than the number of those who lose?

There is a general recognition that a multiplicity of rankings, comparisons and a large number of indicators are needed to ensure that the diversity of institutions can be reflected and protected in these exercises. Much more focus on assessing quality of the learning experience and the fulfilment of the service function of the university are needed. Academics and scholars need to employ their not inconsiderable expertise to design measures and indicators that are fairer, that cannot easily be manipulated, that are more comprehensive in their assessment of all university activity and they must do so in ways that respect plurality of languages, cultural and economic contexts. In some respects, this is both in the interest of universities but also their responsibility in that communicating and informing the various stakeholders and publics in transparent and objective ways is of increasing importance in the information society.

In keeping with Jon's statement that academic freedom and institutional autonomy are not given but must be gained, another vast, and related challenge in the struggle for control over institutional destinies is the one of building or rebuilding public trust without falling into the trap of focusing the discourse exclusively on utilitarian aspects of the university endeavour.

Again, this is a responsibility of the university as an institution but needs also to be sustained at the systemic level. Universities cannot claim to shape future society without being credible and respected, without being perceived and thus acting as the source of objective, expert knowledge. They need also to be viewed as institution concerned with addressing humanity's challenges. All of this requires universities and the members of the academic community to demonstrate, explain and track proactively and on an on-going basis, the ways in which they contribute to the economic, social, cultural and artistic life and how they both shape and question the society around them. And I am not saying that they do not do so now. But mostly, such contributions are the stuff of rhetorical statements of university leaders; finding effective ways to showing these contribution in ways that matter in 'real life' is necessary and does not need to be equated with a narrowly utilitarian view of higher education. On the contrary, it seems to me that trust re-gained on some fronts, is the only way to enlarge the space of freedom so essential for the university – such trust is the key for giving the institutions the luxury of the benefit of the doubt

Here too explaining the work of universities, indeed all higher education institutions must integrate a clarification of the importance of the core invariant - a commitment to learning through scholarships and research based on the scientific method, as well as the crucial value of openness to diverse points of view, are all essential for quality of the

overall higher education effort. Placing these aspects at the centre of the message about higher education contributions is essential, but not as an exercise in marketing but rather as part of an ongoing pedagogical process.

How to conclude when looking at the unknown future? Let me do so very quickly by urging all of us to focus our energies on narrowing the gap between our own rhetoric and our actions; on closing the distance between the text and reality, as Michael Daxner, President of the Magna Charta Observatory has stated. Finally, let us do so with integrity, honesty and modesty, paying attention to context and recognizing that such a process may place various institutions on different paths rather than one superhighway towards the so-called knowledge society.