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Back to the Drawing Board: Do Universities Need a Redesign?

ELCO VAN BURG

'An aircraft is only a piece of aluminum. As a pilot am happy to fly it, but for us as an organization it is an indispensable means to an end.' This is how our experienced chief pilot – with an impressive number of 10,000-plus flying hours – reflects on the new airplane that has just arrived. The date is September 2015, and finally, after having been forced to wait for seven months, our small social venture *Lentera Papua* in the rural highlands of Papua (Indonesia) is up and running again. The plane is essential: not only for our pilot training programme for the benefit of local Papuans, but also for the cash-flow that is needed to keep all the social services up and running. With his words, our pilot highlights the fact that we need to keep our goals in mind. In running an aircraft operation, remembering the aim of training locals and providing other social services is often a challenge, as the business usually requires full attention. Yet during the past few months, we have been able to reflect on our mission and aims. Since the business came to a standstill in January, staff have stayed on – even without wages – and wanted to talk about why we are doing this and what our key values are. Although the period was stressful and uncertain, the end result was that we found confirmation that *Lentera Papua* truly is the project that we would like to work for: we aim to train local Papuans to be dedicated and mission-driven professionals in the field we work in, and we are willing to pay the price it takes for doing this.

When I was back at the university for a couple of months, to

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teach, supervise and conduct research, I started to reflect on this period with *Lentera Papua*, triggered by Meindert Flikkema's thought-provoking essay 'Sense of Serving' (Flikkema, 2016). Although I realize that the idea may be rather foolish, I wish that there was something we could do at the university that resembles our Indonesian project: stop certain processes for a while and think about why we are here – and what we want to achieve. Typically, when I am at work at the university, it feels more like being overloaded by competing and sometimes even conflicting demands rather than having sufficient time for reflection. Students ask all kinds of questions about exams, books and assignments. PhD students send drafts that need my input. I find myself running to meetings, preparing lectures while travelling on the train, and the end of the day often leaves me dissatisfied that I have not been able to work on the five research projects that are sitting on my desk. At the same time, however, it is this combination of tasks and responsibilities that makes my work meaningful. Still, I am glad to have the luxury to be able to look at universities from a distance every now and then, literally and mentally, when I am in Indonesia. In this essay, I shall build on these reflections with the aim to put on the drawing board some of the design principles for universities, and in particular the discourse within universities.

Debates about universities

A few years ago, when I was still full-time involved in academia, I wrote a dissertation on university spin-offs, targeting the topic of 'forgive me for using a Dutchism – 'research valorization' (Van Burg, 2010) and subsequently becoming involved in the discussion on 'selling the university' (Van Burg, 2014). As a PhD student, but especially in my role as research coordinator in our department, I learned about an issue that was much more pressing for large groups of university staff: the demands for research output had become high, leading to situations in which research has to compete with education in terms of available time (this key tension is also emphasized by Flikkema, 2016). Most people, however, actually seem to stress the reverse: teaching demands are eating up our research time, while at the end of the day, when it comes to promotion decisions, we are evaluated on our research output.

In an academic reflex, I started to look for answers to these

problems in the academic literature. Yet, delving into popular as well as academic literature commonly consulted at universities, the first things I came across were additional debates about universities, research and education. First, I noticed the popular press and journal editors complaining about research *quality* and pointing out shortcuts designed to obtain long publication lists: plagiarism, salami publishing, data fabrication (cf. Martin, 2016) and other questionable research practices (cf. O'Boyle, Banks & Gonzalez-Mulé, 2014). Relatedly, researchers and funding institutions are increasingly often questioning research *relevance* (cf. Van de Ven, 2007), and researchers lament that real breakthrough work and innovative research are hindered by academic conventions and promotion procedures (cf. McMullen & Shepherd, 2006). Second, especially after the recent economic crisis, people have started to question the quality and relevance of university *education*, including education at the top business schools which had educated the managers that unintentionally laid the basis for the economic crisis (cf. Romme, 2016). More in general, the entire system of ranking academic institutions – including managerial attention for these rankings – is currently being critiqued (Adler & Harzing, 2009), partly because these rankings suggest that all universities are animals of the same breed, although in actual practice a top school like Stanford University and a largely unknown institute in Indonesia are as different as chalk and cheese.

These debates are as lively in Europe as they are in the US, and they may even be louder in the US. To illustrate, just take a look at all the books that have been published with titles like *University Inc.*, *College for Sale*, *The University in Ruins*, *Selling the Ivory Tower*, *In Defense of American Higher Education*, and *Wannabe U*. One review of the latter work nicely summarizes many of the issues that academics often complain about (Stevens, 2010, p. 1042): 'There is the gradual but relentless growth in numbers and titles of administrators. There is the obsession with measured admissions inputs, academic outputs, and institutional rankings. There is the overlay of organizational and environmental change on intergenerational faculty succession, such that senior faculty, with their purportedly obsolete conceptions of university life, are doomed to codger status. There is the large and pervasive importance of courting big donors. There is the chronic contraction of state support for the university and the constant hunt for new revenue streams. And there is of course the

'wannabe' phenomenon itself – the capacious prison of middling status in which countless ambitious schools and their personnel are sentenced to endless, unflattering upward comparisons.'

Designing the discourse

Reflecting on these debates and perceived issues for universities, predominantly in the western part of the world, I would like to take the liberty to stop for a little while and go back to the drawing board. I think that this is helpful, at least as a thought experiment, to get a clear vision of what it is that we want to achieve at the university and how we want to do it. The multiple debates – as outlined above – involve multiple tensions and possible design choices. That said, as a pragmatist, I am interested in the question what we can do about it in terms of crafting solutions together with all the stakeholders involved rather than in terms of describing an ideal vision or model for a university that needs to be implemented. In general, I believe that devising blueprints or *ideal types* for universities (for instance the ideal type Humboldtian university) is not really helpful in the professional community that a university forms – apart from the thought-provoking function that such ideals can have. Instead, drawing on design thinking in organization design as a reflective practice (Schön, 1984), I propose developing a set of guiding design principles that help to design the discourse about what the university could become.

In such a design science approach, the key parts to be specified are design elements and design principles. Design elements describe what can be altered in the design without changing the class of the object being designed. Design principles describe possible interventions that lead to a certain outcome or set of outcomes, and sometimes add an explanation of how these interventions lead to the outcomes. In management, steering away from 'fixed designs' and archetypal thinking, design thinking is amongst others applied to develop heuristics for effectual decision-making in entrepreneurship (Sarasvathy, 2004) and to describe practical design principles for corporate venturing practices (Van Burg, De Jager, Reymen & Cloodt, 2012).

To develop fully-fledged design elements and principles, a systematic review of the literature as well as codifying managerial practice is recommended. This essay is not the appropriate place for me

to develop a complete set of design principles and present a systematic literature review. Moreover, key to designing discourses is that this requires a bottom-up approach, without predefined outcomes in mind. This means that design elements and principles need to be specific enough to guide the discourse in order to make it relevant and to the point, but at the same time they need to be sufficiently generic to avoid predefining the direction of the discourse within the academic community, or *universitas*. Nevertheless, building on a set of review and overview papers available in the literature as well as general design science insights, I *can* present a preliminary set of design elements and discuss aspects that need to be included in design principles in order to help design the discourse about the university. As such, these design elements delineate the topics that need to become subject of the discourse.

1. The first design element is that of a shared vision for a university. To facilitate a fruitful discourse among professionals, there needs to be some form of shared vision or imagination (Romme, 2016). For universities, this means that the university community and management need to agree, at least to some extent, on what the future of the university should look like, given the context that the university is in (see Barnett, 2011). For many larger universities, in particular public universities, this will very likely take the form of a 'pragmatic vision' rather than a utopian ideal type (Badley, 2014).
2. A second key design element is the type of governance that fits this vision (cf. Trakman, 2008). The more specific the vision, the more explicitly university governance can be steered towards this vision. The design principle(s) for this element need to specify how to deal with the so-called *New Public Management* reforms that have been implemented in many public universities and that are focused on increasing efficiency in public organizations (cf. Christensen, 2011) and on measurable output such as publications (Flikkema, 2016). Moreover, HRM practices need to be defined (Musselin, 2013) that contribute to the vision that we propose (to illustrate: some research performance measurement systems do indeed increase research output, but they also reduce diversity and societal relevance, see Hicks, 2012).
3. With its dependence on vision and its effects on governance, the element of teaching quality, methods and approaches is a third

item to be considered (cf. Díaz-Méndez & Gummesson, 2012). This includes how the university – or departments within the university, if they have the autonomy to decide on these topics – deals with digital learning materials and environments such as massive open online courses (MOOCs).

4. Regarding the element of research quality, topics and approaches, design principles need to give guidance on how to organize research, how to fund research and how to evaluate research (cf. Hicks, 2012).
5. A final element concerns the way in which interactions with society and the economy are formed. Here, the design principles need to give guidance on how to deal not only with technology transfer, university-industry relationships (cf. Perkmann *et al.*, 2013) and university spin-offs (Van Burg, Romme, Gilsing & Reymen, 2008), but also with the question how the regional role of the university can be fulfilled.

Imagine the university

The role of the university in modern society has significantly changed over the years. Approximately fifty years ago, a university education was something for a highly selected group of people, but this situation has changed significantly. In the Netherlands today, for instance, half of the Dutch thirty-year-olds holds at least a Bachelor's degree; in the US, this number stands at 32%¹. The enormously increased role of university education alongside revolutions in research practice and changes in society and the economy make that 'old' models of universities may no longer hold – or at least fail to offer the utopia that we want to build with our current universities. Therefore, we need to imagine new futures; not just one future, but multiple futures, and we subsequently need to make careful, joint choices about what we want to do – while simultaneously staying flexible and open to change, new insights and new opportunities. In this respect, it is of key importance that universities form professional communities in which the community as whole – including students, academic and non-academic staff

¹ 'Nederland wordt steeds slimmer', DUO. Retrieved from www.dub.uu.nl/plussen-en-minnen/2014/09/15/nederland-wort-steeds-slimmer, November 21, 2015; 'Educational Attainment in the United States: 2014', U.S. Census Bureau. Retrieved from www.census.gov/hhes/socdemo/education/data/cps/2014/tables, November 21, 2015.

as well as management – can engage in joint sense-making of the imagined university. Here, design thinking can help us to shape potential development trajectories and to make deliberate choices about each of their design elements. In essence, this concerns a joint endeavour and a joint responsibility, so that we may shape the university of the future. After all, in the academic community everyone is responsible – although perhaps not always to the same extent – for the end result.

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