The Future of the University

Maarten Simons, Jan Masschelein

Essay – June 3, 2015

What if the university was a unique time and space where society could offer itself a future? Would this be a sufficient reason to offer the university a future?

Speed demons

It is fairly common knowledge that acceleration is a defining aspect of our capitalist society, and that the university in times of academic capitalism *[onlineopen.org/communising-or-immunising-the-humanities]* is both subject to increased acceleration and serves as a means of increasing the speed of society via innovation and development. Speeding up university life is clearly only possible as long as we begin by looking at – and organising – teaching, research and service in terms of productivity. This is precisely what seems to be happening today. Learning is increasingly organised as a production process that leads to clearly defined learning outcomes, and when it focuses on these outputs as quantifiable figures, improving learning becomes synonymous with making it more efficient and effective. Fast learning becomes the ideal where the student as professional learner becomes the speed demon of higher education.

The situation is similar when it comes to research, where it becomes increasingly difficult to ignore that research is seen as a production process, with knowledge as the produced output, which is increasingly regarded as a private good and is clearly considered not only a way of looking or speaking about research, but also a way of organising research. Project-based research seems to have almost become the norm, with its detailed formulation of work packages as production units and actually defining in advance the expected outputs. This approach maximises the possible return for investors. Implicitly or explicitly, the logic of productivity functions as the guideline for the research. Research becomes something to be managed with the proletarisation of the scholar as knowledge worker as its logical result.

But it is not just about fast education and fast research. The so-called service role of the university is also increasingly seen as organised in terms of acceleration. This is expressed in the popular idea of (societal or public) impact, and draws upon an apparatus of indicators used to measure the impact. That apparatus is clearly not just measuring or valuing academic contributions post factum, but increasingly these indicators act as constitutive elements for what is considered valued service and what is not. The logic of acceleration probably explains why there is no time at today's university; both students and professors are always busy, or rather, always involved in possible productive activities or projects. It is no surprise that multitasking has emerged as the highest virtue among these speed demons. The experience of "no time" actually means that all of one's time is productive time, and hence, all time that is not yet defined or occupied is considered as a scarce resource to be exploited for acceleration and productivity.

Academic bubbles

Perhaps less obviously, but equally important, is that with the emergence of the accelerated and accelerating university we have created an arena for speculation. Despite the call for a permanent reality check that might lead to a focus on the employability of the student upon graduating, on innovation and development in research, on practical relevance and the impact on service activities, there has been an increased accumulation of virtual value. Disconnected from so-called reality and utility, the permanent accumulation of value in learning, research and service becomes a goal in and of itself. In higher education, for instance, value is expressed in terms of (employable) competences. But competences refer to that which is assumed to enable someone to act in a particular way in a particular context. Higher education learning, by being oriented towards competences, is actually oriented towards an assumption. When we look at the detailed, carefully constructed and very long lists of competencies, it seems like we are re-entering the age of speculative philosophy. The professional learner who accumulates competences is someone who remains in a virtual state. And even worse, the value of what she has learned is subject to the law of supply and demand; the human capital in her portfolio does not have a stable value. There is no gold standard for education. The consequence is that the professional learner is not only asked to approach her learning as an investment, but also as a matter of speculation.

This is similar to what happens in research where publications and journals with citation indexes and impact factors and where patents are not just an indication of output, but actually the generally accepted currency for expressing academic value. Hence, we have academic speculation (including actual fraud) or at least a decisive concern for accumulation (or being cited). We should also not forget the complete disconnection between writing and actual reading, between making something public and actually gathering a public around something. The value of innovation has a similar logic. The focus on innovation, in fact, means that change has become a goal in itself. Competences, publications and innovations seem to have become the very bubbles of academic life.

Universitas studii

It is one thing to complain about or even mourn the current state of the university, but a very different thing to be curious and actually see where the university is re-emerging today. In the case of the latter, one needs to at least consider that the university no longer happens where one expects it to take place. We all too often continue to identify the university with that glorious model of the research university that originated in early-nineteenth-century Germany. The research university, including its self-awareness as an institution dedicated to truth, seems to still be the ideal measure for both defining the university as it is or should be, as well as to regret what it no longer is in these times of acceleration. Perhaps its possible today to gain some insight by observing the university from another angle, by simply returning to its Middle Ages origin, when the university was neither a sophisticated version of a cathedral school, nor an updated version of the ancient academy. The university clearly had it sources of inspiration, but at the same time, it had a distinctive form as a *universitas studii*. University does not primarily refer to the notion of "universal" – as the understanding related to German idealism would suggest – but to a *universitas*, a concrete gathering or association.

Specifically, the *universitas studii*, the association of students, is the place where knowledge – previously considered sacred and protected – somehow became public, and thus became subject to collective study. The divine "book of nature" became a secular study book. But it is crucial to note that this happened within the actual (physical) assembly of students. Thus, from the very beginning, the university included a very specific form of collective study, which was often not initiated by people of wisdom who wanted to

share their knowledge but by students themselves. More precisely, the *universitas* was established by those who wanted to become students, leaving the seclusion of the monastery to assemble in public spaces, halls, rooms and sometimes simply meeting on a public bridge or a street corner. In that sense, the establishment of a *universitas studii* was quite revolutionary because collective study practices broke open existing knowledge circuits and related power hierarchies, allowing collective thinking to create an openness or a future.

The specific *universitas* of study was thus more like a movement of (intellectual) concern than an institution. And being a student was less a role or position than a way of life. For that reason – and from the very beginning – the moving *universitas studii* was considered something dangerous, and was thus something that had to be tamed or neutralised by the church or the state – or by both church and state. But the university and the student have throughout history remained a possible thread, the mark of revolt, or at the very least, the materialisation of a time and a space to open up a future.

It is important to stress that the *universitas studii* always slowed things down. Being confronted with knowledge that has been made public (through public presentation and discussion), implies that it was looking for a way to relate to that knowledge, to think in the presence of a new world that was becoming increasingly real via that very knowledge. What we have is a world that can be named and discussed again, so that it becomes a challenge to do justice to that world. Slowing down was very much a consequence of the interruption of the usual ways of thinking, knowing and acting within the actual assembly of students. This probably helps explain why the current acceleration processes and the capitalisation of – and on – time are causing so much commotion; it touches at the heart of the university as the *universitas* of collective study. Unfortunately, today "slowing down" is often perceived as an adagio embraced by sore losers.

Collective experiments

This is not a plea to replace our modern idea of the university with the classic *universitas*. It is about changing the perspective by focusing on the collective and public practices of study that are not often associated with the essence of a university. The focus here is on experimental investigations and thinking done collectively and in public (and not on research done in the seclusion of the individual office or behind closed laboratory doors – which, in fact, don't really need the university). It means focusing on study within the assembly or *universitas* of students. These forms of university study are experiments in the sense that they always try to *meet with* the phenomenon (or text, or image) – which therefore has to be made present. They attempt to understand what this meeting actually means through description, explanation and narration. It is not just about knowledge production or transfer, but also about putting knowledge and what one sees and thinks to the test. What happens is that a new world opens up for the students through study, allowing them to confront questions that address notions of that new world. Experimental here refers minimally to the assumption or belief that the outcome is and cannot be defined in advance, and that the activity of study cannot be some planned, output-driven production process, but always implies a test or attempt.

Entering the university, and becoming a student, which also includes professors and researchers, means being open to an experimental life. This process is collective in the sense that students become witnesses to these attempts. For example, a professor who discusses issues refers to knowledge, but not without hesitation because there is always the chance that something will arise to cause hesitation. Through interactions and as part of these gatherings something is transformed into an issue of common concern. At that moment, the process of finding common descriptions, explanations and narratives can commence.

The test here not only refers to adequate methodology that guarantees validity and reliability by defining in advance what should and what should not be taken into account. It also means thinking and performing research so that it can be shared, questioned, challenged without knowing the how and whom in advance. This in effect removes all sorts of academic protections (or at least questions these protections). Here the lecture, seminar and science laboratory – when they actually occur as a collective, unprotected study – are considered examples of a collective experiment. But without a doubt, when we look at what goes on in university gatherings, unhindered by university ideas and ideals, other examples begin to emerge. What happens in these contemporary forms of the *universitas* is that research is returned to the students (and professors), which allows university studies to be truly experimental again instead of merely productive, collective instead of merely protected and privatised. But these so-called teaching and study activities should not be seen as breaking or interrupting research productivity, however. To the contrary, research in the presence of students is part of the intensification and publication process of research. Students should not be merely regarded as those who stand to be informed by the research (and publications), but should be actually involved from the very beginning. University study occurs in public forms of inquiry; students are involved *in actu*, when studies are performed publicly.

Careful vigilance

Study gatherings contribute to the creation of a future, not by producing learning outcomes or knowledge but by putting knowledge and science to a public test. This is a particular way of inserting ideas, object or concepts into our shared world. What study achieves can be compared, as Isabelle Stengers notes, to an "out of equilibrium" state that makes something appear that transforms our relation to what is at stake. The future here is not associated with an increase in knowledge or capital, or associated with progress, but with a fundamental uncertainty: "we don't know what the future will look like", or "we don't even know what we don't know". The consequence of this is that we do not know whether, how and to what extent rational thought, our necessary abstractions and any new facts (and sometimes – e.g., genes – a new nature) that our science produces will affect our lives. This is exactly why we have to be remain vigilant. We should be careful, *faire attention*; the *universitas studii* are forms of association that allow us to be cautious, to pay attention and thus, to hesitate. This clearly implies that, *as students*, we slow down for what is at stake. We suspend the logic of investment, productivity and acceleration.

Slowing down is, thus, not simply embraced as an imperative to counter the imperative of speeding up. Slowing down is regarded as a consequence or an effect of collective study practices. This is not just some plea for slow science but for the renewal or reinvention of university study as collective public experiments. Reinventing slow education instead of organising fast learning tracks. When students get involved in collective study it allows them to find new or alternative futures rather than simply searching for predefined (learning and research) outcomes. Indeed, the assumption of collective study is that there is always something more important to be considered, that new issues may arise and that there are no fixed destinies and predefined futures. To phrase this in a more positive way: university study is a form of gathering that allows society to discuss and shape possible common destinies and futures.

This, then, would be one reason why society should offer the university a future. When you are involved in experimentation as a university student (or professor) – in both lecture halls and labs – one is always simultaneously being confronted with new ways of organising society and with what matters – in other words, new and shared futures. It clearly implies recognising that university study is not confined to an institution that claims its name but is increasingly involved in taming and neutralising the concept of study by framing it as a mode of fast, individualised learning. This is a trend we should resist! We should resist by recuperating time and space to allow for the creation of collective study practices that

utilise both old and new tools.

Sources of inspiration

- Blacker, D.J. (2013). *The Falling Rate of Learning and the Neoliberal Endgame*. Winchester and Washington, DC: Zero Books.
- De Ridder-Symoens, H. (ed.) (1992). *A History of the University in Europe vol. I.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Latour, B. (2004). *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy.* London: Harvard University Press.
- Rheinberger, H.J. (2007). "Man weiss nicht genau, was man nicht weiss. Über die Kunst, das Unbekannte zu erforschen". *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 5 May 2007.
- Slaughter, S., and L.L. Leslie (1997). *Academic Capitalism: Politics, Policies and the Entrepreneurial University.* Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Stengers, I. (2013). *Une autre science est possible. Manifeste pour un ralentissement des sciences*. Paris: La Découverte.
- Stiegler, B. (2010). *Taking Care of Youth and the Generations.* Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Editorial Common Knowledge *[onlineopen.org/common-knowledge]*

Maarten Simons is Professor of Educational Policy, also at the Laboratory for Education and Society at the K.U. Leuven. Together they are author of *Globale Immunität. Ein kleine Kartographie des Europäischen Bildungsraum* (2005, Berlin / Zurich: Diaphanes, and Jenseits der Exzellenz) and *Eine kleine Morphologie der Welt-Universität* (2010, Berlin / Zürich: Diaphanes). More recently they co-authored *In Defence of the School: A Public Issue* (2013, Leuven, free downloadable: ppw.kuleuven.be). They co-edited *The Learning Society from the Perspective of Governmentality* (2007, Oxford: Blackwell) and *Rancière, Public Education and the Taming of Democracy* (2011, Oxford: Blackwell).
Jan Masschelein is Professor of Philosophy of Education at the Laboratory for Education and Society at the K.U. Leuven, Belgium.

Crosslinks

Common Knowledge: onlineopen.org/common-knowledge
Communising or Immunising (the) Humanities: onlineopen.org/communising-or-immunising-the-humanities

Tags

Capitalism, Commons, Public Domain

This text was downloaded on November 30, 2026 from
Open! Platform for Art, Culture & the Public Domain
onlineopen.org/the-future-of-the-university