University Futures: What’s Possible?

Though technological shifts will continue to have an impact on how we learn, how research is conducted, and how universities are managed, there will still be many universities in 2020 that look similar to the institutions of today. But, unless a significant reorientation occurs in our understanding of what a university is, universities as we know them today may not have a future extending very far beyond 2020. As someone who has worked in universities for 28 years, I want them to have a future. Many of us do. But what we want won’t mater if the thinking that shapes the idea of a university and what it does continues to be informed by the past rather than the future.

At the core of this thinking is the assumption that, regardless of changes in other aspects of life and society, there will always be a university. However, there has never been a single idea that truly encompasses the concept of the university. Indeed, thinking around this institution has been interpreted in various ways at different times. This thinking has been applied to national university systems, explored philosophically in any number of ways, and reclaimed by so many writers that there are now multiple contested ideas explored philosophically in any number of ways, and reclaimed by so many writers that there are now multiple contested ideas that are so deeply embedded in our minds that we often don’t know we have them or the power they have.

In the few years leading up to 2020, my hope is that the people who lead, manage, work, and study in universities; the policy and decision-makers who stand outside the university and decide its operating parameters; the businesses who employ graduates; and the new and emerging alternative universities can find a way to come together to think about the future university, starting from the premise that today’s university is not tomorrow’s university. If we want to reframe, reimagine, and retool the university, we need to let go of the past. This is the only way to let the range of alternative possible futures emerge. This thinking is not about predicting another single future for the university; rather, it is about escaping the constraints of thinking that no longer helps us in order to build new images about university futures that are able to balance both history and future. It is about creating a university that is ready for the future — no matter what future emerges.

I challenge the assumption that there will always be a future university, in my research I explore the many contested ideas now shaping the future of the university to see how those both enable and constrain that future. I’m not suggesting that people aren’t thinking about the future university, because they are. Everywhere. In their work, most of these people use old thinking, old ideas; they forecast out from today, conceptualizing a university that might look different, that may do things in very different ways, but that will still have teaching and research at its core. For these researchers, the future university probably still operates on a physical campus and is still populated by managers, academics, and students. Somehow, this model of the university will continue to be funded, and the social roles supported by this model will remain strong and uncontested. Conceptualizations of this thinking project an assumed linear future based on what the authors believe to be true about universities today. In reality though, there is a range of futures that await the university. Some of these forecasted futures include:

/ A reimagined retreat to the past in which academic work returns to the center and the university is re-born as a public space
/ A corporate university that is indistinguishable from other businesses
/ A digital university driven by artificial intelligence that creates a techno-learning environment whose form cannot really yet be envisaged
/ A socially connected university where learning and research are co-created by learning communities to support their needs
/ A dinosaur university – one that becomes a historical relic perhaps seen only in museums or in very few locations

These assumed futures are defended fiercely by those who believe in them. However, these narrow perspectives constrain thinking about the university and what it does, as well as about what needs to be done today to prepare for the futures that are coming. These ideas are all underpinned by the assumption that there will always be a university. This is a comforting yet dangerous way of thinking in a world swarming with interconnected, complex, and deep change that is dismantling the traditional university’s role as a social institution.

In 2020, the university as we know it in 2016 will still be with us – though significant change may occur even in that short time. The university’s self-definition of its role, which is already being challenged today, may no longer be accepted as relevant or valid by 2020. To date, this self-definition has allowed the university, as a social institution, to adapt and change throughout its eight-century history. But, even in 2016, it’s becoming clearer that the future of the university is being increasingly defined by outside stakeholders. While there are many competing ideas about what the university should be and what it should do today – most of which are derived from the past and the present rather than from thinking about the future – we are missing the opportunity to imagine possible futures that will help create an idea of the university that will be relevant in the long term. We need future-oriented new thinking that will assure that some model of the university continues to exist as a place for dreaming about what’s changing in the world and how we can respond to that change to ensure we have sustainable futures for individuals, societies, and the planet. Our thinking about the future university needs to be disrupted, and it needs to be disrupted soon. It needs to shift from individual to collaborative – not in the spirit of the hackathon, but in the spirit of working together to reimagine those deep systemic ideas about the university, the contested ideas that are so deeply embedded in our minds that we often don’t know we have them or the power they have.

I don’t know if the university has a future. I hope it does, but I suspect that hope isn’t going to be enough to sustain the university as we know it today. I do know that, unless we can think about the future in new ways, today’s contested ideas will constrain us from exploring the many future possibilities that are now nascent. A new way of thinking about the university will acknowledge that relying on the present form of the university as a starting point for thinking about the future has little value. This way of thinking will reorient us to the future and help us loosen our grip on the idea that the university of today will be around forever. It will help us imagine what might reshape today’s university and refocus our energies on collaboratively imagining what the future university might do and what its social role might be. Only with that grounding in the future will we have the base from which to understand what the future university will need to look like, what we will call it, what it will do, and what role it will have in our future societies. Most importantly, with this forward-looking thinking, we can start working today to ensure we get the university we want rather than a broken down version of today’s university or one that is created for us by someone else’s conception of the future.

Maree Conway is a strategic foresight practitioner and researcher at Thinking Futures.

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