Contested ideas and possible futures for the university

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Abstract
Purpose – This study aims to identify and explore the nature of ideas of the university in the present to demonstrate how the ideas both enable and constrain the emergence of its possible futures.
Design/methodology/approach – An integrated literature review of work on the western university was undertaken to identify the defining elements of ideas discussed in the literature – purpose, social legitimacy and embedded future – for the university in each idea.
Findings – Four contested and co-existing ideas of the university in the present were identified, and the nature of their co-existence and their underpinning assumptions about the purpose and social legitimacy and the embedded future held by each idea are made explicit.
Research limitations/implications – The paper focuses only on public, non-profit western universities as they exist in Australia, Europe, the UK, Canada and the USA in the present. Whether other forms of the university such as private non-profit and private for-profit “fit” into the four ideas and university types identified here was not explored and is a topic for future research.
Originality/value – The paper draws on an extensive literature to identify a new frame to understand the evolution of multiple ideas of the university, the impact of these ideas on the empirical organisational form of the university and how they shape assumptions about the university’s possible futures.
Keywords Universities, Ideas of the university, University futures

Paper type Research paper

Introduction
This paper presents some preliminary findings from current doctoral research that explores how today’s discourse constructed in the literature about the western university’s possible futures is constrained by contested ideas of the university, tacit cultural constructs that shape understandings of the university’s purpose and social legitimacy. The term “the idea of the university” (the idea) probably entered the higher education lexicon when Newman’s Idea of a University was published in the mid-nineteenth century, although its defining elements have coalesced over time, starting from the eleventh century when the first western university emerged in Bologna in the late-twelfth century (Perkin, 2007). This nineteenth century idea is termed the traditional idea here, and it shaped an understanding of the university’s purpose and social legitimacy until around the middle of the twentieth century. The idea represents an understanding of the university’s purpose and social legitimacy that has come to be accepted as true in context, so much so that it is taken for granted, and its formative assumptions remain largely unquestioned. The idea shapes and maintains what is believed to be real and true about the university, and these beliefs inform action and decision-making about both the university in the present and what is accepted as its possible futures.

It is argued here that the traditional idea is now only one of four contested ideas (the ideas) that co-exist in the present. While the genesis and defence of the traditional idea remain located within universities, two other ideas now span the institutional boundary between the
university and society – the managerial idea that was imposed on the university by the state and the reframed idea that seeks to establish alternative university types beyond the neoliberal university of the present. The fourth idea – the dismissive idea – originates entirely outside the university and appears to have little interest in either its present or its future. These four ideas not only hold incommensurate views of the university’s purpose and social legitimacy in the present, they also each embed quite different images for the future university and for the future of the university.

This paper begins from the position that, when considered separately, each idea constrains individual and collective understanding of the university’s possible futures. By taking a more integrative stance, the paper shows how the discourse can expand beyond the confines and limited scope of any individual idea to surface the power of the integrated ideas, articulated and made visible. The assumptions underpinning each idea can be challenged for validity and relevance, and the meanings constructed from those assumptions can be consciously tested to assess whether they enable or constrain emergent futures. The discourse may then be able to move from its current state – in which terms such as “toxic” (Smyth, 2017), “invasion” (Saunders, 2010), “violence” (Kalfa et al., 2018), “assault” (Bailey and Freedman, 2011; Barkawi, 2013) and “divide and conquer” (Scott, 2012) are used – to a more positive, inclusive and informed debate; one that enables all possible futures for the university to be valued and considered. Such a discourse would develop a wider, deeper and longer-term view of the university’s potential future operating environments in which today’s actions and policy and decision-making will have an impact.

The evolution of four ideas

The western university has always exhibited a chameleon-like ability to adapt to meet the needs of its changing societies (Perkin, 2007; Abeles, 2014), but it finds itself in a novel position in the early years of the twenty-first century. The value of its present form as the neoliberal university, and indeed its existence altogether, is being challenged by two new ideas. The evolution of the four ideas is discussed in this section and focuses on three points in the university’s history when new types of the university’s organisational form began to emerge: the nineteenth century modern university, the neoliberal university from around 1990 and the university in the present. Three core assumptions are identified for each idea:

1. the university’s purpose;
2. the university’s social legitimacy; and
3. the future for the university as an organisation.

Purpose is defined as how what a university is and why it exists is understood. Purpose helps define what makes the university different from other organisations in specific contexts and times, as well as who is entitled to define that purpose.

Social legitimacy is defined as a “generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs and definitions” (Suchman, 1995, p. 574), the degree to which services provided by the university are considered fit for purpose in context and time.

“The future” is defined as 2035 – far enough into the future to move beyond the “official future” (Van Der Heijden, 2005) and to ensure thinking moves beyond the conceptual limits imposed by the three- to five-year timeframes of conventional planning and/or forecasting to generate a space where new and assumption-challenging views about the university’s possible futures can emerge.
The traditional idea: a university left alone

The western university’s origins can be traced back to the monastery and cathedral schools of medieval times, but it was the establishment of the University of Berlin in 1810 that signalled the emergence of the modern university, the precursor of the university of the present (Shils, 1992). Wilhelm von Humboldt is credited with establishing the university as part of a broader restructuring of the Prussian education system (Grafton, 1981), as an institution “founded and maintained by the State, yet enjoying as its most precious privilege the widest freedom of research and teaching [. . .]. The State [. . .] in the government of the university only interfered as far as was absolutely necessary” (Tierney, 1937, p. 355). This university was viewed as:

[. . .] the moral soul of society and the source of the nation’s culture and survival. To ensure the highest form of knowledge (wissenschaft), absolute freedom of teaching and learning (lehrfreiheit and lernfreiheit) was imperative (Perkin, 2007, p. 160).

The assumed autonomy, the university separate from society in which academics could manage their own time and work without interference, and a distant relationship with the state are fundamental characteristics of the traditional idea that remain strong today.

When Newman published the Idea of the University in 1853, the traditional idea as a concept was given discernible definition and form in the literature and incorporated some of von Humboldt’s organising principles, particularly the pursuit of truth and the university as free from state control (Bahti, 1987). Despite the fact that Newman’s idea about the meaning of a university education was a construction shaped by a very specific idea for a very specific context at a particular time, his singular idea has been reified to the extent that Rothblatt (1977, p. 328) suggests “that all modern thinking on university education is a series of footnotes to Newman’s lectures and essays”. The combination of the establishment of the modern university in Berlin by von Humboldt and the publication of Newman’s lectures is considered here to be the primary source of the traditional idea. Of note is that the term “the idea of a university” was largely superseded in the twentieth century by the slight but significant adaption to “the idea of the university”.

This idea was shaped and defined by academics from within the university. Their view saw responsibility for higher learning, knowledge generation and transmission to society as existing solely within the university’s domain, generated by academics in quiet reflection and in their own time, without interference or distraction from government or broader societal demands. This view of the university projected a future where the organisational form would simply continue unchanged – this future was assured, irrespective of the scope or depth of challenges emerging in its social context. The traditional idea’s three core assumptions are:

1. Purpose: that the university has a critical social role to search for the truth;

2. Social legitimacy: that the university is autonomous and belongs to the academics, with their work benefitting society indirectly in some way at some point in time; and

3. Assumed future: by virtue of its very longevity, the university has an assured future, because of its self-evident role and legitimacy.

The managerial idea: a university that obeys

The managerial idea began to be articulated from around 1990 when managerialism became a reality in universities. As governments sought to reform management in all public sector organisations via new public management (Bleiklie, 1998), the university’s purpose was challenged in ways that saw the structure and operations of the modern university all but disappear, replaced first by the entrepreneurial university in the late-twentieth century (Slaughter and Leslie, 1997; Clark, 1998; Vogel and Kaghan, 2001; Jessop, 2017;
Király and Géring, 2019) and then by the neoliberal university in the twenty-first century (Davies et al., 2006; Di Leo, 2016; Peters, 2013). There was a swift but ineffectual reaction against managerialism by academics, particularly in response to any suggestion that the university and a business were alike (Baldwin, 1997), the loss of collegiality (Smyth, 1989; Lindsay, 1995; McNay and Schuller, 1995), viewing students as customers (Baldwin, 1994; Scott, 1999; Franz, 1998) and to the “invasion” of business-like language into the operations of the university (Deem, 2011; Reed, 1998; Manne, 1999). The power to define the university’s purpose had already moved outside to governments, with the university now treated as a public organisation like any other, its continuing existence depending on meeting government demands. The traditional idea was displaced as the dominant influence on the discourse about the university, moving it into resistance mode.

Importantly too, the managerial idea was conveyed into universities by the university manager, a new staff group that began to emerge in the 1970s, as administrators sought to professionalise their work and whose members occupied roles separate from those of academics. This period also saw the emergence of academic managers (Moodie, 1994; Parker and Jarry, 1995; Bramble, 1996) – that is, academics who moved from teaching and research to management and leadership roles. Together, these two new competing professions (Abbott, 1988) of academic managers and professional managers have come to dominate internal decision and policy-making about the university’s structure, processes, management and work practices necessary to maintain the university’s social legitimacy, as defined by the government. One result of the emergence of this new occupational class was a perceived growing divide between academics and managers in the literature (Warner and Palfreyman, 1996; Conway, 2000; Dobson, 2000; McMillin, 2002). The image of the future embedded in the managerial idea is one where the neoliberal university continues to be closely connected to national goals, its structure and operations resembling a business, with legitimacy provided by the government. The university is effective and efficient in what it does; it is measured and audited. The managerial idea’s three core assumptions are:

1. **Purpose**: that the university’s role is defined by the state to meet national economic priorities and needs;
2. **Social legitimacy**: that the university is a public organisation like any other; and
3. **Assumed future**: that the neoliberal university will always be fit for purpose as long as it continues to respond to the dictates of market capitalism.

For academics, however, the image of the future generated by the managerial idea is one that sees the university as an instrument of the state that has lost its soul (Alvares, 2014; Blackmore, 2016) – or perhaps has made a Faustian pact and “sold” it. The literature displays outrage at what has been “done to” the university (Slaughter and Rhoades, 2000; Davies et al., 2006; Shore, 2010; Samier, 2010; Hill, 2016). It was this outrage, expressed often as a “loss of control” by academics to frame the university’s purpose, role and functions (Reed, 1999), that gave rise to the Reframed Idea which is, essentially, the **absolute** rejection of the managerial idea and the very concept of a neoliberal university.

**The reframed idea: a university redesigned**

The Reframed Idea emerged in the second decade of the twenty-first century. The literature shows “a shift from conceptions of resistance as subversion or opposition to one of resistance as transformation” (Amsler, 2011) and indicates an acceptance of the reality of the neoliberal university. More notably, there is a recognition that academics were too late to realise exactly what was happening to their university in the 1980s and 1990s (Davies et al., 2006; Newfield, 2016), and that they were actually complicit in enabling the embedding of neoliberal approaches in the university (Barkawi, 2013; Kalfa et al., 2018). This realisation...
continues the outrage that academics no longer control their work or the university’s purpose, but it has not engendered a sense of hopelessness, instead creating a sense of urgency for change, as Bacevic (2018) describes:

The main problem is the ecosystem in which universities are [now] embedded. If we want to imagine new communities of knowledge, we must set them up in a new ecosystem, not governed by the same incentives, rewards and penalizations of the performance-based university. We should expand the space of knowledge creation and innovation beyond the borders of universities and explore new modes of organizing.

Those who hold this idea have essentially decided not to play the neoliberal game anymore. They are very deliberately seeking to establish new forms of the university, outside the mainstream higher education sector and theoretically beyond the reach of the managerial idea and its manifestation as the neoliberal university (Butcher, 2016). They seek “a real alternative, neither private nor public, that undermines […] the logic of the capitalist state on which it [the neoliberal university] is premised” (Neary and Winn, 2016, p. 3).

Essentially, this idea is driving a search for new structures and ways of operating (Bacevic et al., 2018; Facer, 2018). These new universities are seeking to take back the right to define the basis of their social legitimacy, but because they are still embedded in current legislation such as cooperatives (Glaser, 2017; Altuna, 2016), their relationship with the state remains, albeit not as strong or as invasive as the more direct government–neoliberal university relationship. What is different is that while the reframed universities may need to meet legislative requirements, they may have relative freedom to design their structure, operations and work practices that “place scholars rather than managers at the heart of higher education policy” (Boden et al., 2012, p. 22). The Reframed Idea is based on the following core assumptions:

1. **purpose**: that the university has a necessary and foundational social role to generate knowledge for society;
2. **social legitimacy**: that the university exists in and for society; and
3. **assumed future**: by virtue of its longevity and its assumed public role, the university has an assured future.

Because the Reframed Idea is emergent, it is not certain whether the new universities will take their social legitimacy from acceptance by society (in the form of a social compact, for example) or by the legislative arrangements used to establish them. If it is the former – acceptance by society – then the reframed and dismissive ideas (see below) will both exist entirely outside the university.

**The idea: a university no more**

Another idea probably first emerged around 2008 as the first massive open online courses (MOOCs) when claims were made about a future without the university (Webley, 2012). Today, in a post-truth society (Wilber, 2017; Peters, 2018; Lewandowsky et al., 2017), with surveillance capitalism a reality (Zuboff, 2019), trust in public institutions continuing to decline (Newton and Norris, 2018), access to knowledge open to all via the internet (Williams, 2011), the rise of individualism and declining social belief in the public good (Simmel, 2007) and increasing costs of a university education (Pearlstein, 2015; Myton, 2018; Moran and Powell, 2018), this idea questions the assumed value of the university in its present form. Now, new forms of learning, research, knowledge generation and access are free or low cost for students. Personalisation of learning experiences, “just-in-time” delivery and micro-credentials are becoming more common as mainstream learning options are delivered online or outside the university (Moodie, 2016; McCowan, 2017; Marshall, 2018; Morris, 2018).
Unlike the three other ideas which are generated from different ideas of the university’s purpose, this idea focuses primarily on the university’s social legitimacy – its value and impact in society and its perceived inability to not only provide affordable access to higher education but also to address major social, environmental and global challenges. Brewer (2017) exhibits the frustration that is typical of the dismissive idea:

But do any of these organizations take a fully integrative approach to the coupling of human and ecological systems capable of designing and implementing policy solutions […] to avoid planetary-scale systemic collapse? Do they train people to intervene in ways that can save us from running ourselves off a civilizational cliff? […] Are universities really failing humanity? I’m afraid the answer currently is yes. Will they continue to do so? That is a matter of culture design — only if we choose to remain on our current course knowing systemic collapse will arise somewhere down the road [bold in original] (Brewer, 2017).

The university’s relevance is diminished within society, and its continued existence is no longer assured. Many suggest that the university’s value is now so limited that it is no longer even needed (Deuze, 2018; Bacevic, 2017; Jenkins, 2018). The university has, therefore, been dismissed – its social legitimacy withdrawn by society.

Because the dismissive idea is embryonic, its exact form and power to disrupt the traditional, managerial and/or Reframed Idea, and their assumed futures are not yet apparent. What is very clear, however, is that this idea generates an image of the future that does not include the university of the present. The three core assumptions of the dismissive idea are:

1. **purpose**: the university has no valid purpose; it has passed its “use by date”, learning can happen in society;
2. **social legitimacy**: the university is no longer needed for access to knowledge and credentials by individuals and society; and
3. **assumed future**: the university in its current organisational form does not have a future.

In summary, the traditional idea is located wholly within the university, but now has a porous boundary. The managerial idea spans the boundary between the university and society, having the impact of weakening the traditional idea. The Reframed Idea is also on the boundary, but in contrast to the managerial idea, it draws its strength from the traditional idea to enable it to move outside the neoliberal university. The dismissive idea exists outside the university entirely and is moving away from it, seeking out alternative structures that are perceived to be more fit-for-purpose in the present. New ideas will also continue to emerge over time, and these can be viewed as weak signals or latents on the periphery of the university’s broader social environment – “features of reality embedded beneath its surface” (Poli, 2011, p. 68) that are no less real than visible features that allow us to see the future as both active and dormant in the present. Adam and Groves (2007, p. 172) see latents as “processes that set future presents in motion”.

The “idea of the university” is one of the most discussed and dissected topics in the literature about the university reviewed in this research. Barnett (2018, p. 1) terms that literature the great tradition, 200 years of “a steady stream of writings, in which writers have set out not just their individual thoughts but also their hopes and their urgings. They have sought to promote an idea of the university of their own and to change thinking about the practices in the university”. What is most notable is that a concept of the idea of the university has remained strong over those 200 years, even in the face of significant critique, redesign and dismissal (Pelikan, 1994; Maskell and Robinson, 2002; Kelly, 2008; Barnett, 2013b). What is a blindspot in that literature, however, is recognition that the idea – in whatever form – has always been a critical primary shaping factor in the emergence of the university’s possible futures, one that remains largely invisible in the present discourse.
Concluding comments

That four co-existing ideas exist in the present matters for three reasons. First, an adversarial relationship between the traditional and managerial ideas defines the present discourse, to the extent that any understanding of the nascent disruptive power of the reframed and dismissive ideas to shape the university’s possible futures is constrained by the unchallenged assumptions about the university’s purpose and social legitimacy held in the traditional and managerial ideas.

Second, contested understandings and perceptions about the university in the present shape different and conflicting ideas about its possible futures. The managerial idea is currently dominant in the discourse, and its future image is based on an assumption that the neoliberal university will continue to be accorded social legitimacy into the future – that is, that today’s university will be the university that the futures needs. This is a tenuous assumption, simply because the future cannot not be “known” with any certainty – a future based upon an unchallenged belief in a “business as usual” existence is intrinsically tenuous.

Third, if the ideas shape different beliefs about the university’s purpose and its possible futures, then the idea held by those who define the university’s social legitimacy in the present becomes important. The emergence of the managerial idea, for example, shows how quickly the traditional idea – a centuries-old and deeply embedded belief within the university – was undermined by social changes that moved the power to define its purpose and social legitimacy outside the university to governments. The reality is that the continued existence of the neoliberal form of the university is not predetermined, and its currently assumed future is not a given. Instead, the empirical nature of the university today is better understood as a structure that will probably be reshaped by new ideas about the university’s purpose that has not yet taken shape, and that will likely bring with it another contest for the power to define its purpose and social legitimacy.

Understanding the connections between all ideas and their embedded possible futures is critical because the present discourse holds the assumption that “A modern society is unthinkable without a university” (Pelikan, 1994, p. 13) – a taken-for-granted assumption that effectively generates a “discourse trap” that is unlikely to help people who care about the university today to explore its possible futures in any meaningful way (Miller, 2018). Understanding the four ideas as perspectives on the present university that hold four distinct pathways into the future provides the opportunity for what are now individual perspectives to be integrated in an explicit way to allow the discourse to move beyond the cognitive constraints of “contest”, “resistance” and the language of war (Perkins, 2007) that characterise the literature today – that is, beyond the discourse trap and beyond constraints of the individual ideas themselves. The full range of possible futures for the university can then be made visible, valued, viewed as plausible and open for exploration and challenge.

Integrating the past, present and futures of and for the university, therefore, requires a transformed discourse, one that accepts as valid “new ideas, new imaginative ideas, that are going to help us break out of the present imaginaries [about the future university] […]” (Barnett, 2013a, p. 28). That is, we need to think about the future university in new ways (Stein and de Andreotti, 2016), resist the “‘capture’, ‘foreclosure’ and ‘colonisation’ of [its] future, and […] [prise and keep] new possibilities open” (Amsler and Facer, 2017). If today’s discourse continues to draw only on the university’s past (the traditional idea) and present (the managerial idea), the full range of its possible futures will not be made visible, the discourse will continue to privilege the future embedded in the managerial idea and the university as an institution risks being blindsided by societal and historical change.
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