

# Neoliberalism, Economism and Higher Education



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## FOREWORD

This book originated from a series of talks conducted by its editor during the last five years. These conversations were precipitated by an intellectual desire to understand and explain a number of complex, overlapping or otherwise closely related tendencies, often worrisome, of our present (post)modern culture, tendencies often included under the label of globalisation. Some fifty distinguished and internationally renowned social thinkers and experts whose writings I happened to know well were invited to share their insights into some of the most persistent and dangerous cultural problems of our times. Sociologists, anthropologists, philosophers, urbanists, architects, ecologists and educators were asked to comment on some of the questions posed by the present editor. Most of them agreed and the outcome was several dozens of exchanges first published by Lithuania's leading cultural monthly journal *Kulturos barai*, (by way of adhering to a wise maxim, *think globally, act locally*). While conducting this series of talks, however, I had a feeling that despite the remarkably deep interest the readers of a Lithuanian cultural media might have, these conversations deserved to reach a wider, international, audience because of their topicality. Originally conducted in English, they were waiting to be mediated further. On the other hand, the form of conversations was seen as an advantage, allowing the individuals involved to transgress the boundaries of a standard academic essay focused on one particular issue. As a result, a collection of some twenty—three conversations was published in 2017 under the title *Rethinking Modernism and the Built Environment*, and is here followed by a companion volume focused on higher education and its connections with the dominating discourses of current economics and the surprisingly aggressive and often winning politics of neoliberalism.

This volume attempts to inquire into the discourse of economism and neoliberalism as well as their “avatars”—the cult of efficiency, competition, ranking, etc., and how this discourse shapes the present reality of higher education in a variety of seemingly distant contexts with different histories. Though I would perhaps tend to agree with one of my conversation partners that the present course in higher education might be irreversible, I still maintain a modest yet enduring belief in the power of reasoning and rational critique. Moreover, the current economic regime

that is reshaping the university “business” worldwide is already showing signs of a deep and long crisis arguably leading to an inevitable collapse. It does indeed seem that that regime fails to effectively deal with both global and local problems, while artificially “globalizing” them. Of course, the discussions going on in this book go beyond the ideology and politics of neoliberalism and reach toward other aspects of our social and cultural being. I do hope that these timely conversations will contribute to a rising awareness of the fact that many seemingly distant problems are in fact closely connected and often trigger each other.

The thanks of the present editor are first and foremost due to social thinker and theologian John B. Cobb Jr. whose writings, discovered years ago, made me question and rethink many of the dominant assumptions reigning in contemporary society, and enabled me to recognize how widespread is the failure to understand those assumptions and their consequences. Our lengthy conversation made me reconsider my original intellectual “itinerary” for the series and finally brought me to some of the brilliant social thinkers and experts whose works I did not know then. Some of them are, however, now available here. My thanks go to all the contributors as well professor Dr. Norman Lillegard who has helped me to polish the English language of the chapters presented in this book, and especially my own portions of these conversations.



## INTRODUCTION

# HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE MONOCULTURE OF CONSUMPTION

ALMANTAS SAMALAVIČIUS

The modern university as we know it, i.e. the institution that was traditionally supported and maintained as first and foremost a public instrument of higher education and research, is undergoing a significant, dramatic, and perhaps as some observers suggest even irreversible transformation. Almost everywhere in the Northern and Southern hemispheres, universities are giving up some of their former aims and commitments (among them the shaping of a public character and civic values), and no longer tend to speak of their “mission.” Instead they are aspiring to become participants in a global educational/research market, fiercely competing for higher status not only in their respective national or regional arenas but also worldwide. In order to be fit for the pursuit of these new goals universities as well as other establishments of higher education (colleges and institutes) are adapting to the rapidly changing conditions of the global marketplace and are busily restructuring their identities, policies, goals and aspirations. Moreover, their present structure and modes of performance are radically altered, more often than not, while adopting a model formerly characteristic of large profit—seeking businesses. These are the most obvious changes during recent decades. Together with these, should we say, “fundamental” changes, principles of the market are being incorporated and implemented in the sphere of higher education almost universally.

Universities and colleges today are being run as if they were nothing more than profit—seeking business enterprises, although the products they are selling are education, research and, last but not least, a status that supposedly provides financial value to the graduates. University administrators are no longer members of academic communities though some of them still hold Ph. D’s or equivalent degrees. They are now more usually appointed than being elected by their peers as in earlier periods in

the history of universities, and now are often far better paid and more socially secure than the other “ordinary” members of the academic staff, who are increasingly likely to work on a contract—basis and have no possibility of being tenured. The business of university administrators today is to ensure that their institutions move up in national and international ratings of various sorts, to get more financial resources for research activities and at the same time receive positive public reviews. These priorities are replacing the supervision of purely academic matters, which seem to be less and less important, at least until some new “culture war” issue threatens the reputation of an academic enterprise.

Universities are also subjected to external financial pressures and thus they reshape their internal structures according to the demands of a growing spirit of commercialization, financial profit and entrepreneurship. Commercial principles are being applied more and more systematically to higher education all over the world and this sort of universalization is often used as both proof of and excuse for the necessity to implement changes in each and every locality. In continental Europe the so—called Bologna Declaration (which has hardly had any effect on the UK) triggered policies designed to enable competition with the USA in the sphere of higher education/research and development activities undertaken by universities and colleges. Growing demands to become competitive on the global market and to be able to “sell” research production to the states and the private sector had the effect of sidelining issues of public education or discussions of any deeper purpose to higher education, as if such discussion could only amount to pretentious and empty “philosophizing.” The space of higher education, when the pursuit of a common good is sidelined, is increasingly filled with a neo—liberal agenda implemented with great rigor and persistence. Competitiveness, entrepreneurial spirit, effectiveness and marketability of produced knowledge have become common denominators among globalized universities that seem to have given up both their pursuit of a common good and any educational goals transcending the demands of the current market.

## **The University and Neoliberal Globalisation**

In his discussion of the historical phases of the contemporary university Portuguese sociologist Boaventura de Sousa Santos observed that the modern state university has lost its focus on public service to the state and that this important shift was caused and institutionalized by the model of economic development widely known as “neoliberal globalisation,”

launched during the last decade of the twentieth century.<sup>1</sup> According to Sousa Santos the commercialization of the university underwent at least two important stages; the first was related to the national growth of the university market during the last two decades of the twentieth century, followed by another shift that might be correctly labelled as neoliberal globalisation. He forecasts that the global transformation of higher education will essentially destroy the foundations of the university as the servant of a public good and ultimately convert higher education into a large and profitable capitalist playground.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore removal of significant differences between state and private universities, characteristic of earlier periods, encourages their transformation into large business enterprises that not only produce for the market but also create the market itself.<sup>3</sup>

There have been numerous discussions worldwide on this issue so there is no need to enumerate all the symptoms that indicate the subjection to neoliberal globalisation of much of higher education in countries everywhere. This form of globalization seems to be winning and is often recommended by international institutions as a global panacea for all social ills. As a consequence of policies advocated by the economically most advanced and powerful countries and the international organizations founded and supported by them, institutions of higher education, no matter where they are located, are forced to reshape their goals and visions so as to conform to the “global standards.” They are offered internationally mediated exemplary models (say, those of an “entrepreneurial” or “world—class” university, etc.,) and are urged to compete with their peers in order to become players in both local and global markets. Sociologist Richard Munch, who has recently commented on how neoliberalism has taken root in contemporary German higher education, has observed that present university marketing has its own specificity, thus

once education has been reduced to the market commodity, the luxury of the product is determined in the first instance by the prestige value of the academic title, which in turn determines the money that can be charged for the product. Education thus mutates from a collective good brokered by the state into a good whose value is taken on trust, and ultimately into a prestige object whose value is determined by its degree of exclusivity. The exclusivity of an academic title in turn depends on how selective the admission procedure for the course is. The more the number of applicants

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<sup>1</sup> Santos, Boaventura S. “*The University in the twenty—first century.*”

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

exceeds the number of admissions, the more selective a course of study is and the higher the prestige value is deemed to be. Universities that act as businesses must do everything to attract as many applicants as possible. In this game, education becomes a crucial resource of capital accumulation in the competition between universities—cum—business. Education becomes human capital invested in so far as to extract profit.<sup>4</sup>

This might be a situation recognizable in most so-called advanced or developed countries (and even those categorized as still “developing”) despite certain local and as a rule insignificant differences. Of course, there has been a history of varying understandings of the role and functions of a university in different continents and regions but these differences in recent decades have been erased or blurred in the context of the global neoliberal turn. Few would deny that the understanding of the role and goals of the modern university was far more diverse before the takeover by the neoliberal political agenda at the end of the last century. Earlier in the twentieth century educational thinkers like the renowned Spanish philosopher Ortega Y Gasset could still stress the uniqueness of Spanish higher education and its institutions as well as the historical specificity of its national culture. But in recent decades such modes of thought have been represented as outdated and backward and completely out of keeping with the vision of the “brave new world” promoted by the adepts of neoliberal ideology.

Certainly, homogenization has taken over higher education globally, but with some variations locally. Martin Trow, a renowned American sociologist of higher education, has observed, while analysing differences in higher educational contexts in the US and Europe, that Americans have always tended to trust market forces more than their European counterparts. Americans have been more likely to be wary of the influence of central government and thus less attentive to or concerned about the growing importance of the market. Meanwhile the United Kingdom, despite the fact that it has a more robust liberal tradition than many continental European countries, traditionally disapproved of market hegemony in the sphere of high culture.<sup>5</sup> Nonetheless since Martin Trow made these observations more than a couple decades ago, the course of development has been essentially reversed in the UK as well, and the pressure of the market on English universities is now far more evident than it was when the institutions of elite culture had a degree of independence from such forces. It hardly seems to be an exaggeration to claim that the

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<sup>4</sup> Munch, “*Bologna, or The Capitalization of Education.*”

<sup>5</sup> Trow, “*Comparative Perspectives on British and American Higher Education.*”

growth of the market sphere and consequent shrinking of the public dimension of education is a universal feature of the economics of present globalised capitalism.

## **The Rise of Neoliberal Consumerism and the End of the Traditional University**

Fundamental if not irreversible changes are indeed taking place in the sphere of higher education. A new model of a corporate university built upon the mirror—image of transnational business enterprises is changing the landscape of higher education. This development is reflected in the growth of a new vocabulary in which terms and categories previously related to the sphere of business feature prominently. These changes in popular rhetoric were discussed some time ago by Bill Readings who has observed that students’ “frequent perception of themselves and/or their parents as consumers is not mistaken, since the contemporary university is busily transforming itself from an ideological arm of the state into a bureaucratically organized and relatively autonomous consumer—oriented corporation.”<sup>6</sup> This ongoing process of transformation of higher education was triggered by shifts in state policies adopted in the US and the UK when President Ronald Reagan and Prime minister Margaret Thatcher eagerly embraced the neoliberal agenda. Their explicit policies were willingly adopted in other continents, regions and countries. Commenting on the current situation in Australian higher education, sociologist and political scientist Raewyn Connell has concluded that as an outcome of the neoliberal agenda significant changes followed one another:

Higher education was increasingly seen by government as an export service industry in which Australia could find comparative advantage: the cultural equivalent of iron ore. High fees for overseas students monetised this idea, replacing an earlier regime where Australian universities offered modest development aid to Southeast Asia for free. Deregulation is currently being deepened to include domestic students. At the same time, universities have been reshaped on the model of corporations. Traditional hierarchy (remember the God—professor?) has been broken down from the 1960s to the 1980s. Ironically this opened a space, a new condition, for growth of managerial power, with Vice—Chancellors and Deans increasingly understood as entrepreneurs, being paid like corporate managers and—together with their officers—actually having more autonomy. This price is greater social distance, and often distrust, between

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<sup>6</sup> Readings, *University in Ruins*, 11.

university managers and academic staff. Corporate techniques of personnel management along fractal lines (performance management, auditing regimes) have been introduced.<sup>7</sup>

Transformations of this kind have been lately observed in other distant locations as well and despite some minor insignificant deviations from the dominating global policy model the comparison allows us to suggest that these national policies have the same ideological source. Let us take a look at my own home country, Lithuania, where neoliberal policies appeared not so long ago (around the year 2009). They are now systematically applied to the sphere of higher education in no lesser a degree than in most other European and non—European countries. While analysing the cases and consequences of the neoliberal turn in Lithuanian higher education, sociologists of higher education have recently argued that because of a reorientation of goals and means, fundamental changes have taken place, especially during the last decade. According to professors Vaitkevičius and Merkys who based their findings on several surveys and fieldwork done during several years,

The reorganization of university management took place not only externally, but also internally. It began first with the destruction of the organizational culture and tradition of universities. Relying on the pretext that schools of higher education needed a new image, their image was changed by transforming the internal structure of the university and by “modernizing” the university. At the same time employees with more experience and influence were fired, and their positions (in the administration of the university) were taken over by representatives of the business, whose salaries were much higher, who had commercial experience, but who had no idea of the specific needs of a university. All other academic employees were required to become educational managers. Prescriptions were imposed regarding the amount of funds an employee, in his/her capacity as a manager, must attract to the university by undertaking projects.<sup>8</sup>

Of course, since the collapse of Communist regimes in Eastern Europe, most of the countries formerly controlled by the Soviet Union faced (and still face) a need to reshape their respective systems of higher education. However, the neoliberal turn was hardly a necessity; other approaches to the reform of higher education sectors could have been taken. And yet, the

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<sup>7</sup> Connell, “*Neoliberalism and Higher Education: The Australian Case.*”

<sup>8</sup> Vaitkevičius and Merkys, *Neoliberalism and Its Effects on Higher Education in Lithuania*, 12.

simplest (and perhaps most disastrous) road to solving the complex problems of higher education, the neoliberal road, was eventually chosen. Undoubtedly the Bologna process, though hardly a neoliberal project in itself (but in the final analysis based on borrowings from the neoliberal agenda), contributed to this redirection of policies in many EU countries, including Lithuania.

Some researchers, in timely fashion, have emphasized the relations between the ambitions of the European Bologna process and global trends fostered and sustained by global neoliberal ideology and local policies of higher education. Austrian researcher Marion von Osten insisted that the links between the Bologna process and other globalist tendencies have created a new form of power relations, and not only in the sector of higher education. Her analysis of the situation suggests that

this new form of “governance” illustrates the way in which national governments are being confronted with a new form of statehood, where supra—state actors exercise an increasing influence over national legislation. This is by no means restricted only to education policy, as the anti—globalization movement has made clear. What enables these supra—state specifications to be implemented is above all a highly abstract discourse appealing to the regulatory power of the free market, and to the need for competitiveness, efficiency and optimisation—in other words to neoliberal ideologies. The goals of the Bologna Process are therefore also to be placed in the context of the post—national politics of the European Union, and indicate a whole new dynamic of inclusion and exclusion that does not only exist in higher education. The background to this turn is the assumption that learning processes play a dominant role in creating differentiated markets in the global competition.<sup>9</sup>

This observation is similar to those offered by many other analysts who have studied the impact of neoliberalism, monetarism and economism on higher education sectors in a number of European countries and beyond.

The ability of universities to increase their capacities to be active and constantly competing actors in the global higher education market have recently become far more important than any other features of the industrialized and commercialized enterprise that continues to call itself a “university.” At the same time politicians and university administrators in various national contexts are urging institutions of higher education to play a more significant part in national (as well as international) economics and to adapt their aims and functions to the job market. Recent discussions in

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<sup>9</sup> von Osten, “*The Bologna paradox: In the contradictions in the implementation of the Bologna criteria.*”

Lithuanian media are quite telling in this respect. For example, a certain Mr. Robertas Dargis, the president of the National real estate development association and chair of the Confederation of Lithuanian industrialists, on numerous occasions called on the Lithuanian government to commercialize higher education. According to Dargis, a large part of potential foreign investments bypasses the country largely because the relations between politics, business and higher education lack efficiency as “co—operation between research and business in Lithuania is so fragmented and weak that we can hardly be competitive in the future technological world. The government should undertake a more active role initiating and sustaining insightful discussions.”<sup>10</sup> His words were echoed by the infamous rector of Kaunas University of Technology, Petras Baršauskas, (who incidentally was recently publicly accused of engaging in plagiarism some twenty years ago while obtaining his habilitation and finally resigned) who insisted that business and research should be looking for each other; in his vision

A university has to be international, interdisciplinary and capable of developing entrepreneurial relations with business. There has been a lack of cooperation between the university and business earlier [in Lithuania—A.S.] because both partners weren’t ready and there was little synergy and profit seen in this kind of cooperation. However, now the situation has changed radically—research and business are both in need of each other.<sup>11</sup>

Though hardly anyone today would dispute the value of interdisciplinary approaches and internationalisation (one should not forget that universities have always been international in character since their establishment in the Middle Ages when students from various European countries flocked to the most famous ones), the relationship between higher education and business requires closer scrutiny.

Relations between businesses and universities have been traditionally strong in the American context and they grew stronger after World War II. As George Keller has observed in his persuasive study *The Managerial Revolution in American Higher Education*, the ascent and eventual domination of research universities in the USA was enabled by a unique combination of funding from large philanthropic organizations, large business enterprises and the federal government itself.<sup>12</sup> As Keller

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<sup>10</sup> Samalavičius, *Tarp Scilès ir Charibdès: aukštasis mokslas permainų metais*, 33–34.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>12</sup> Keller, *The Managerial Revolution in American Higher Education*, 8.



emphasized, these sources contributed to the specific arrangement of academic research, due to a combination of private and federal financial allocations. But the question still remains whether this kind of structure can be replicated or proposed as an example for the development of higher education worldwide. And if it can be replicated then the next question follows—what price must each society pay for this fundamental rearrangement (and possible demolition) of public education?

### **Beyond the Rat—race**

There is further dimension to this global shift in the sphere of higher education that was already mentioned above. The discourse of economics produced by leading universities worldwide seems to enhance the neoliberal ideology and economic policies implemented and fostered by a world—view based on neoliberal ideology. Mainstream economic thinking based on the paradigms of neoclassical economics became deeply entrenched in academia and its spokesmen have contributed to the application of neoliberal models to many spheres that were previously considered public. As economist James Kenneth Galbraith has emphasized in an exchange with the present author,

the most important critical thinking comes from those who have studied the critical traditions in the history of economics. That said, there is a great deal of critical thinking in economics. The difficulty is not an absence of thinking, but a hierarchy of professional prestige, access to secure positions in academic life, the positions of influence in government, and the popular press, so that instead of welcoming “new thinking” the economics profession works most effectively to suppress it.<sup>13</sup>

Thus neoliberal ideology and policies have strong allies in departments of economics all over the world. There is no doubt that this vicious circle needs to be broken.

Currently most universities worldwide seem to have more interest in participating in the “rat race” for social status, academic prestige and economic welfare than in any commitment to the pursuit of intrinsically valuable knowledge, the development of qualities of critical reasoning and education into a civilized and civic spirit of dissent. As Buddhist thinker and social activist Sulak Sivaraksa has observed, this happens largely due to the almighty spirit of consumerism penetrating all contemporary institutions, including higher education;

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<sup>13</sup> James Kenneth Galbraith, in conversation with Almantas Samalavicius, 26.

Consumerism also supports those who have economic and political power by rewarding hatred, aggression and anger. And consumerism works hand in hand with the modern education systems to encourage cleverness without wisdom. We create delusion of ourselves and call it knowledge. Until the schools reinvest their energy into teaching wholesome, spiritual values instead of reinforcing the delusion that satisfaction and meaning in life can be found by finding higher-paying jobs, the schools are just cheerleaders for advertising agencies, and we believe that consuming more, going faster, and living in greater convenience will bring us happiness. We don't look at the tremendous cost to ourselves, to our environment, and to our souls. Until more people are willing to look at the negative aspects of consumerism, we will not be able to change the situation for the better.<sup>14</sup>

Fortunately, some thinkers and university leaders like Derek Bok have already persuasively argued against growing commercialization in the sphere of higher education. Bok has warned about the incompatibility of university structures with corporate models borrowed from the sphere of business.<sup>15</sup> These warnings need to be taken seriously.

The question, however, remains open; how can the present university, sustained and controlled by consumerist political and economic interests, resist this ongoing course of development that goes under the label of neoliberalism and economism? The economic regime that established and fosters consumerism globally, as well as the habits of thinking and action generated by this regime will not easily fold. But even if overcoming and undoing neoliberalism in higher education may seem like a Sisyphean task, it must be undertaken before we find ourselves amid the ruins of that institution, originally a guild or association of scholars, that has been so central to the life of the mind and spirit for so many centuries, and still *calls* itself a university.

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<sup>14</sup> Sivaraksa, *The Seeds of Peace*, p. 8–9.

<sup>15</sup> Bok, *Universities in the Marketplace: The Commercialization of Higher Education*, 31.

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**PART I.**

**GLOBAL SHIFTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION  
AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS**

## CHAPTER ONE

# RETHINKING THE UNIVERSITY: A CONVERSATION WITH RONALD BARNETT

Your countryman Winston Churchill insightfully observed that “the further backward you can look, the further forward you can see.” Though it seems that today we have no universally accepted idea of a university, revisiting the history of the idea of a university may nonetheless be worthwhile. What can we learn about the future of the university from studying and understanding its past? Why is it important to study the changing concept of a university in a contemporary academic culture in which most participants have almost no memory of their own past?

**Ronald Barnett:** On a personal level, it concerns me that it appears that many in higher education policy—making and in university management have neither an interest in nor an understanding of the history of higher education. Even quite recent developments, over the past two decades or so, are very often unknown worlds.

Why does this matter? A trivial answer is that, without a study of the past, we may think that we are doing new things but are only recycling past moves. A more nuanced answer runs as follows; a study of the historical development of the idea of the university reveals significant debates that may inform today’s decision—making and perception of options. What is meant by “a liberal education?” What is “critical thinking?” What might be understood by “reason,” “thought,” “knowledge” and even “skill?” Should the university concern itself with social challenges? What might be meant by “openness” or “public” (as in the public role of the university)? Should research and teaching be closely connected? All these matters and more have been topics of debate over the centuries—certainly over the past two centuries (to the beginnings of the modern German university) and even further back to the Greeks. And by understanding their debates, we gain insight into these matters today.

A further answer is that many universities themselves have long histories. Even new universities are often formed by amalgamating or incorporating older institutions. Many universities have histories of a hundred years or more. And we cannot understand such institutions unless

we are sensitive to their particular origins, their trajectories and paths of development.

A yet further answer, linking these two considerations, is that many important developments have been influenced by ideas in the past—e.g. the founding of the University of Berlin was shaped by the ideas of von Humboldt, themselves influenced by the thinking of Kant, Schleiermacher and other German philosophers; Newman's ideas about liberal education would have been influential in his work in forming a new university in Dublin in the mid—nineteenth century; the founding of the UK's Open University sprang out of thinking about "openness" in relation to the university; the founding of University College London was influenced by the utilitarianism of Jeremy Bentham in the early nineteenth century; the "new" UK universities of the 1960s were influenced by ideas then circulating about a "new map of knowledge," and so on and so forth. Ideas of the university can be influential in shaping new forms of the university.

Crucial here is that having a historical perspective does not entail either that we should try to hang onto or to return to past ideas and practices. What it does mean is that the past is more influential than some like to believe. (Many today seem to consider that we should only have an interest in the future "going forward.") But, more importantly, it also reveals that the past contains resources that may be of value, both in terms of ideas of the university and in terms of institutional orientations, in helping us to discern options for the future of the university. There can be no repetition, but we may still be able to learn from the past.

Furthermore, the past continues to be shaping both our contemporary sense as to what is to count in general as a university, and the options available to any particular university. National characteristics, local cultures and the institutional histories of particular universities are all influential. For instance, the matter of the relationship between the public and the private dimensions of universities and higher education systems have played out differently in different countries and regions of the world. Again, the matter of academic freedom is understood quite differently, given different histories and experiences.

But at the level of the individual institution, too, history plays a part in shaping the territory in which a university trajectory unfolds. The possibilities that open for, say, a small university with a religious foundation and a certain sense of itself and its value orientation are going to be quite different from a university founded more recently with a practical orientation to its region. And more generally, I would want to say that right across the world, there has developed a broad understanding that a university has come to be understood as an institution reflective of a

penumbra of universal concepts, such as knowledge, truthfulness, disinterested inquiry, social utility, institutional autonomy, personal freedom and the flourishing of humanity. To use a term from the philosopher Charles Taylor, there has developed, certainly from its origins in Medieval Europe, and even before then in Greece, China, Egypt, Persia and India, a social “imaginary” as to what is to count as a university. Certainly, as I indicated, there have also developed historical differences, both at the institutional and at the national levels in the weight accorded to these concepts within the constellation of concepts that constitute the university but, nevertheless, that a set of ideas of the university has more or less come to be accepted around the world, is striking.

So the historical dimension turns out to be important at institutional, national, regional and global levels and important in relation both to ideas of the university and to policies and practices within higher education. That perspective is there, influencing universities not just today but also their trajectories into the future. Understanding that history, at all of those levels and in all of those directions, in relation both to ideas of the university and its practices, does not constrain but, on the contrary, may open, new possibilities for the future of the university.

Indeed, at least in the academic literature, we see today, for instance, references to the nineteenth century thinking of von Humboldt (the German academic and reformer) and to J. H. Newman (the English theologian and the first leader of a Catholic University in Dublin). Such contemporary scholarly work serves not to retreat to the past but to draw on such thinking as resources in imagining afresh options for the university in the twenty first century.

What are the biggest challenges for universities in a contemporary European context. What outcome would you expect from the so-called Bologna process that was initiated first and foremost to compete with the US academic system? What do you think about a certain tendency towards standardization of European universities, their degree programs and curricula?

**RB:** I am not in a position to comment in an informed matter on Bologna and its many further steps. What I would say is that alongside any moves towards harmonisation, one continues to see considerable variation at all levels, across countries, within countries and within universities, not least as the different disciplines respond differently to large external (national, European and global) forces.

It follows that any further moves towards harmonisation across Europe and any further development of a European project (and I think we are



seeing signs of this), will pose the challenge as to what this might mean for higher education. The largest general challenge is clear; to what extent can the very real differences in higher education across Europe, not just in systems but in their inner ideas and cultures, be accommodated as further moves towards harmonisation take shape? More specifically, there are clearly differences across Europe as to the extent to which (a) students are treated as customers in a market place and (b) international students are welcomed. But there are also less immediate but very large differences as to the ways in which universities in their national settings relate, say, to their regions and to the economy of their regions. A European project of any kind is going to generate local and regional tensions with higher education markets of any kind (even alongside interests in open flows of people, services and information across borders).

What perhaps is just as significant are global forces, further moves in the direction of markets and “neoliberalism,” the digital revolution, trans—national movements of students, the rise of the “STEM” disciplines and the consequent lessening of the status of the humanities. (Japan is reducing its humanities work as a feature of governmental policies).

As I have indicated, there is considerable variation across universities within national higher education systems in Europe. Jostling alongside each other, at least in Western Europe and in Northern Europe, one can see universities that bear marked similarities with and arising from their mediaeval heritage alongside shiny new universities that are heavily inter—linked with their regional economies, and deploy new forms of teaching, curricula and learning experiences. So standardization as a trans—European project will have to find accommodations with a complex and shifting landscape at institutional, regional, national and global levels.

During the last century the United States was envied as a producer of successful research university models, which were widely copied and applied in various parts of the world, albeit with various degree of success because of varieties of local academic traditions, funding channels, societal structure, etc. What do you think of the prospects of this model in our century? Will European countries continue to compete with the model American research university and if so what is the price of this continuous competition? On the other hand, Europe has world class universities of its own, with even older traditions. So where does the future of European universities rest?

**RB:** Two answers: first, on a per capita basis, some European countries match and even outscore the USA on some performance indicators (the Netherlands, Switzerland, England). London has the greatest concentration

across the world of universities of world stature. Second, the 21st Century needs a range of forms of the university reflecting different ideas of the university. The different traditions, political situations, and social/public outlooks (“imaginaries”) across Europe will help to sponsor differences in higher education. We can expect to see new kinds of public outreach in the Scandinavian countries as compared with England, for example. Internally, different ideas as to what it is to be a “professor” and to have an “academic identity” and what counts as a proper pedagogical relationship (in terms of formality, hierarchy, learning “outcomes” and epistemological openness) will persist for a very long time to come.

More broadly, against the background of traditions of thought and social institutions in continental Europe, the question arises as to whether we might see a new idea of a European university emerge, in contradistinction to the “entrepreneurial university” of England. This would be a university that held to a strong and strengthening link to the public sphere, with a balance between public and private (student) funding, and a continuing attachment to the academic sphere as having intrinsic value. England, on the other hand, is tilting quickly towards a system of higher education reflective of private interests and student funding, towards entrepreneurialism and income generation, and close connections with the corporate private and business sector.

More broadly still, the question arises as to whether tacitly there are different ideals of the meaning of “world class” university: (i) multi—faculty universities, with a significant involvement in all the major disciplinary areas, seeing themselves as contributing not just to the economy but to the wider social and cultural spheres, and even acting as “the critical conscience of society” (New Zealand universities); (ii) high technology—focused, with the science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM disciplines) given particular prominence and with biomedicine very strong, and high citations indices—as in Asia and some universities in the USA and one or two in England; (iii) entrepreneurial universities, working closely with industry especially in the local region, generating a high % of its own income, organized around money as such, its academics being expected to be entrepreneurs, setting up spin—out companies and earning as innovators and consultants. If this is right—clearly these three are overlapping models of world—classness, then issues arise as to how far such different ideas of world—classness are reflected in the world rankings.

As implied, there is one very large difference now present in European higher education and that is in the orientations of England on the one hand and the rest of Europe, including the rest of the United Kingdom, on the

other hand. The general matter here is the diminishing extent to which, as it seems to me, England has a public orientation. Now, England—in so many ways—is one of the most marketized amongst the advanced countries and this is reflected in the student fee levels, which in England are now the most expensive of all so-called public systems of higher education across the world. (NB, Germany has now abolished fees and Chile is also reversing its market-oriented policies.)

With the possible separation of the UK from the EU (BREXIT), it is possible that this tendency towards the marketization of its higher education will gain further impetus. It is also a question as to whether England and English universities will continue (a) to be attractive to international students and academics and (b) will be able to collaborate with other world-leading universities across the world.

On the other side, and again aided by a desire for more harmony within continental Europe, we may see gradually evolve a new European idea of the university, which is imbued by a mix of public, social, economic and cultural dimensions, with a value complex that includes critical reasoning, democracy and liberty, attuned to matters of sustainability and a broad societal and European development and remaining influenced by considerations of the public sphere and societal reason and understanding. I am not unhopeful that we may see the emergence of a new idea of the university within Europe—as I regrettably say probably excluding England. For short, we may refer to such an idea as the ecological university. (I pick up this idea below.)

The logic of these reflections is that it is possible that Europe, especially continental Europe, will regain its place as offering to the world a distinctive model and idea of the university, as the rest of the world becomes more attached to the over-identification of the university with the economy. Europe could offer to the world a much broader conception and institutional instantiation of the university in the twenty first century.

While criticising the present tendencies in the US in his *Unmaking of Public University* Christopher Newfield has expressed his concern about a university as a “privatizable” knowledge factory. Though the system of public higher education is different in the US than, say, in the U.K., since the times of Thatcher and Reagan there has been a policy shift toward neoliberalism, and privatisation was often suggested as a remedy for “ailing” public higher education. What is your view on the future of public universities in Europe and U.K.?

**RB:** I have already commented on the diminution, as it seems to me, of the public dimension of universities in England. However, what is to count

as a “public university” is a matter of fraught debate, both across Europe and within countries. In the UK, the leading public universities (the Russell Group) are wanting to extract themselves from public information inquiries, claiming that they are not public but are private institutions. So this is a highly contentious matter. Across Europe, there will be quite different views on the matter. We have too, in the UK, a gradual rise in the emergence of private institutions of higher education—and issues arise as to a level playing field between private and public institutions (in terms of criteria for the title of “university” and quality standards and accreditation).

More broadly, the issue of public/private raises profound conceptual issues that are going to be part of the worldwide debate for some time to come. What “responsibilities” fall on public institutions, and on private institutions? Can/do private institutions fulfil public roles? Can/should universities help to promote a wider “public sphere” (as I believe that they should)?

I would say that, especially in England but more generally too, the public—private debate has not developed sufficiently. Or, to put it more positively, we see signs of the debate moving on, although it could develop still further. We see some reluctance to engage with possible public benefits of higher education, since such benefits are not easy to quantify and measure and economic models are built characteristically around putative choices made by individuals. But again, especially in England, we see a reluctance to engage with the ideas of the university as a contributor to the public sphere, presumably because the very abstractness of the idea runs against the more pragmatic and empirical British dispositions

In the worldwide debate, key distinctions are not always observed, for example, the public university can be described as a university that (a) receives public monies (inputs); (b) opens itself to a wide(r) range of students (processes); and (c) performs public roles (outputs). Nor are the distinctions between social, civic and public always recognized. Sometimes, we see references to the university’s social benefits and to its civic responsibilities but we seldom if ever see serious consideration of the way in which the university can take on a role in extending the public sphere and so helping to develop—to draw on a concept of Habermas’—societal learning systems, for example, by widening public understanding of key issues, by requiring academics to become public intellectuals, and engaging with different publics, such as citizen scientists.

So the debate goes on; thinking and scholarly research has some way to run, to unpack the possibilities of the idea of “public” in relation to universities, to attend both to the present public worth of universities and

their potential expanding public role and public terrain in the future. Perhaps the university could be reaching out to multiple publics? Perhaps the university could itself become a collective corporate public citizen?

In a period when market values dominate, higher education is often viewed not from the point of view of the public good but as productive of knowledge that is marketable. The humanities have become easy targets during each new university reform. How can they reclaim their lost territory and maintain at least some of their former importance? Is liberal education in general important in a culture where market values dominate and are worshipped?

**RB:** The humanities face challenges and their role needs to be recast. They can and should address societal problems and challenges head on, they can no longer rest on bland assertions of their link with critical thinking and democracy. They should be more inter—disciplinary, linking with other disciplines to address major problems of the world and of society.

There are some very large and interrelated issues here, of the humanities in a “post—human” or “inhuman” world (see the writings of Lyotard, Derrida, Nussbaum, Maxwell and others); of the (epistemological) legitimacy of the humanities in a technological world; and even of what it is to write and to be a scholar. We should note that there are schisms within the humanities here; some want to reserve a particular domain for the humanities; others look to the humanities reaching out to other disciplines. Some see the humanities remaining as a scholarly endeavour within the academy, others see the humanities as consciously becoming central in the repositioning of the university to identify and address key issues that are of value to society. Some see the humanities as rightly having their own languages, which may legitimately be unintelligible to the wider society; and others, even within the humanities, decry the poverty and inaccessibility of, and even poke fun at, the unintelligibility of modern scholarship, especially Critical Theory.

My own view is, indeed, that the humanities are running the risk of retreating to an excessive scholasticism, to use a term from Bourdieu. The risk is double fold; (a) the humanities may be bringing about its own demise, being a kind of academic dinosaur, unable to adjust in any way to the challenges of a new age, and (b) more importantly still, the humanities are undershooting the potential that is now opening to them to play their part in societal and worldly reconstruction.

There is a paradox here, that the humanities are most needed at a time when they are being seen as irrelevant. The humanities cannot throw all

the responsibility onto society to give them a hearing if they do not listen sympathetically to the voices from and of society. (There are, of course, many in the humanities worldwide and among the scholarly community who are working to take on more socially constructive roles.)

(I have written a paper on this matter, “Imagining the Humanities—Amid the Inhuman,” *Journal of Arts and Humanities in Higher Education*, 13 (1—2) 42—53.)

Separately, the question arises as to whether liberal education will not need to be rediscovered. There is much talk, and has been much talk for 25 years, about “soft skills,” “transferable skills” and “generic skills.” These terms tend to be used loosely and inappropriately. (Why call “communication skills” a soft skill? Perhaps it is quite hard, in many ways? Moreover, perhaps it is not just a skill but a matter of human dispositions, to listen, to engage, to empathise, to work towards a consensus?) Nevertheless, this talk is reflective of an awareness that higher education is more than the acquiring of knowledge and skills as such but has something to do with the formation of persons in a complex world.

This, indeed, is the case. The world is complex, unstable and uncertain, and presents with multiple and conflicting readings of a situation. What kind of persons are appropriate to such a “super—complex” world? In short, the world calls for a higher education that is concerned with human being as such, with the forms of being that are going to be adept in an unstable world, and in which our fundamental categories for understanding the world are not so much in disarray but are in dispute. How are we to find our way through a disputatious world? What is urgently needed here is not more knowledge or even more skills but certain kinds of human beings with certain kinds of disposition and qualities, and we can identify these to some degree.

(Forgive me if I mention that I have gone into this matter in my books *Realizing the University in an Age of Supercomplexity* and also *A Will to Learn: Being a Student in an Age of Uncertainty*.)

Worldwide ratings of universities have become more and more important in recent decades. University leaders in Eastern European countries (my own in particular) seem to be obsessed with them. An advance in these ratings is viewed as a sigh of undeniable success. However, there are old and famous universities in Europe, the U.K. and the US that are considered as “best” no matter which particular position they occupy in commercialized rankings. In what terms would you describe a good university? What is your own idea (or concept) of a successful university?