What are universities for?

Roberto Poli

Ideas generated during a prolonged exchange with Riel Miller, Keri Facer and others
To begin

- Robert Hutchins – president (1929–1945) and chancellor (1945–1951) of the University of Chicago:

  “Long experience as a university president has taught me that professor are generally a little worse than other people, and scientists are a little worse than other professor”

- Universities are not independent from their social environment
- To understand the future of universities one should include a vision of societal changes

Some data

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Labour market

Analyse carefully the three forms
(social mobility, political stability)
A society with many old and very old people and a minuscule middle class

Do universities really have any role to play?

What are universities for?

- What relationship we want between society and its universities?
  - Very few defend the “ivory tower” idea
  - Collaborative partnership between universities and communities

- An interesting experiment is the Connected Communities Programme, headed by Keri Facer

  https://connected-communities.org/
Kinds of collaboration

- **Mutual Learning**
  - How can academics and community partners learn from each other about how to make things better?
  - Development of new skills and the creation of new accounts of how the world might be organised

- **Crowd & Open**
  - Mobilising massive numbers of people to address a particular issue
  - Create a frame within which lots of people can contribute. Gather massive amounts of data through volunteers and create new knowledge as a result

- **Design & Innovation**
  - Work with people as experts and as informants who have distinctive knowledge
  - Assess whether particular products or services might be better designed drawing on the expertise of different groups

- **Correcting the record**
  - Correct the voids in the knowledge landscape
  - Critically engage with and challenge what is already known. Absence of women’s voices in the research field; or civil rights or critical disability research

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Caveat

As important as it can be, the collaboration between universities and communities is widely insufficient for answering our initial question, What are universities for?

- What does university do that other social institutions don’t do?
What does university do that other social institutions don’t do?

- Universities are unique ‘engines for anticipation’
- University may help society and individuals think about, imagine, challenge and create the future – something no other institution can do

- Produce the knowledge that may help us to navigate a rapidly changing world in which technologies, economic systems, demographic shifts, environmental disruption and cultural conflicts are feeding off each other to create unpredictable contexts for action

- But how can a university address the challenges of uncertain futures?

 Orientations to the future

- The disciplinary scaffolding
  - Production and evaluation of highly tailored knowledge
- The library
  - Repository of knowledge that might otherwise be lost
  - Sources for teaching diverse forms of knowledge, study the obscure, the unexamined, and the curious. Protects, holds and keeps alive difference
- Future-oriented research
  - Anticipation as a driving force in biological, psychological and social processes
  - Tools to explore the visions and forecasts we make, to ask how different interests and assumptions frame our ideas about what will happen next, and to understand the relationship between ideas of the future and consequences in the present
  - Understand complexity and develop ways to manage complex systems
- Experimental attitude
  - Understand the future as produced by those who make it – whether this is in the realm of politics or engineering
  - Experiment with building and creating new futures in the present
However ...

- “Disciplinary scaffolding” may be part of the problem
- Worldwide, universities are good at producing specialised knowledge
- The “specialists” way of looking at problems may itself become the issue, especially when “complex” problems are addressed
- Universities have lost the capacity to produce “generalists” (not understood as failed specialists)
  - Once upon a time, this was the role of philosophy
  - This issue is for another occasion, though

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Future Generating Research


- **NOT ONLY: FUTURE-ORIENTED RESEARCH**
- **BUT ALSO: FUTURE GENERATING RESEARCH**
  - Social change as the primary goal (against the classical distinction between “social” and “sociological” problems)
  - Ultimately, future generating research is about possible futures and how to realize them. This research is not on *what is*, but on *what is to become*  
  - Exemplification
    - NOT common mistakes in cognitive analysis, BUT how to erase error-related biases
    - NOT determinants of depression, BUT means for avoiding depression
    - NOT how discourse may foster difference, BUT how discourse can foster mutuality
    - NOT the many failings attributed to age, BUT how to stimulate late-life flowering
  - Future generating research can be as productive as traditional research
  - Learning to ask future generating questions is difficult; many scholars do not know how to address future generating questions and how to work with them
  - Current and emerging practices with future generating research are fragmented and partial (Gergen summarizes critical discourse analysis, the performative movement in social science, appreciative inquiry, and action research)
University

- Unique combination of different orientations to the future, fundamentally tied up with being a multi-faculty university – i.e. a university in which there are different subjects taught under the same roof
- Taken alone, however, each of these orientations to the future is fragile
- Only their combination makes universities an anticipatory framework, providing that
  - The different orientations to the future embodied in different disciplines become explicit and are mutually compared
  - => *Handbook of anticipation*
  - These orientations are put in dialogue with the expertise, interests and concerns of communities outside universities

http://www.projectanticipation.org