

Thinking about the Future of Universities

Highlights from our discussions at the TD Net conference¹

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We held a workshop on the Future of Universities within the context of the Transdisciplinarity Conference (TD Net) at Leuphana University-Germany (<http://www.transdisciplinarity.ch/td-net/Konferenzen/ITD-2017.html>). The event was organised by Olivia Bina, Marta Varanda and Andy Inch, and funded by the COST Action INTREPID <http://www.intrepid-cost.eu/>

Background to the workshop

Across Europe, the future societal roles of Universities as producers of knowledge are in question, and the increasing demands for interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary modes of knowledge, including co-production are placing new demands on the existing structures, culture and governance. The perceived needs of the knowledge economy have generated instrumental pressures to build skills for employability and act as anchors for regional economic competitiveness and innovation. In this context, alternative understandings of higher education as core to building citizenship, social justice and environmental sustainability seem to be marginalised.

The session was dedicated to “Thinking about the Future of Universities” through facilitated discussion and debate of different visions of higher education futures, by five invited speakers. The overall idea was to make a contribution towards shaping the space and terms of debate about universities as producers of knowledge with the potential to promote sustainable and just development (UNESCO 2016), as well as wisdom and character (Fadel *et al.* 2015). Considering inter and transdisciplinarity, and processes of mutual learning as key enablers, we hope to contribute to the discussion of how core institutional processes that structure research agendas and pedagogical practices might be reshaped.

We started off with a list of five core questions around the topic, which arose from previous discussions at our London Workshop <http://www.intrepid-cost.eu/london-workshop/> and from our ongoing literature review of the state of the art on the Future of Universities:

- What **purposes and goals** will define Universities in the future? What future for the UN agenda on Education for Sustainable Development (**ESD**)?
- What will be the driving **ethos** of the future university: the **character and values** of its educational project?
- What are the most likely **drivers of change** and related **uncertainties**? How will **inter and transdisciplinarity** shape universities?

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- How will Universities **relate** to, and **engage** with, the world around them (locally, regionally and globally)?
- What **obstacles and challenges** are to be expected?

Our Keynote Speakers:

[Heather CAMPBELL](#) (University of Sheffield) **Knowledge to change the world: Reimagining the university of the future**

[Igor CAMPILLO](#) (Euskampus en Universidad del País Vasco) **Thinking about the Future of Universities: Towards 'the Challenge-oriented University'**

[Garry JACOBS](#) (World Academy of Art & Science) **New Paradigm in Education**

[Roberto POLI](#) (University of Trento) **What are universities for?**

[Petra SCHWEIZER-RIES](#) (University of Bochum) **Alternative perspectives and challenges around the topic of the Future of Universities**

All videos and presentations can be found here:

<http://www.intrepid-cost.eu/intrepid-tdnet-conference-luneburg/>

Some highlights from the workshop

It is impossible, and certainly undesirable, to summarise our keynotes' presentations. This set of highlights is a summary of my personal reading of a much richer and nuanced debate.

“ We have to re-think the knowledge project” Ahmed Bawa, 2017
Cited by Heather Campbell

Our reference point is the notion of 21st century as an age of human global and unprecedented impact, rapid change and systemic crises (often referred to as Anthropocene). As many have argued, this calls for a re-purposing (see for example: Göpel 2016) Future of Universities of our socio-economic, socio-cultural, socio-ecological and socio-technical systems. In other words: for systems transformation.

In transition research (EEA 2016) such transformation(s) must involve and affect three dimensions: policies, practices and thinking. Our focus on the FoU is essentially a contribution to the latter: 'thinking' – finding new ways to think. However, to this set of three, we suggest to add two further co-dimensions of thinking: acting and being (drawing from Otto Scharmer's work, cited by Igor Campillo in his keynote). All three need changing: we need new forms of observation and knowing, leading to new forms of action and being:

'an open mind... open heart... and open will', entail a 'transformation of science [that] is no less revolutionary than Galileo Galilei's. And the resistance from the incumbent knowledge holders will be no less fierce than the one that Galilei met in the Catholic Church. Yet, when looking at the global challenges of our time, we can recognize the call of our time to come up with a new synthesis among science, social change, and the evolution of self (or consciousness)' (Scharmer 2009).

Universities have been thought of as 'communities of thinking' and promoters of wisdom, but have also become specialised and narrowly focused around instrumental, job-related and neoliberal agendas, which many argue is impoverishing their contribution. Moreover, these institutions have tended to elevate knowledge collection and dissemination from being a means, to becoming the end itself (to paraphrase Jane Addams, as quoted by

Heather Campbell). This is a matter of concern. When we consider the Anthropocene as a reference point representing systemic crises requiring new ways of knowing, but also representing fast changing job opportunities, an ageing population (in and out of Universities), and radically transformed data and information capabilities thanks to technological leaps – the current mainstream Universities appear less and less fit-for-purpose.

We can summarise the current context into three ‘provocations’ for further debate:

- We should **stop** using 20th century knowledge and science for 21st century problems and challenges, and jobs that have yet to be invented;
- We should **rebalance** our focus between teaching knowledge and building capabilities, skills and dispositions (learn how to learn, think, act and be) apt for 21st century life courses; between disciplinary and inter and transdisciplinarity, as ways of knowing the systems that need re-purposing;
- We should **part-recover, part-expand**, the overall mission of Universities as a public good that delivers education (knowledge and capabilities), wellbeing (of those inside and outside its ‘walls’, notably the city: a porous university), and social equality (and mobility that includes the notion of nurturing human potential and self-development).

These three provocations, which draw on our discussions, point to a **redefinition of why** we might continue to have Universities in the future: their ‘civic’ purpose, their ethos (see our five questions above), and the role and ways of knowing, learning, acting and being - for the 21st century. Such redefinition can only usefully occur in a **process of co-design and co-creation**, involving students, business, citizens, and scholars. INTREPID will contribute to this in the coming year.

Within this perspective, **inter and transdisciplinarity** (including co-design and co-creation) play a crucial role in breaking down some of the existing barriers to change and to the production and teaching of knowledge and capabilities that matter to a sustainable and just future. Amongst key aspects of knowledge highlighted we include: critical thinking, the ethical dimension of applied research (the ‘should’) and the need to co-create values – showing the value of values, the relevance of active rather than inert knowledge, the need to rediscover the value of ‘generalists’ and their capacity for bridging and synthesis (compare this to the growth of big data and the artificial intelligence alternative).

Full details of the event and videos and presentations can be found here:

<http://www.intrepid-cost.eu/intrepid-tdnet-conference-luneburg/>

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