Believing in the University

What is it to be a University in the Twenty-First Century? What might the university become? What limitations are pressing upon the university? And what possibilities might lie in front of the university?

These questions lie at the heart of this volume and they in turn open up a large territory. In order to tackle them seriously, we shall need to develop a sense as to the past and present conceptions of the university, in order that conceptions of the university’s future possibilities might be well grounded. In turn, we shall need to identify and explore conceptions of the university from different regions of the globe, for assuredly there will be different traditions and perspectives in different countries. In many countries and even regions of the world—for example, South America—debates are being conducted over the purposes of the university and it may be that different views are emerging on the matter bearing a national or a regional imprint.

The reference to “the University” rather than to “higher education” in the proposed title of this volume is significant on three grounds. First, this volume focuses on the university as a social institution. This is an institution that has extraordinary longevity, being around a thousand years old since its mediaeval inception, but yet arguably is on the cusp of a new phase opening to it in the twenty-first century. This volume will attempt to explore the options that are opening to the university. Second, higher education is here understood to be a significant part of the functioning of the university, but only a part: the contemporary university has ever-expanding functions, not only in knowledge production and knowledge transfer but in a manifold of relationships with the state and society (in class formation and in intellectual culture). It is, therefore,
the university in its totality that is in question here, rather than any particular aspect of it. Third, there is a long-standing literature that continues to grow on the idea of the university but rarely has an attempt been made to bring together scholars from across the world imaginatively to explore the future possibilities for the university.

Three ideas in that last sentence deserve, perhaps, a little emphasis—those of imagination, exploration and possibilities. Across the world, the space occupied by the university apparently seems to be increasingly defined for it as the university comes to be subject more and more to the market. The university is being incorporated, it is said, into “knowledge capitalism” (Murphy, 2009) and is being enjoined to play an ever fuller part in expanding this new form of capitalism. It may be said that this new function of the university now opens possibilities for the university that it has not enjoyed before. Now, the university is free to identify and exploit possibilities for its position in society and the global knowledge economy. There is an expanding universe of opportunities available to it. But these opportunities, such as they are, have severe constraints written into them. Now, knowledge inquiry and learning processes have to prove their worth through their economic impact. It is not enough that these activities are “applicable”; now they have to generate demonstrably an economic return in some form.

Against this background, it becomes a matter of both significance and urgency as to whether there are other possibilities for the university in the twenty-first century and as to what such possibilities might look like. “Possibilities,” “imagination” and “exploration” become, therefore, key terms in addressing the current state of play; or, at least, they form key ideas for this volume. The contributors to this volume are not content simply to assess or even to critique the contemporary university but, as the title suggests, to identify and explore “ideas and possibilities” for the future university. Such a venture requires, in turn, the exercise of the imagination: only through the imagination is it possible to try to step outside the given order of things and to bring forward future possibilities for the university.

The exercise of the imagination, however, can only be a necessary condition of leaping beyond the current order of things; it cannot be a sufficient condition. Two additional conditions have to be met. Firstly, the exercise of the imagination has ultimately to be tempered by a certain realism. Hard-nosed efforts have to be made in order to assess the actual possibilities inherent in the current state of play of the university. Seriously identifying ideas and possibilities for the university is a nice example, as we might put it, of “critical realism” in action (cf. Bhaskar, 2011: ch9). Universities are real social institutions, caught amid social forces, networks of other institutions and ideologies. That complex of real factors, often hidden from immediate view, has to be teased out if the exercise of the imagination is not to have a castles-in-the-air quality. Secondly, the exercise of the imagination needs to be accompanied by a belief in the university. The university remains an extraordinary social institution, replete with possibilities. The identification and exploration of those possibilities has to be infused by a double belief, both that the
university is worth struggling for and that the there are still possibilities open to the university that enable it to do some justice to its traditional value background, connected with reason, understanding and personal and social improvement. Believing in the university, therefore, is a crucial part of the inquiry represented by this volume.

In the rest of this introduction, I shall refer more explicitly to the chapters in this volume.

**Emerging Futures (Part I)**

As Sheldon Rothblatt puts it (chapter one), “the future isn’t waiting.” It is already with us. This, too, is a message in much of Louise Morley’s chapter (chapter two). New institutional forms involving cross-institutional collaboration, a blurring of the public and the private, new learning modes (especially favouring e-learning and practice-based learning), forms of knowledge pursued for their “impact” on the knowledge economy, the rise of the “global” in higher education and the emergence of “nomadic” identities among academics: all these and more contribute to the “hyper-modernisation” of the university (cf. Lipovetsky, 2005). We can surely safely predict, with Rothblatt and Morley, that these trends will continue into the future. They will do so because they are the outturn of massive underlying forces of the incorporation of the university into the dominant structures of a post-capitalist society.

This set of considerations raises two fundamental issues. Firstly, there is a question raised by Rothblatt: under these circumstances—in which the university is being broken open, and its boundaries are not so much becoming porous as rather entirely dissolving—does the very idea of “the idea of the university” retain any substance? If, as both Rothblatt and Morley observe, a heightened competitiveness among universities is likely to develop, we can predict that universities will increasingly seek each to identify a niche for itself in the academic marketplace. In such a situation, talk of “the idea of the university” may seem to be redundant at best and pretentiousness at worst. The “idea of the university” seems to have had meaning in an age in which universities were largely undifferentiated and serving a small (actually an “elite”) section of society. In an age in which the meaning of “university” simply cannot be either stable or uniform, engaging in an inquiry into the future idea of the university becomes redundant. It can have no purchase. It is also pretentious in that it pretends to a unity that is now lost from view. And it pretends that there could be ways of talking of the university that have a universal connotation, above and beyond the particularities of institutional forms and fluidities.

Rothblatt’s answer to his own question is that the idea of the university can now serve as a conceptual umbrella—albeit with “untidy boundaries”—for “a collection of niches, for disciplines, for individuals.” Here, in this volume, this reflection raises in turn the following question: Just what niches, conceptual and
practical, are available to the university? Just what are the possibilities for the university in the twenty-first century, in ways that still retain some substance of the term “university”? Morley observes that “it is unclear whether . . . recent and current policy discourses are generating creative thinking about the future of universities, or whether they are limiting it.” At least, then, we might hold out the hope that the idioms and currents of the present age are generating spaces for new kinds of thinking about and practices in and around the university.

A second issue here is this: to what extent should the recovery of any idea of the university borrow from or seek to retain remnants of earlier ideas of the university? Or are any ideas of the university from earlier ages inevitably so much conceptual baggage? Rothblatt himself notices that the “absence from discussions of globalization” of the idea of the liberal education is “particularly evident.” In this weighing of the “University of the Past” with the “University of the Present” (as Morley puts it), there are two subsidiary issues. On the one hand, there is the empirical story: as governments around the world move to introduce more market elements into their higher education systems, the possibilities for the university to expand social mobility and social equity seem even to be reversing. This is, as Morley puts it, a “rapidly dessicating sector.” The University of the Future seems to be becoming, in part, the University of the Past as its locus as a centre of power, prestige and inequality grows again.

But, on the other hand, there is—as we might put it—the discursive story. Can we still sensibly hold onto elements of the former ideas that characterised the University of the Past? For Morley, “the University of the Future needs to recover critical knowledge and be a think tank and policy driver.” In other words, parts of the traditional idea of the university can still be called up, providing that they are re-interpreted in the context of the University of the Future. As Morley puts it, “We need new conceptual vocabularies and reinvigorated courage to challenge the archaism and hyperactivity that frame the sector.”

Global Possibilities (Part II)

Each university system in each country has its own history, traditions and contemporary circumstances. Ideas of and the possibilities for the university always have their place in a context. Increasingly, too, within a university system, each university will have its own setting and positioning. This necessary contextualisation of the ideas and possibilities is just one of the points to be drawn from the contributors in this section. And yet, strikingly in these four contributions and across the countries and regions represented here—Australia, China, South Africa and Latin America—we see recurring themes, such as those of a shift towards “performativity” (in which efficiency and output become crucial), a driving up of knowledge that has direct applicability in society (and in which that impact can be demonstrated) and a slide away from “liberal education” towards vocationalisation and the increasing influence of governments and inter-governmental
agencies in encouraging these shifts. These commonalities—albeit with a greater or lesser presence in each case—in the country-specific narratives point to a global context for an inquiry into the ideas and possibilities for the university in the twenty-first century.

This dual set of reflections—as to the presence of the local and the global contexts that surround universities—surely invites the following line of thought. The university has for a very long time—arguably even since its medieval origins—stood for universal categories. It came to have a close association with an inquiry into truth and whatever that might mean (even in its pragmatic orientations), truth was never simply my truth, or my group’s truth or even my society’s truth. The university’s truth claims were to be subjected to validity tests for truth as such. The question “but is it true?” has always been a key question for the university. It is here, in this concern for truth, that we find the university’s allegiance to reason, of which Yusef Waghid speaks. Yet the university does have to live in particular contexts many of which are closing the spaces for untrammelled reason. We surely catch glimpses of this movement in each of the chapters: Leesa Wheelahan draws attention to the promotion of vocationalism in Australia and the separation from the systematic conversations of society about itself for those who take that learning route; Shuang-Ye Chen and Leslie Lo draw attention to the struggle in China—now apparently infused with renewed vigour—to revivify university practices with ideas of the university fit for the twenty-first century; Mario Díaz Villa, amid the heterogeneous sets of spaces that now constitutes Latin America, points to the dominance of the economic field and of economic reason; and Yusef Waghid, borrowing from Derrida, points to the heightened production in South Africa of “technicians of learning.”

And yet, despite situations that could lead to quite dismal readings, each of the four contributors is able to identify ideas and potential practices that just might lend themselves to enactment that helps to move the university forward in the twenty-first century. Wheelahan looks to “the notion of professionalism [to provide] a bridge back to . . . disciplinary knowledge (and thereby a form of liberal education)”; Chen and Lo look to a visionary institutional leadership leading, for example, radical curriculum reform; Díaz Villa boldly sets out a raft of principles framed around critical dialogue and openness through which the university might combat the “performativity” and “postmodernism” that confront it; and Waghid, by way of example, refers to the cultivation of “democratic iterations” that may be embodies in a student-supervisor relationship in which each learns from the other.

In a way, the actual weight that may be placed on each of these proposals is not, I think, to the point. The key point is that, however fast the currents in which the university finds itself may be running, the search for progressive possibilities that extend reason across society remains a worthwhile activity. It just might lead to the identification of realisable possibilities. Such possibilities we may term “feasible utopias” (Barnett, 2011): they may not be realised but there
is sufficient available to us—both in reasoning about the character of man’s place in the world and empirical evidence—to suggest that they could be realised. They are not fanciful suggestions.

We can draw, I think, three broad conclusions from these four case studies. Firstly, the very globalisation of the university is opening up global spaces in which the idea of the university as a space of reason in society may be reclaimed. Secondly, the identification of feasible ideas and practices that may carry the university forward requires hard and imaginative thinking, especially if they are successfully to contend against the main currents of the age. Thirdly, the very insertion of the university into global society—as we may term it—opens and even calls for new ideas and practices that open up possibilities for the university for society. There is no sliding back available: the university cannot ratchet itself back to a situation in which it is separate from society. Very well: let us see, then, if we can identify ideas and possibilities for the university both in and for society. The enactment of ideas here becomes just as important as the identification of the ideas themselves; they should yield feasible possibilities for the university, in fulfilling its new potential as a global institution able to promote learning, inquiry and even social development across the globe.

Ideas of the University (Part III)

Possibilities for the University, then, are already present. Spaces are opening for new practices. Those spaces present themselves differently across the world and across universities even within a single system. Yet, if full advantage is to be taken of the spaces now opening for universities in the twenty-first century, new ideas are surely needed. Certainly, the extent to which any new ideas might or should still draw upon earlier ideas of the university—of reason, truth, academic freedom and so forth—is a matter for further consideration. But the university in the twenty-first century has challenges afresh. It occupies new spaces in society. Accordingly, new ideas are needed if the university is to realise its possibilities. The four chapters in Part III seek to help precisely in this task. For each of the four contributors, there is a dominant concept and with it comes a cluster of attendant concepts.

Nicolas Standaert (chapter seven) develops the idea of the university as a set of networks within wider societal networks. Associated concepts here include those of web, places, nodes, spaces, displacement and the “in-between.” For the networked university, there is no centre as such. Consequently, “in a time of fragmentation there is need of rediscovering the whole.” For Standaert, a major challenge for the university understood through such concepts becomes the following: Can ways be found so that different disciplines can meet each other? “How can one create new nodes in the web of sciences?” A particular problem is that of the relationship between “the so-called measurable and hermeneutic sciences” (or, as might be said in the UK, between science and the humanities): just
“how can the two meet each other?” It follows that “the space of a networked university still has to be invented.” We need, therefore, a new architecture that has “in-between” spaces that in turn generate the “uncertain, vulnerable, uncontrollable or incomprehensible.”

Donncha Kavanagh (chapter eight) invites us to think of the university as a fool, the idea of fool taken from the mediaeval courts and elsewhere in which the fool had a crucial role to play. The role of the fool, after all, is to present ambiguity to the powerful, wittily engaging his audience but perhaps to disturb a little as well. “The fool is an irritant, a provocateur, whose modus operandi is to provoke new wisdom in others.” Within the fool’s foolishness, then, lies wisdom. Understood as fool, the university has had several masters or “sovereign institutions” over its near-one thousand years of history, including the crown, the nation, the state, the professions and the world of work. The idea of fool, however, implies a certain “liminality” from the main structures of power and so an issue (for Kavanagh) is the extent to which this liminal role has been or is being abandoned. If, qua fool, the university is both to institutionalise and to de-institutionalise, the university cannot become subservient to any authority. “The fool must . . . be careful not to transgress this (liminal) role.” Accordingly, “there is an . . . onus on the university . . . to actively foster intellectuals that question and play with society’s institutions.”

In her chapter (chapter nine), Gloria Dall’Alba—drawing especially on Martin Heidegger—explores the concepts of care, being, responsibility and attention. To care is to have a deep concern for something beyond oneself, both “others and things in our world.” Calling on the concept of care is thus a rejoinder to a higher education that has become narrowly a matter of the intellect and of skills in the world. To have a concern with care is to take up a view as to one’s being in the world. An interest in care and in being on the part of the university would carry over into all of its key practices, namely teaching, research and social engagement.

Care shows itself in being responsible, in responding appropriately, whether in pedagogical relationships or in the choice of research and in the manner of its conduct or in the possibilities that open for social engagement. Responsibility entails choice which in turn has further implications: “when possibilities are opened, we press ahead into an emergent possibility, thereby negating and foreclosing other possibilities.” Part of the functioning of the space occupied by the university, therefore, is that of encouraging “the discernment of possibilities” and the wherewithal to follow through on certain possibilities: “the university can encourage thoughtful—and, at times, courageous—responses to the call to care.” We discern possibilities through “attention,” through close and careful attention to matters at hand. Such an education—and such a university—for being entail commitment and risk and require courage and leadership.

In chapter ten, Nicholas Maxwell develops an argument around the idea of wisdom. Connected concepts include those of knowledge-inquiry and
wisdom—inquiry, and problem-solving rationality and aim-oriented rationality. Maxwell believes that the university has long favoured “knowledge inquiry,” a form of inquiry that is “grossly and damagingly irrational.” This is a form of inquiry that is dissociated from a more fundamental concern with problems of living and which, as a result, violates certain rules of rational problem-solving. What is needed, therefore, is to develop universities around a form of inquiry that promotes wisdom—“wisdom being the capacity to realize what is of value in life, for oneself and others . . .” In this “wisdom inquiry,” “social inquiry is intellectually more fundamental than the natural and technological sciences,” helping “to develop and assess rival philosophies of life.” “Whereas knowledge-inquiry demands that emotions and desires, values, human ideals and aspiration, philosophies of life be excluded from the intellectual domain of inquiry, wisdom-inquiry requires that they be included.” Wisdom inquiry, therefore, would offer an interplay of sceptical rationality and emotion, an interplay of mind and heart so that we may develop “mindful hearts and heartfelt minds.”

On the face of it, these four chapters constitute four quite different viewpoints, articulating and developing separate sets of concepts in helping to develop ideas and possibilities for the university in the twenty-first century. And the chapters have some substantive differences in the detail of their arguments. However, there are certain features that are to be found across them to a greater or lesser extent. Firstly, they are centrally concerned to identify and to develop imaginative concepts not currently part of the mainstream of contemporary thinking about the university. Secondly, each contains indications as to ways in which the concepts for which their authors are contending could be put into place. Thirdly, they are suggesting in their different ways that a conception of the university built around knowledge per se is inadequate. Fourthly, they are arguing—again to a greater or lesser extent—for the intellect and other aspects of human being to be brought into a proper and closer relationship with each other. Fifthly, we see here too a view—especially in Standaert and Maxwell—that a new understanding of the humanities needs to be developed and a new articulation of the relationship found between the physical sciences and the various forms of social and human inquiry.

There is a further issue raised by these four conceptions: if the university of the twenty-first century is to realise fully its possibilities, should it be construed as lying within the main body of society or somewhat separate from it? Kavanagh’s conception of the fool is itself a point of ambiguity on the matter: the fool is both within the court but keeps his distance from it; and hence is a “liminal” character. For Maxwell, the University of Wisdom is presumably to be within society in that it is deliberately structured as a site that identifies key issues in society and rigorously brings together its total resources in addressing those issues; but it is clear that the university here too has to be permitted its own space if it is rigorously to assess all the competing viewpoints and evidence on issues. Perhaps the metaphor of the web suggested by Standaert is potent here: the university can be
seen as occupying a region within a larger web of webs, with its own nodes and networks, but yet having sufficient force that it is able to exert an influence of its own on the totality of the webs that constitute the world.

A University for Society (Part IV)

Suppose, as part of our imagining the university in the twenty-first century, we conceived of a university not just in society but actually for society? What would that mean? I take it that it would mean a number of things. It would mean that the university was interested not simply in reflecting society but in helping society forward; towards a better society. It would mean, in turn, that universities would be compelled to forge some sense as to what might constitute “a good society” (to steal a phrase from the aphorism of Tony Judt with which Jon Nixon opens chapter 11). It would mean that the university had formed some sense of its own collective virtues, in helping society to realise better and more profoundly the capacities of its members to come to have a care for each other and to live more harmoniously and respectfully together. And it would mean that the university was seized of its potential in developing the public realm, especially the realm of public reason, of the giving and rendering of reasons in a public space.

This is a formidable list of conditions and yet the five chapters in this section not only, I think, imply such conditions but go even beyond them. For Nixon, the matter is essentially one of an “aspiration towards a fairer and more just society; a society shaped and motivated, that is, by a sense of the common good.” For Paul Standish (chapter 12), one way of achieving such an end lies in the recovery of teaching as constitutive of the good life in itself and as, therefore, at the heart of the university. Here, the “subject matter” would come alive “in the interaction between teacher and student, . . . in dialogue or conversation . . .” Jan Masschelein and Maarten Simons (chapter 13) urge the rediscovery of the lecture as a conversation between professor and students in a public space, a space of free-thinking, unalloyed by considerations of performance, economy or informational resources or even specific interests of any kind. Berte van Wyk and Philip Higgs (chapter 14) plead for “a form of African community based research which takes cognisance of values present in the community, for purposes of fostering the communal beliefs of that community.” It would be a “kind of research that is conducted by, with and for the community.” Michael Peters, Garett Gietzen and David Ondercin (chapter 15) examine the possibility that new communication technologies may usher in a university that is much more open than its predecessors, structured around many-to-many interactions and knowledge creation. We may even, they suggest, be on the verge of the formation of a university that is playing its part in the birth of “knowledge socialism.”

Together, these five essays provide a powerful rebuke to depictions of the university as a matter of private good, or personal interest, or as a set of marketable products (where the capacity to access those products is inevitably severely
curtailed in a capitalist society). It was long part of the self-understanding of the university that, alongside teaching and research, it offered “service” to society. (This view of the university was perhaps markedly so in the US.) But these five essays suggest that a new conception of the university is both possible and necessary, a university that actually helps the remaking of civil society in a fragmented age.

Of course, there are many issues that these five chapters implicitly raise that should be tackled on another occasion. One is that of concepts. What, for example, are the meanings of, and the relationships between, the following concepts: common good, civic good, public good, public sphere, public reason, social good, communality, commons and public engagement? This is not the place to essay such conceptual analyses. I will, in closing, instead confine myself to making three points.

Firstly, as these chapters make plain, the university is well-placed to contribute directly to the widening of the public sphere by thinking through its own internal practices. For example, as Standish sees it, the dominant conception of teaching that “afflicts the university ... stultifies the public realm”, so that “the threat to teaching is a threat to democracy.” But if and when “the best possibilities of teaching are recovered,” the university—“of the day after tomorrow”—would come to have a “public place in the democracy to come.” In parallel, for Masschelein and Simons, properly conceived and practised, the lecture is precisely a collective endeavour, a gathering together (of a plurality of students and professors) giving themselves to the provocations of an issue that stands outside of themselves. “It shows something about what living and living together is about ...” (Masschelein & Simons). The lecture is not to a public but itself conjures forth a “public.” “Public lectures thus are associated with the emergence of a new consciousness, or an overtaking of the self that extends one’s own„private affairs by making things into a public affair.” As such, it “inaugurates a question about how we are going to live together.” Analogously, a university for the public good would ensure that it offered spaces for learning that “might also become deliberative spaces” (Nixon) in which students might engage with “uncertainty, indeterminacy and irreducible complexity.” A fundamental consideration here is that “it is precisely the capacity for living and working together in uncertainty, indeterminacy and irreducible complexity that the students of today will require [in the twenty-first century].”

Secondly, the university is well placed because of its already embeddedness in society to affect transformations in the wider society. In making its research more community based, focused on community social problems and needs, “grassroots democracy” could be strengthened while, at the same time, through “the opening of educational doors to community knowledge,” the academy itself could grow in socially worthwhile ways (van Wyk & Higgs). The possibility is even emerging that the university could inaugurate a new era of collective knowledge creation and become “a locus of true inclusion and social and economic activity” (Peters, Gietzen & Ondercin).
Thirdly, there is an important distinction to be made here between the social (good) and the public (good). I take the category of the social here to refer to the capacity for human beings to take account of each other. In an individualised and economically competitive world, that natural inclination towards a care or concern for the other may be being jeopardised; and the university is well placed to help play its part in recovering the social dimension of society. The University of the twenty-first century should surely see it as a responsibility that it work towards enabling discordant voices to live together, in a world lacking sureness and certainty. In addition, the university is well placed also to develop anew the public sphere, a sphere of collective and public reasoning. This latter role in particular calls for the university itself to become much more public in its activities, not only in displaying its intellectual wares but in facilitating public reflection and understanding so that society might be more enlightened, even amid discord; and might just be better able to develop some collective and rational control over its affairs even amid differences of perspective and values.