

Values Visionary Group

Fundamental problem: How to reconceptualise universities in order to capture their social and cultural role in local environments in the face of the contemporary challenges?



The core task of universities is to shape citizens capable of critical thinking. To effectively do so, Academia should speak out on the key issues that affect society and play meaningful roles in informed public debates. We strongly believe that there lies a great power in asking questions rather than having all the answers yet, something at the core of dialectics. The University of the Future should operate on the basis of values that are clearly defined and that stand above partisan divisions or perspectives. Universities should embody and transfer the values we want students to consider and adopt.

To facilitate this, Universities should be adaptable and agile, with more space for spontaneity and creativity in basic and applied research and teaching. Research funding and curriculum changes can take years to be approved, resulting in an intellectual climate that is less responsive and impactful. Universities should be autonomous and not be forced into profit-making logics, but not independent: related to local structures, but not wholly determined by them. Autonomy and independence do not imply indifference at all.

In times of open-source data, universities have an ethical responsibility to make their findings/data available for further use and scrutiny. They should reject corporate value systems and tokenistic, managerial approaches to social change. We are convinced that a future oriented university should focus on what unites and underpins existing best practices.



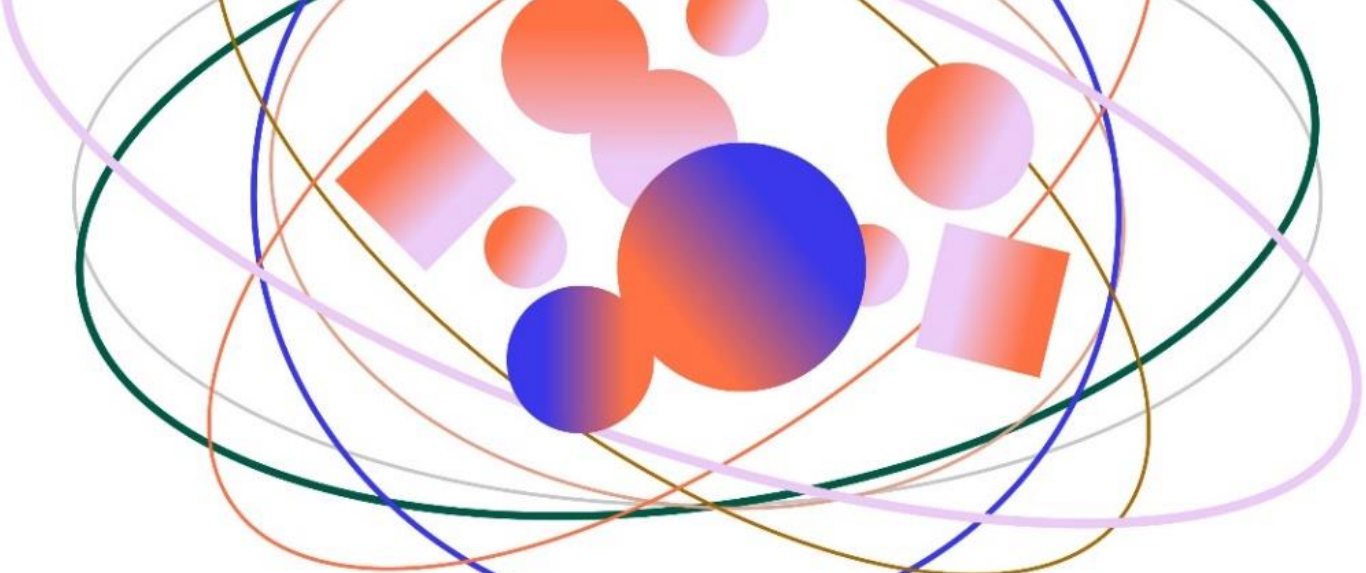
The university of the future should be self-critical

- In what way are universities accessible for a diversity of people? Do they contribute to mitigating segregation at – different levels?
- Do they have anti-discriminatory guidelines and how they are implemented and evaluated on different grounds?
- How can non-western perspectives be integrated?
- What measures are taken to make the future university an inclusive and safe space for everyone, especially minorised people?
- How can an atmosphere of constructive debate be achieved?

The University of the Future constantly needs to be self-critical when it comes to its social and cultural role. A future-oriented university should consider integrating approaches of futures studies and transformative approaches with respect to global challenges, e.g. real-world laboratories, to question the status quo and be open to alternative futures. It must be transparent about how decisions are made, and how necessary compromises are made in a climate of competing interests and directions. Members are aware that trade-offs are necessary but procedures should be developed for more democratic accountability. Universities might be run, managed and structured more like cooperatives, with academics invested in the management and decision-making.

Humility is also critical - students and staff need to be reassured that universities can admit their mistakes, wrestle with their histories, that they are able to apologise without seeing this as a weakness, and that they can recognise and work with their limitations. They must also defend their right to fail, as this fosters innovative but potentially high-risk research.

Last but not least, it's crucial that university teaching and research is based on a plurality of different perspectives and approaches, particularly those outside the Eurocentric and academic canons. Students and staff should be equipped with the tools and vocabularies to question mainstream assumptions about social change and development so that they can envisage and promote alternative solutions to pressing social, political, and environmental problems. This requires epistemic inclusivity and a commitment to reason and evidence, not necessarily always reaching consensus. Students and staff should be supported and challenged to debate, question and to potentially change their views in supportive and respectful environments. We should not assume that solutions underpinned by the same value systems and paradigms as the problems facing universities will be able to offer a radically different future.

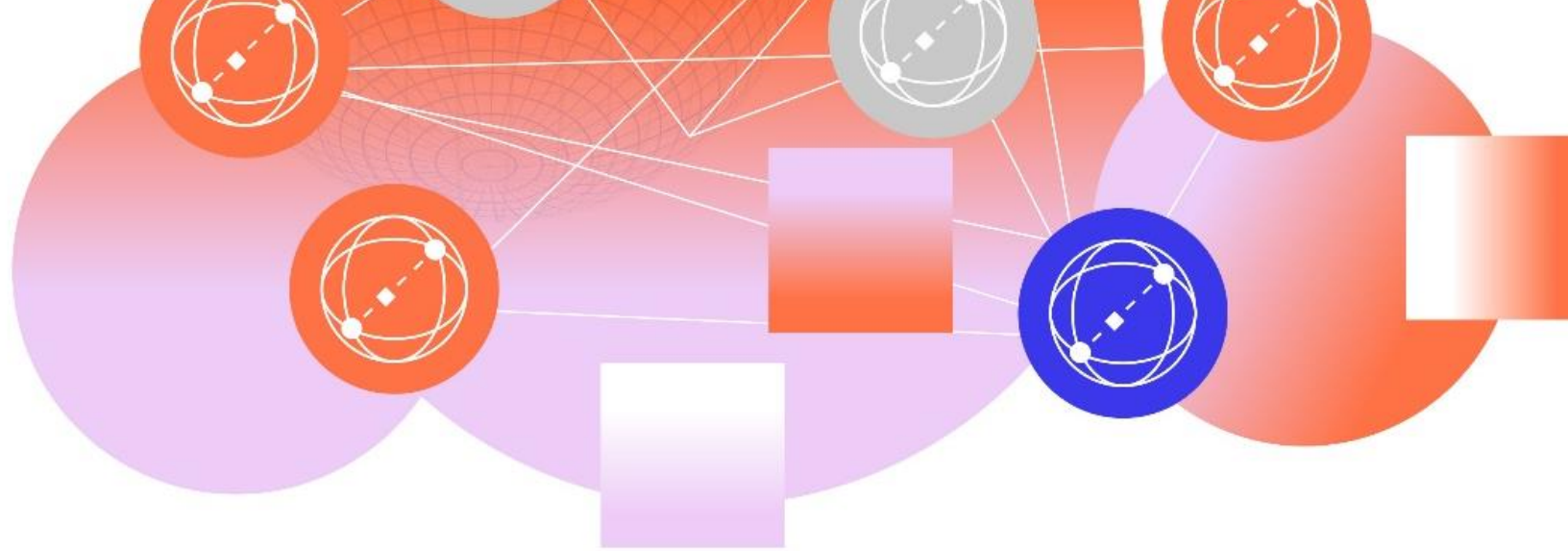


The University of the Future should be inclusive and take actions that embrace members of disadvantaged groups

- How can universities remove social, racial, linguistic, educational, temporal and spatial barriers to inclusion?
- How can universities construct and communicate knowledge in understandable forms, and through reciprocal channels of dialogue and communication?
- How do we embed and model social change without the need for endless committees and consultations?
- Student well-being must be prioritised, particularly for those who come from non-traditional backgrounds and for whom universities remain ‘black boxes’

Universities should be committed to community-wide, lifelong learning and challenge the ‘myth of meritocracy’ through expanding access programmes and admissions. Narrowly defined metrics of intelligence and success need to be reconsidered, particularly as the idea of ‘expert knowledge’ is being redefined as universities diversify and decolonise. Partnerships with ‘non-academic’ organisations should be encouraged, such as NGOs, the public sector, private companies, and community groups in order to ensure the real world applicability and relevance of research. The European academic community should also be aware of linguistic variety and communicate with wider audiences in ways understandable for them both avoiding its jargon and academic slang and by cherishing local languages.

Scholarships should be provided to those who cannot afford to attend university and opportunities should be normalised across all training programmes for people to work and study as they need to. Finances should not be a barrier to entrance and attendance.



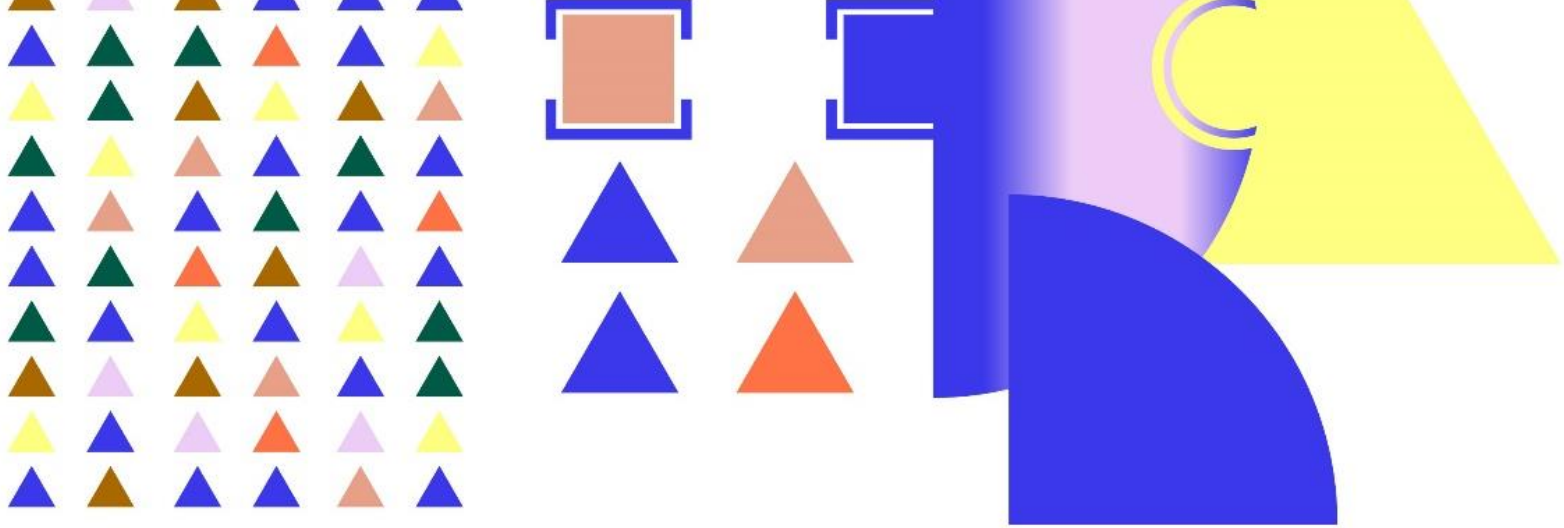
The future lies in supra-national collaborations

- What global challenges will universities all over the world face in the future?
- How can collaborations between universities be supported in order to work on pooling resources and complementary skills?

Universities should develop stronger voices on the key issues affecting our shared world. They should provide an expert voice on topics such as ecological and social justice, and be prepared to stick their head about the parapet. Part of this is that universities should not shy away from having institutional identities and values, and should have systems of accountability in place to ensure that they uphold these professed values.

A focus on supra-national, federal solutions should not, however, lead to the homogenisation of educational experiences. Increasing layers of regulation and accreditation should not standardise educational experiences and further distance them from local realities.

Academia and the global scientific community have shown its strengths during the COVID 19 pandemic. Transparent global exchange of data and scientific results has its impact on local level through credibility, trust and ability to communicate on local level. Hence international communication needs to be “translated” on a local level both culturally and linguistically. Impact of scientific knowledge and universities relies on (at least) two vectors: global exchange of ideas and knowledge with universally understandable vehicles and language and local communication applying cultural knowledge and local languages. Here lies a strength of European academic community with its multilingual and multicultural capacities. Our goal should be global and local (or glocal) to achieve trust and real impact on social, economic and ecological issues.



The university of the future should change in the model of evaluating academics

- How can we encourage, value and respect the non-quantifiable roles people play and impact they have in them?

Evaluation based exclusively (or dominantly) on research achievements, when ignoring (or underestimating) academics' accomplishments within the third mission prevents universities from fully embracing and performing its responsibilities to society. The model of evaluating academics should take into account the complexity of academics' work and appreciate the wide range of activities undertaken by them. More importance should be placed on providing academics with un-earmarked time and time for non-instrumental collaborations to enhance community-building and creativity. The space and time for community engagement and participatory action research must be defended, and reconceptualised as a critical space for learning and research. We should develop new methods for conceptualising non-deterministic and multiple educational futures

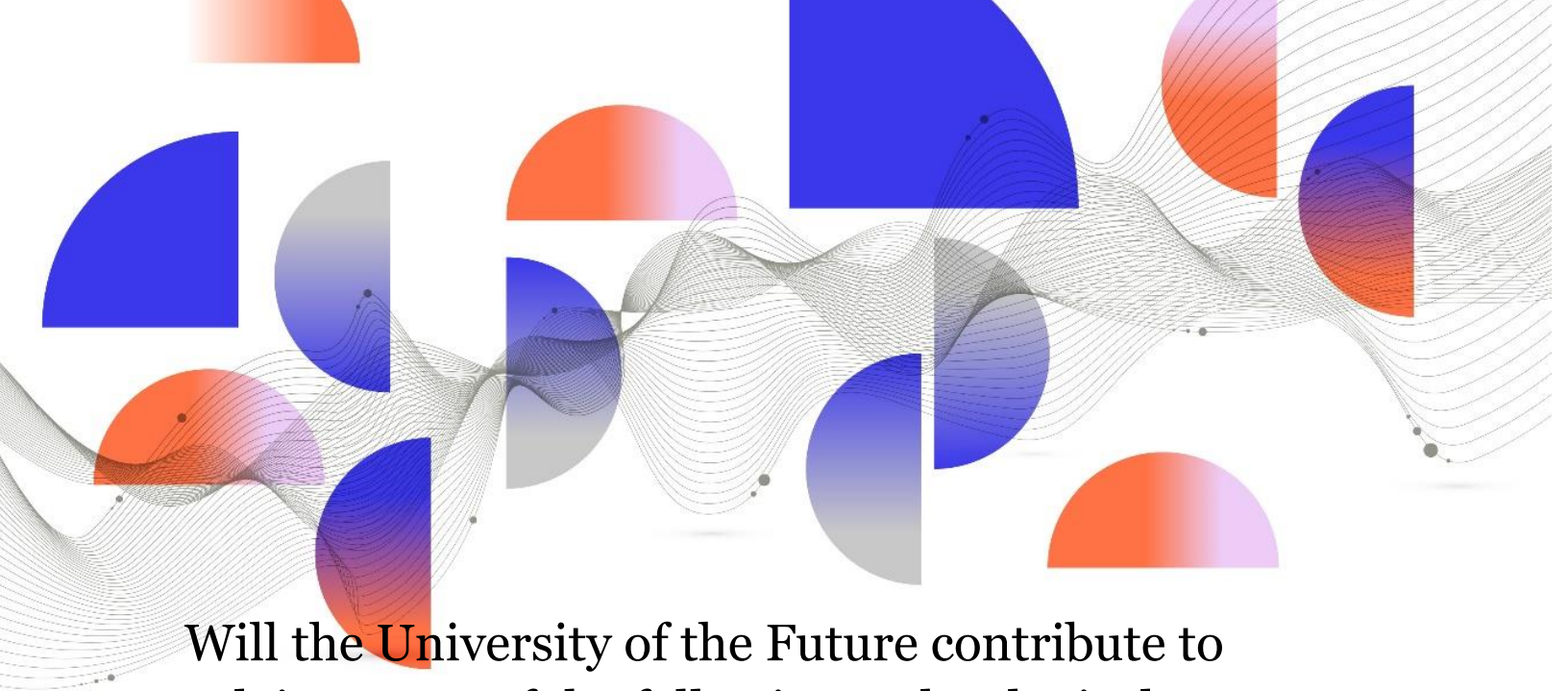


Further thoughts / questions about the University of the Future:

What should be the objective of higher education in the University of the Future?


- What would be the objective of training in our universities?
- What do we think a trained person is? Conventional metaphors for the training ideal reflect a wide range of preconceptions about our aspirations – different values stem from them.
- Will the University of the Future favour an idea of human capital accumulation, through storing information and knowledge, which would lead to think of the university as a preferential way to compile encyclopaedic knowledge?
- Will the University of the Future rather be a data bank (under open-source standards), to make the world within reach for a wide majority?
- Will the University of the Future follow a pragmatic approach to socialization, thus fostering interactivity, diversity, and pluralism?
- Will the university be based on experience, hence fostering individualization and spurring, to some extent, higher competition for attention?
- Will it be built to ensure adaptation in no time to potential disruptions, thus enhancing resilience and flexibility?
- Will the University of the Future be driven by demands from the labour market, placing emphasis on the utility of knowledge, productivity, employability, and profitability?
- Will we be following the canon, traditions, compelled by nostalgia for natural and social order?

One could find appealing features and values in each one of those approaches. Shouldn't higher education combine them all in different ways? Couldn't they be integrated around the idea of being creative in an environment of increasing uncertainty?



Will the University of the Future contribute to solving some of the following technological challenges or rather be shaped by how they are tackled today and in the near future?

Carbon sequestration, grid-scale energy storage, universal vaccine: protection against all variants of virus strains; dementia treatment; ocean clean-up; energy-efficient desalination; safe driverless car; embodied artificial intelligence; earthquake prediction; brain decoding; quantum computing... What about biosensors, brain-computer interface, connected infrastructure, digital money, digital twin technology, distributed ledgers (blockchain), edge computing, genetic engineering, nanomedicines, next-gen robotics, plant-based meat, programmable matter, 3D-printing...? Are we sure none of these potential game changers will not make any reflection today about the future of the university obsolete at birth? Can the University of the Future be envisioned in the absence of these technological developments?



Not only technologies (at all) will change the future – overlooking or downplaying those changes in our reflection about the University of the Future would be like planning for a world that does not exist anymore.

Quantified health, the birth of super humans, stricter environmental regulation, the circular economy, universal basic income, technology as a social divider, baby boomers' demand transforming aged care, drastic changes in the way food is produced, revolutionary changes in mobility, automation, workforce transitions, the shifting geography of employment, increased flows of forced displacements... will be critical to define new scenarios.

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