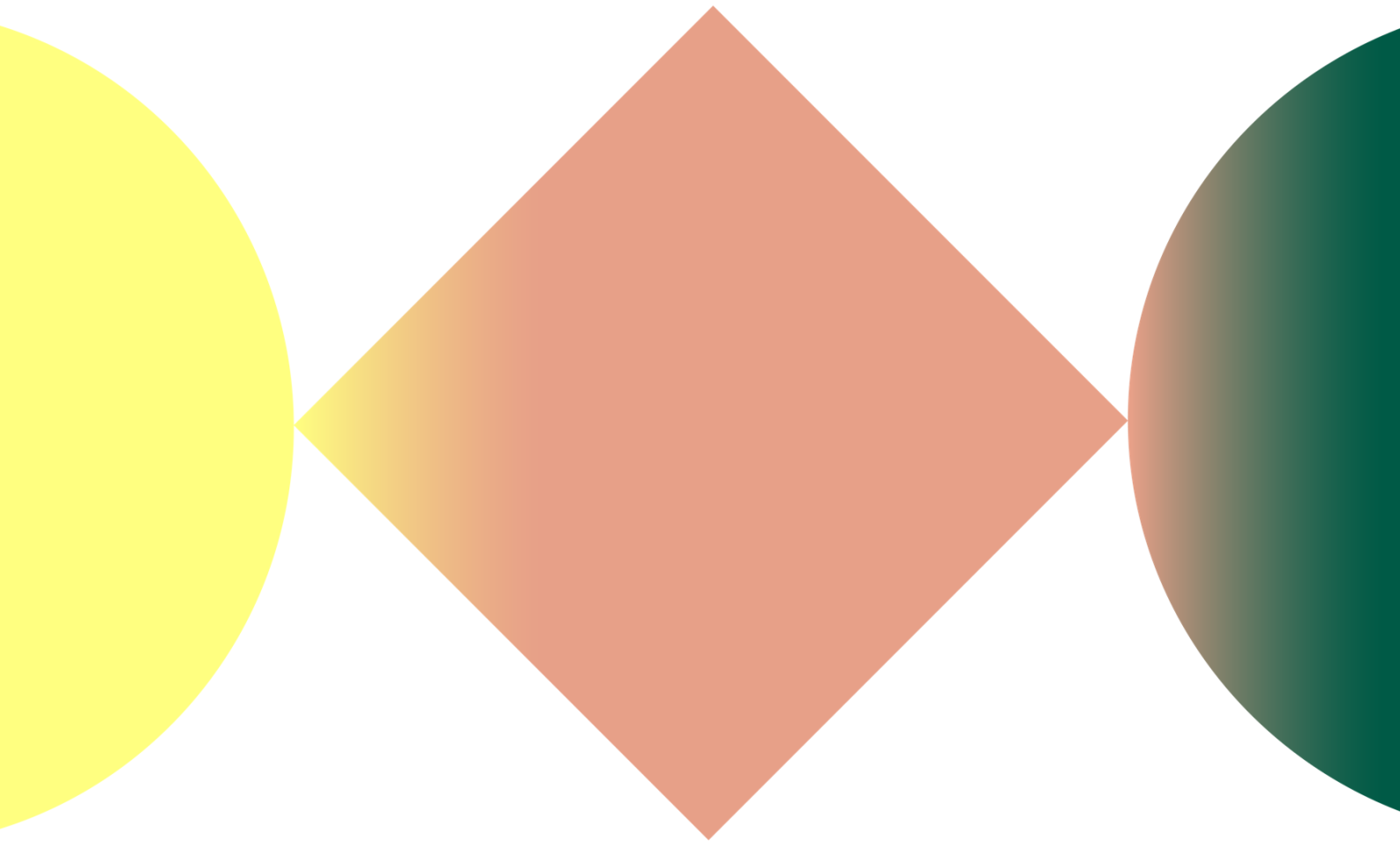




FUTURE UNILAB

The Relevance of Universities

Authors: Alejandro Tiana, Anwar Haneef, Bartosz Brożek, Julie Hall, Michał Pałasz, Noel B. Salazar, and Thomas Jorgensen





FUTURE UNILAB

This is an Una Europa document published on **25 November 2024**.

This publication is an output developed under the Una.Futura project.

If you have any questions or comments relating to this publication, please contact:

Prof. dr hab. **Bartosz Brożek**, Senior Project Lead of the WP7 Future Visions, Jagiellonian University

future-unilab@uj.edu.pl



**Co-funded by
the European Union**



Table of Contents

Introduction	2
1. The challenge	3
2. A toolkit for thinking	3
3. Application.....	7
4. Further actions	10

Introduction

The Visionary Team

The Relevance of Universities team started in April 2024.

Participants in the Visionary Team:

Name	Last Name	University Nomination
Bartosz	Brożek	Jagiellonian University / Una Europa
Thomas	Jorgensen	Una Europa
Noel	Salazar	KU Leuven
Alejandro	Tiana	Universidad Complutense de Madrid
Julie	Hall	Universiteit Leiden
Michał	Pałasz	Jagiellonian University
Anwar	Haneef	FU Berlin

The Process

- Online meetings: 19/4/2024: kick off; 24/05/2024; 05/07/2024; 20/09/2024
- Face to face in Kraków 3 – 4/10/2024

Summary

There exist potential threats to the relevance of universities in the future, such as the technological development, increased mistrust in science, etc. Both space and methods for discussing those threats and considering responses to them are urgently needed. We recommend engaging Una Europa community in debates and exercises taking advantage of creative methods for thinking about the future of universities such as thought experiments, metaphors, doughnut models, etc. We also recommend continuous work on developing such methods.

1. The challenge

The challenge for the task force was to consider the relevance of universities in the changing world. In particular, factors as the rapid development of new technologies (including the spectacular developments of AI-driven technology), environmental challenges and demographic processes, as well as the rise of pseudoscience and mistrust in science, have already raised serious concerns of whether universities in their current organisational forms and functional roles will remain relevant for the society. For example, the development of new, sophisticated AI algorithms may endanger the educational mission of universities, where AI-driven software to provide an alternative to human teachers.

The members of the task force acknowledged that – given the current civilisational challenges – the discussion around the relevance of universities is not only possible but also necessary. However, given the complexity of the issues involved, as well as the limited timeframe and resources of the task force, a thorough investigation of the challenge seemed unreasonable. It is also worth emphasizing that the challenges faced by universities are constantly evolving, requiring a future-proof concept.

Having this in mind, the task force decided to concentrate on the *methodology* of discussing the relevance of universities. During the task force meetings, various ways of addressing the challenge were considered. It was stressed that speaking about the relevance of universities in the future one needs to leave the beaten path of traditional methodology and use tools which prompt imagination and help to see the issues involved from different, often unorthodox perspectives.

In consequence, the task force decided to work on a *toolkit for thinking* about the relevance of universities. It was emphasized that the development of such a toolkit may provide the opportunity for various stakeholders to take part in a discussion about the future of universities, which may in turn lead to deep insights and innovative solutions.

2. A toolkit for thinking

The task force considered a number of ‘tools for thinking’ as possible element of the toolkit. In particular, three kinds of thinking-aids were discussed:

- (a) metaphors;
- (b) thought experiments;
- (c) doughnut economic models.

Metaphors are often used when thinking about the nature and function of universities. Some of the examples include seeing university as:

- A Launchpad: A university propels students towards their future careers and aspirations, launching them into their chosen fields.
- A Seedbed: Just like seeds germinate and grow in a seedbed, universities provide the fertile ground for knowledge and potential to flourish in students.

- A Jungle Gym: Similar to a jungle gym with various climbing structures, a university offers diverse disciplines and experiences for students to explore and develop their skills.
- A Lighthouse: A university sheds light on various subjects, guiding students through the vast ocean of knowledge.
- A Treasure Trove: Universities hold a wealth of information and resources waiting to be discovered by curious minds.
- A Mapmaker: Through research and exploration, universities help us map out the unknown territories of knowledge.
- A Crucible: Universities can be challenging environments that push students outside their comfort zones, forging them into well-rounded individuals.
- A Marketplace of Ideas: Universities bring together people from different backgrounds to exchange ideas, fostering intellectual discourse and growth.
- A Mosaic: Just like a mosaic is formed from many pieces, a university is enriched by the diverse experiences and perspectives of its students and faculty.

Also, the previous work of the Una Europa Future University Lab has resulted in developing a metaphor describing the nature of universities: the Cocktail Metaphor.¹

The task force, while considering this method of thinking about the future of universities, developed two different, but interconnected metaphors: of universities as classical concerts and as jam sessions. Some of aspects of these two metaphors are depicted in the following table:

Classical Concert	Jam Session
musical score + room for interpretation (rule-governed)	'hidden rules' & room for improvisation (value-driven)
distinct orchestra and audience (reception)	blended musicians & audience (participation)
craftsmen (imitation)	artists (creativity)
predictable outcome (static structure)	unpredictable outcome (dynamic structure)

From this perspective, a university envisioned as a classical concert represents a well-coordinated institution, where there is little room for improvisation as strict procedures ensure consistency. Roles are clearly defined and flexibility is limited. There is a clear (hierarchical) boundary between the university (performers) and the rest of the society (audience); and the employees are craftsmen rather than artists. Seen as a jam session, on the other hand, university puts less emphasis on procedures and rules and more on embedding values in its functioning, and is not isolated from the society. This provides more space for flexibility and creativity, which allows innovation to thrive.

Importantly, both perspectives offer valuable insights into the role and functioning of a university.

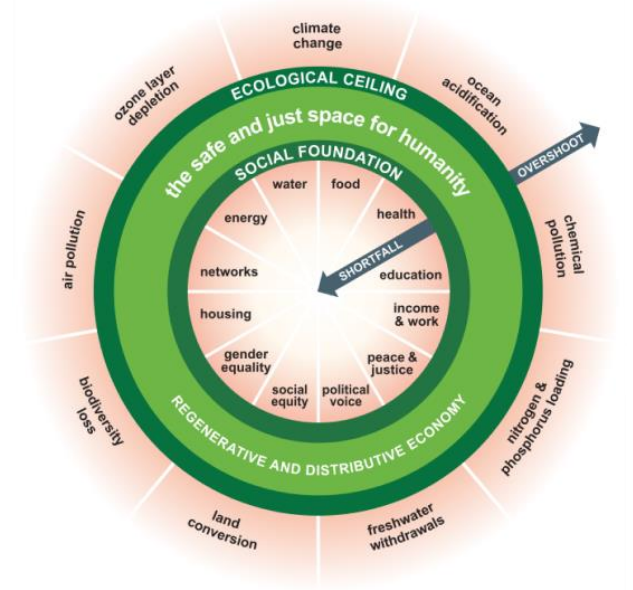
¹ See the visionary team report "The Cocktail University" (2021), UPDATED_Una-Europa-Future-UniLab-Integration_envisioning-report_r1.pdf

The task force observed further the benefits of working simultaneously with two contrasting metaphors.

Thought experiment is another kind of tool commonly used to think about complex problems, in hope of gaining an insight or uncovering deeply buried intuitions. A thought experiment consists in imagining (playing in one’s mind) a situation which is relevant for the considered problem. For example, when thinking about the future of universities one may try to imagine what it would be like if AI-driven software were able to provide instruction in academic disciplines (mathematics, history, law, etc.) in a much more efficient way than human teachers. In order to do so, one needs to imagine particular situations, e.g. how would the instruction be given (at home in front of a computer screen?), would collaboration between students be possible, would the AI-driven software be capable of teaching research methodology or some crafts, how would this type of instruction influence the student’s individual development and well-being, etc.

The power of thought experiments lies in the use of variation, which consists in changing small things in the imagined situation to see whether it influences one’s intuitive reaction to what is being imagined. When one begins with the scenario in which AI-driven software replaces human teachers, one may imagine a student sitting in front of their computer screen. Assuming that the algorithms are so developed that they adjust to the individual characteristics of the given learner, one may still intuitively judge this type of learning experience as lacking. The student is interacting only with their computer, does not take part in joint activities, is not part of a group, etc. At this point, one may introduce some variations into the imagined scenario. The AI-driven software connects students according to some parameters uncovered by the algorithms and assigns them joint tasks which make their progress even more impressive. Or one may imagine that students are not sitting in front of their computer screens but learn while doing other things (jogging, shopping, etc.) with the use of some currently non-existing digital equipment such as brain-computer interfaces. All these modifications do influence one’s reaction to the imagined situation and may lead to identifying such aspects of the learning experience which cannot be provided by AI-driven learning, such as the need for human interaction or a master-apprentice relation. Then the question arises whether such needs require the existence of universities or may be fulfilled in a different way.

Finally, *the doughnut economic model* is a way of thinking about economy in which economic growth is not the sole and ultimate goal of social endeavours. The ambition of the model is to identify a space for safe and just development of humanity, in-between basic social needs (social foundation) and external limitations (ecological ceiling)².

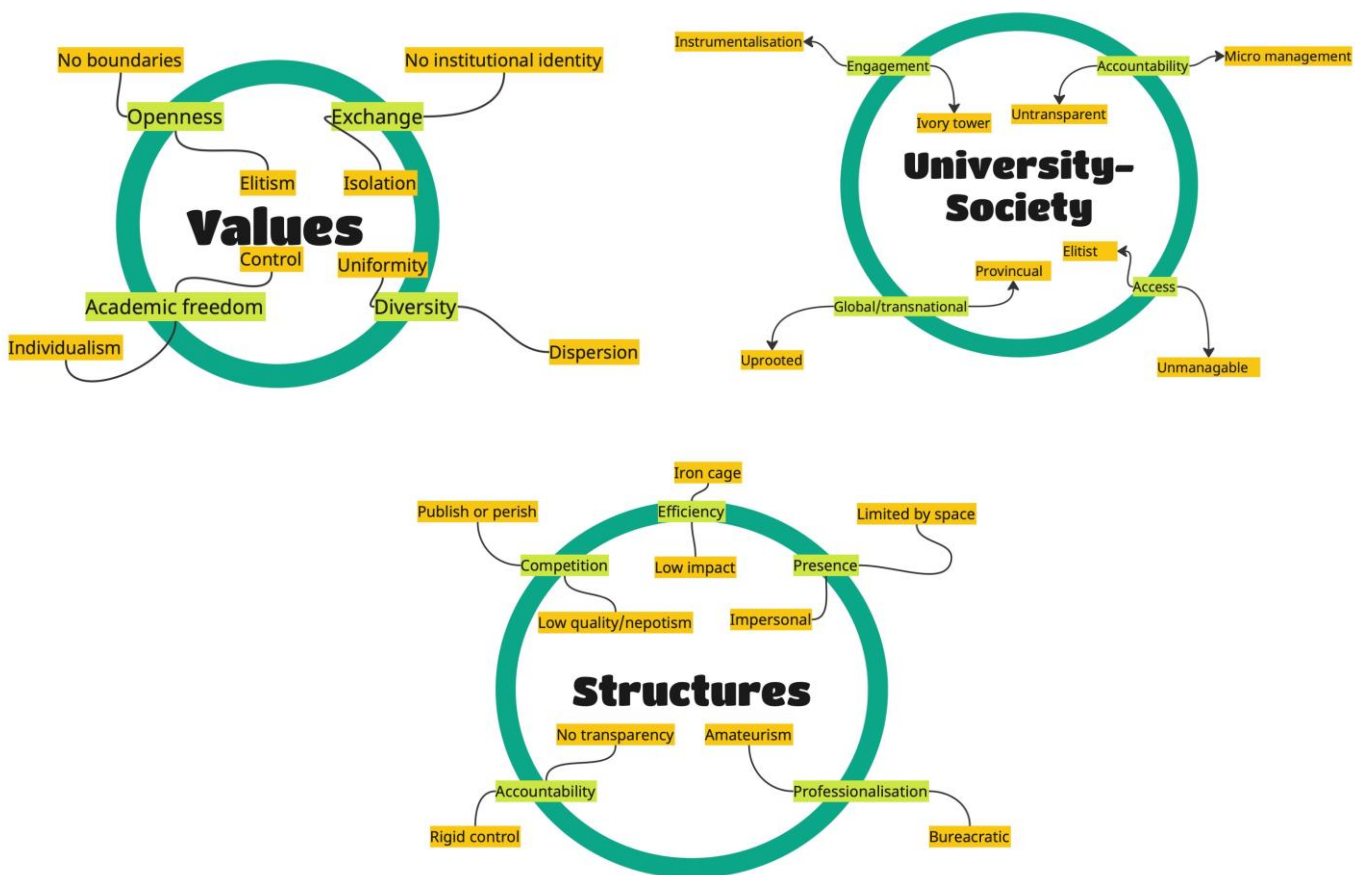


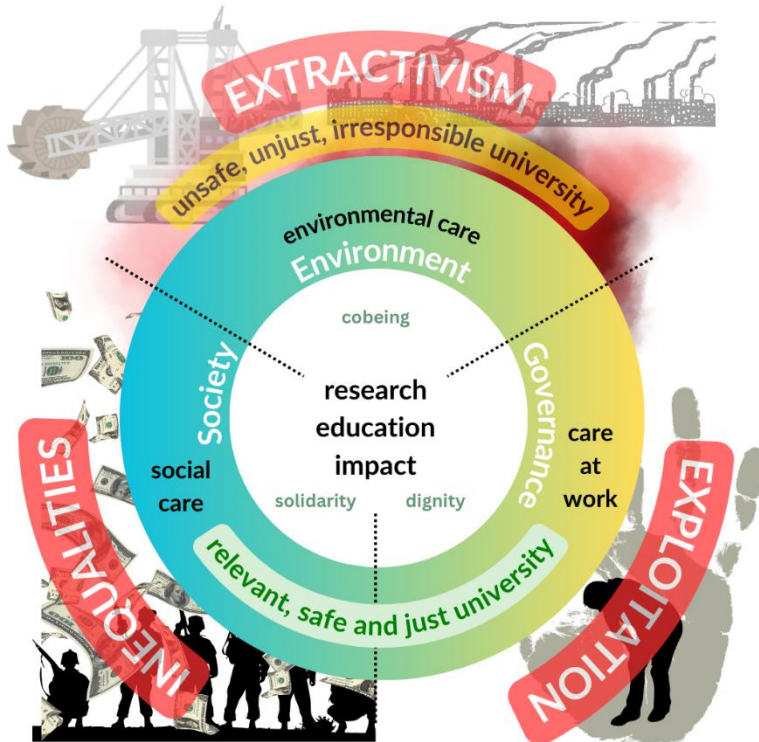
² Raworth, K. (2017), *Doughnut Economics: seven ways to think like a 21st century economist*. London: Penguin Random House.

The model has gained much popularity in recent years and its mechanics is used to address various more concrete social issues. There are also versions of the doughnut model which describe the way universities should function:



The task force has considered a number of different approaches to constructing our own 'the relevance of universities' doughnut:





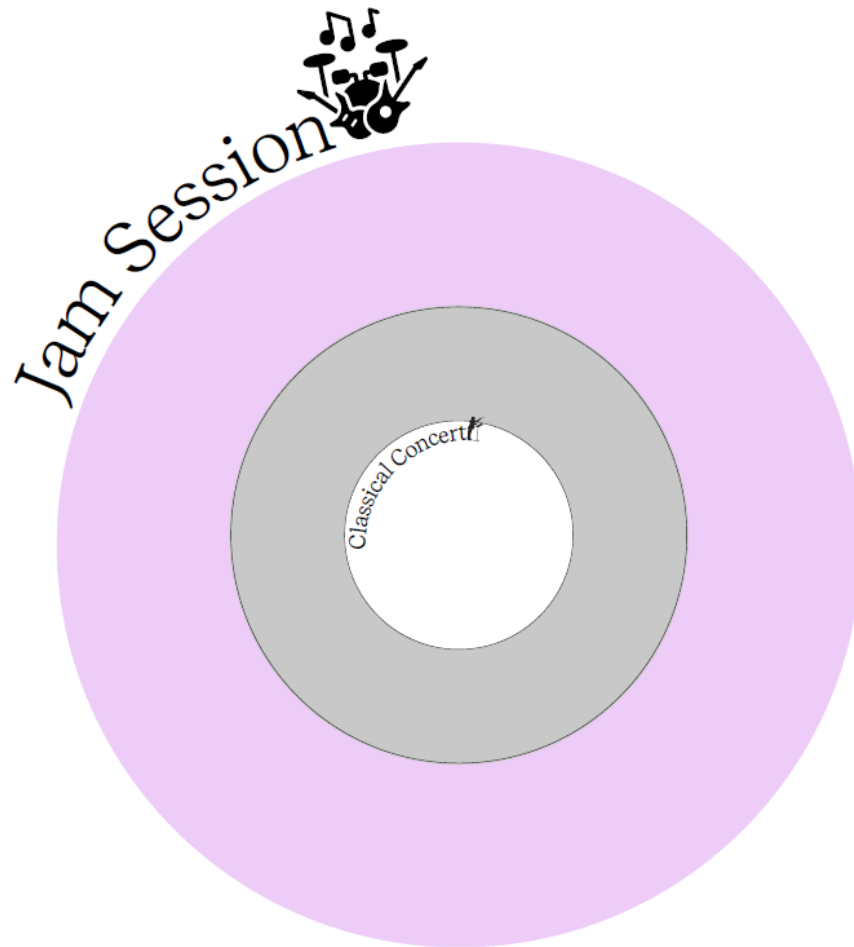
What the task force has learnt in the process is that while there may be many different university-related doughnuts, the very act of creating them is an extremely useful thinking exercise, which may help one to clarify conceptual distinctions and relationships, and – as a result – better understand the nature and functions of universities. Doughnut models may provide a conceptual framework in thinking about particular problems connected to the future of universities.

3. Application

The power of various tools for thinking – such as metaphors, thought experiments and models (e.g., the doughnut model) – lies not only in their ability to guide one in addressing problems and challenges and provide a source of insight, but also in the possibility of easily combining them while working with a particular question.

As an illustration, the task force considered combining three tools to show how they may be used together to consider the relevance of universities in the future. It was stressed that it is not the only way of using the tools, and that they may also be used alone or in combination with some other methods.

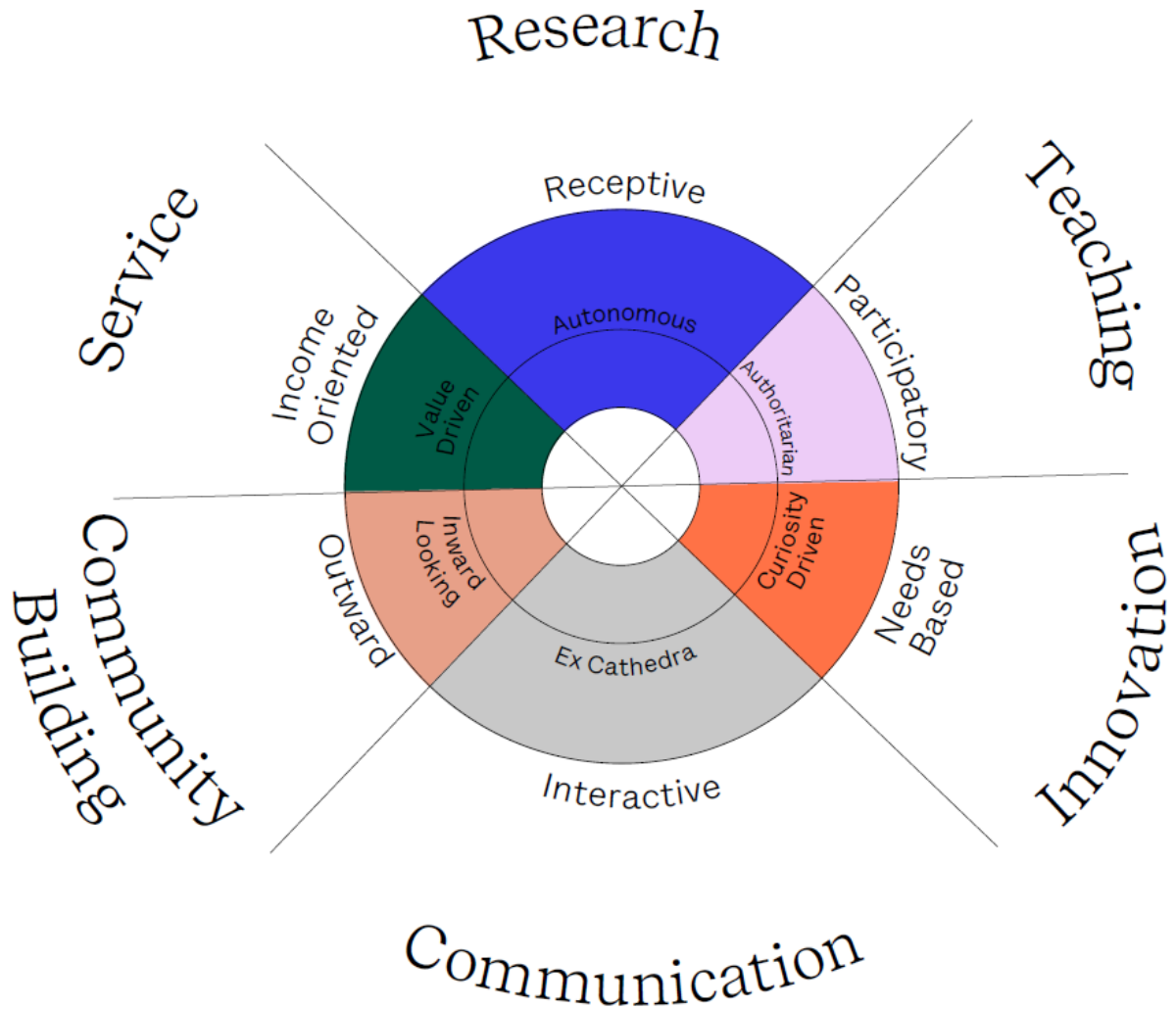
I. In the first step, we have observed that the two metaphors we considered – of university as a classical concert and as a jam session – provide two contrasting but possible ways of understanding universities. In fact, these seem to be two extreme forms of organising a university. Anything which is even more static and rule-governed than university as a classical concert would never perform the tasks of a university, becoming a completely isolated ivory tower with no contact with the surrounding social environment. On the other hand, any organisation which would be even more flexible and chaotic than a jam session, would not be a university any longer. Thus, we concluded that our two metaphors describe two limiting cases of what universities can be and as such identify the two circles (external and internal) of a doughnut. What a university is (and can be) lies in between those two circles:



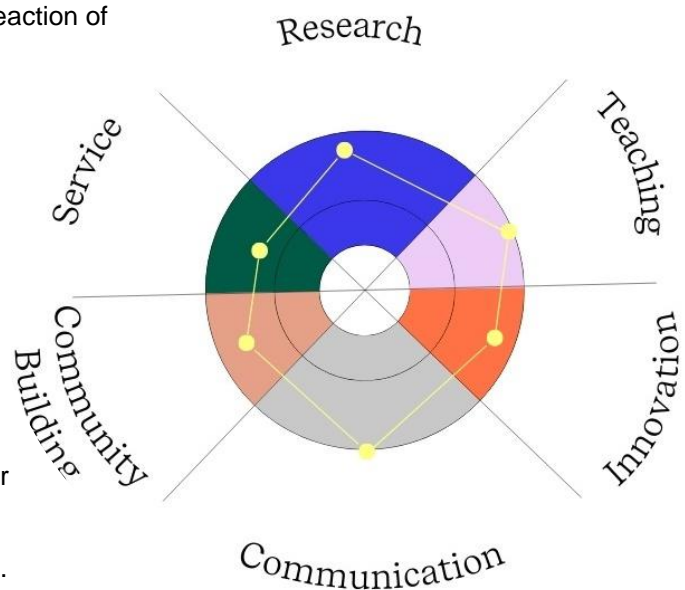
II. In the second step, we have considered how the use of the two metaphors may further inform the creation of the doughnut. As observed earlier, it is possible to develop various economic doughnuts, organized with the use of different criteria. One may, for example, put together a doughnut depicting the structure of a university taking into consideration the dimensions of ESG – environment, society and governance. Another option is to consider the *functions of university*, which include: research, teaching, innovation, communication, community building and service. Playing with the second option, we have observed that our metaphors help to describe the ‘limiting cases’ of the operations of the university in all its functions:

Function/Metaphor	Classical Concert Uni	Jam Session Uni
<i>Research</i>	Disciplinary, autonomous	Receptive to business and social needs
<i>Teaching</i>	Based on formal instruction, authoritarian	Participatory
<i>Innovation</i>	Curiosity and serendipity-driven	Needs-based
<i>Communication</i>	Formal, ex cathedra	Interactive
<i>Community building</i>	Inward-looking	Open and inclusive
<i>Service</i>	Value-driven	Impact-driven

This leads to developing the following doughnut, in which various categories and the interconnections between them have been established with the use of the two metaphors:



III. In the third step, we have considered how the above aforementioned doughnut model may be combined with the method of thought experiments to consider some particular problems related to the relevance of universities in the future. For instance, one may consider what should be the reaction of future universities to the challenge posed by AI-driven software potentially taking over teaching. The construction of the thought experiment in this case may be guided by the doughnut model. Presumably, the imagined situation should not influence research. In the case of teaching, however, given the nature of the AI-driven learning process, universities should become more open to participatory methods of teaching. The envisaged scenario should not influence innovation, but would require more interactive communication. It may also lead to a community-building model which is neither too inward-looking nor too inclusive, as well as to a view of the service provided by universities which is less income-oriented and more value-driven.



This exercise, although by no means conclusive, shows how various thinking tools may be effectively combined to drive problem-solving in the context of the future of universities.

It also helps to formulate the suggestion to keep working on the *toolbox for thinking* about the future of universities, adding new tools and identifying new interconnections between them.

4. Further actions

We propose that the experience of working together on various tools for thinking about the future of universities should be made available to the Una Europa community. Our suggestion is to use the General Assembly meeting in Krakow in May, 2025, to organize an event to experience the thinking process with the tools we described. Each participant would have the opportunity to visit three rooms.

- I. In *the wonderland room*, one would choose whether one is rather a music lover (and then one is to work with two metaphors of the classical concert and the jam session) or a sailor (working with the metaphors of university as a lighthouse and university as odyssey). The organisers would provide the participants with the means to record their observations of the nature and function of universities resulting from the chosen metaphors.
- II. In *the doughnut for a doughnut room*, one would have the opportunity to create one's own doughnut based on the considerations resulting from the chosen metaphors... and eat a real doughnut. A doughnut for a doughnut.
- III. In *the lab room*, one would choose from among several problems which universities may potentially face in the future, and – guided by their own doughnut – try to solve the problem. The solutions would be recorded and shared with the wider Una Europa community.

The outcomes of this experiment would be analysed to inform further work on the *thinking toolbox for the university of the future*.



FUTURE UNILAB

Una Europa vzw

KU Leuven Campus Brussels

Warmoesberg 26

1000 Brussels – Belgium

© Una Europa vzw, 2022

info@una-europa.eu ↗

www.una-europa.eu ↗

Keep up to date with Una.Futura and Una Europa online

[Twitter](#) ↗

[LinkedIn](#) ↗

[Instagram](#) ↗

[Facebook](#) ↗