Horizon 2031

The University of Granada in Light of its V Centenary. “Reflections on the Future of the University”
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The University of Granada in Light of its V Centenary.
“Reflections on the Future of the University”

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DL. GR./476-2015

Granada, 2015
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The Universidad de Granada is celebrating its 500th anniversary. Not just yet, but soon – in 2031. With this ‘reflection project’ Granada is looking back to the past and at the same time booking a ticket to the future. This is exactly what really old universities should do.

Clark Kerr, former President of Berkeley, once envisaged the time-honoured tradition of the university as follows, comparing some of the oldest universities with other longstanding institutions. About eighty-five institutions in the Western world established by 1520 still exist in recognisable forms. They still have similar functions and unbroken histories, including the Catholic Church, the Parliaments of the Isle of Man, of Iceland, and of Great Britain, several Swiss cantons, the water boards (‘waterschappen’) in the Netherlands, and seventy universities. Granada is one of them. Kings that rule, feudal lords with vassals and guilds with monopolies are all gone.

"These seventy universities, however, are still in the same locations with some of the same buildings, with professors and students doing much the same things, and with governance carried on in much the same ways. There have been many intervening variations on the ancient themes, it is true, but the eternal themes of teaching, scholarship, and service, in one combination or another, continue."

Kerr’s intriguing observation does not mean, however, that nothing has changed. The University of Bologna, almost twice as old as that of Granada, at the end of the eleventh century was hardly the university as we know it today. If a stranger in thirteenth-century Bologna had asked the way to the university, no one would have understood him: there was no specific university building. The wealthiest teachers taught in their own houses; the great majority of them were left to rent classrooms from private landlords. How different things are today!

Today, we have the portal of the University of Granada at our very fingertips (‘un portal ágil!’), where Rector Francisco González

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Lodeiro addresses his visitors in web language that would have confused the medieval visitor:

"The Universidad de Granada warmly welcomes you to its website. The purpose of this tool is to serve as a flexible, efficient and participatory portal for users of the network, and to answer the questions and queries of people accessing an open University. This website offers all the information you require in relation to the structure of the institution and the range of services offered to the University Community and the general public."

These differences are not just confined to buildings or communication: a lot has also changed in what universities do. Until the late eighteenth century, little research was carried out at universities. With some exceptions – such as Newton in Cambridge and Boerhaave in Leiden – the early universities were primarily centres of teaching and learning, focusing on specific professions: religion, law and medicine. It was not until 1809, with the foundation of the Universität zu Berlin that there was any interaction between teaching and research. The modern concept of a university was developed by Von Humboldt. No longer was it a matter of 'brotstudien', but of the 'Einheit von Lehre und Forschung' in which researchers and students could become part of a true community ('eine Gemeinschaft der Lehrenden und Lernenden').

So, although they may be venerable institutions, today's universities are by no means replicas of their counterparts from the eleventh or fifteenth century. Everyone in the university should read the marvelous History of the University of Europe, a series of four volumes that tell the story of the European university. It is a story of stability, but also of continuous adaptation, survival and downfall. The series' final volume, from 2011, shows how much has changed since WWII alone, both within the university and outside.3

Universities and their strategic challenges

As a former law dean, I have recently reviewed some of the major strategic issues confronting law faculties today. I was amazed by the speed of the changes in my own field over the past decades, changes affecting research, education, governance, international student mobility and the international competition of which research universities are a part. The request by the Rector of the University of Granada to say something about the key issues in the run-up to 2031 is therefore both

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challenging and risky. Just take the Internet as an example, that has totally transformed the world of higher education and research in only a few years.7

For most universities, I see a number of strategic challenges: their funding; the development of so-called widening participation policies leading to increased massification, diversification, marketisation and even privatisation; digitisation; specialisation and diversification in research; the ongoing debate about institutional autonomy and state regulation on the one hand, and the role of academics and the virtue of collegiality in the university on the other; globalisation and internationalisation of higher education and research; and the increasing importance of scientific integrity and the league tables.8

Let us start with funding.

> Every single day, our universities give shape to their responsibility to contribute to a fairer, healthier, more just, safer and more sustainable world.

**Funding**

Rectors and Presidents across the world consider the level of funding of higher education and research as the most pressing challenge faced by today’s universities. In Europe, total investment in higher education is generally low, particularly in those countries that have been severely hit by the worldwide economic downturn. Spain is definitely one of these countries where research funding must come increasingly from the EU, rather than from national funding agencies.

Funding is also an issue for university education, with important questions such as: how much should students themselves contribute to their education? I in my book I looked at the extreme situations where American law graduates find themselves saddled with debts almost for the rest of their lives due to having pursued a law degree. An intriguing question is whether the 'Americanisation' of higher education in general, will also lead to the export of this particular socio-economic problem. This question is especially relevant in times of massive unemployment, as is currently the situation in Spain.

Many research-intensive universities have discovered in oversea students an attractive source of income, and these are by no means only the MBAs or the law schools that dare to charge tuition fees in the order of magnitude of 25,000 euros or even more. Another important question is whether we can then expect a division between national students whose studies are funded by national government subsidies, and international students who mostly have to fund themselves.

And yet another question: does all this mean that we will no longer be dealing with students, but with customers or even consumers? Students who pay such tuition fees demand value for their money – and they are undoubtedly not prepared to accept a dropout scenario after their first year or bankruptcy after graduation.

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7 The First Email. The First Tweet. And 13 Other Famous Internet Fads (www.businessinsider.com/every-first-on-the-internet-2013-2?p=1&IR=T (last accessed 3 January 2015)).

8 I borrow from the second Chapter of my book.
Globalisation and internationalisation

Certainly one of the most prominent recent developments in higher education is its ongoing globalisation and the internationalisation of teaching and learning. However, at times we seem to forget how international the world of the university once was. ‘Medieval men loved travel,’ is Hilde de Ridder-Symons’ lovely opening sentence in an elegant chapter on the mobility of university professors and students in the Middle Ages:

“It mattered little that roads were few and that they could only go on foot or on horseback, by cart or by boat. The twentieth century thinks of the travellers thronging the roads of Europe in the Middle Ages as the ubiquitous armies, merchants going from town to town, and pilgrims [Yet] until the end of the eighteenth century pilgrims ... of another kind were also a familiar sight on the roads of Europe. These were the university students and professors. Their pilgrimage was not to Christ’s or a saint’s tomb, but to a university’s city where they hoped to find learning, friends and leisure.”

Since WWII, the world of higher education has entered a new phase of increasing mobility of students and academics. And if we realise that by 2031 we will be looking at 10 to 15 million students every year, and that Spain and Granada, for example, are highly attractive destinations for international students, we can expect that they, too, will be flooded with students from abroad.

And here again important questions arise: which students does a university want to have, and how many? And what should the ideal mix of national and foreign students be (the so-called ‘international classroom’)? All this calls for a well-thought-out strategy. As I have said before, student numbers alone do not say very much, certainly not for universities that also have research ambitions.

Education: massification and diversification

An important development is the ambition by most countries to widen participation in their higher education. In many instances, university education has developed—or is developing—from an activity engaged in by the elite, to a system of open/mass post-secondary education. Take Europe, where the target is that, by 2020, almost 40% of its young people should successfully complete higher education. But although attainment levels have risen significantly across much of Europe in the last decade, they are still largely

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insufficient to meet the expected growth in knowledge-intensive jobs.12

In an in-depth volume about globalisation and internationalisation, Nick Foskett and Felix Maringe, from the UK and South Africa respectively, conclude that for those universities in national systems where student participation rates have already reached high levels, the only response to the market is to compete for students internationally or to adopt a niche strategy of specialisation. Increased internationalisation, they argue, is the inevitable path for universities to enable them to operate in the global markets to which they will be exposed.13

Strategies of widening participation mean that the student influx to higher education becomes more diverse than it was, say, twenty or thirty years ago – let alone a century ago. In many countries, the number of female students is continually rising, as are the numbers of students from deprived backgrounds, and from ethnic minority groups, as well as students from elsewhere in Europe and from overseas. Equally important is the increased diversity in pre-university education and in students’ motivation.

New questions therefore arise. How are we going to deal with such massification and diversification in the coming years at a university like Granada, with upwards of 60,000 undergraduate and graduate students? How much attention will we be able to pay to individual students? Will we be able to cater for the differences between all these students? New business models and pedagogies are already emerging. For instance, what will be the role of the rapid advance of online education, such as Massive Open Online Courses – the MOOCs?14 We are already seeing an increasing acceptance of non-degree credentials that do not rely on traditional universities.15 Unbundling the customary curriculums and courses is considered to be one of the great disruptors in higher education. Students seem to prefer blended to 100% face-to-face or online learning. The future may well be blended and unbundled. 16

Research: choosing more focus

For all comprehensive universities, it is the quality of their research that determines their international reputation. No matter how important education is, reputation is always derived from research.

But scientific research is very expensive, and to conduct research a university has to recruit and retain the best researchers. It has to make major investments in scientific and technical infrastructure; and it has to make choices: what are the areas where my university can become a national or a world leader? After all, with increasing specialisation and a growing tendency towards a multidisciplinary approach, for most universities it is impossible to excel in a broad spectrum of fields.

The pressure of increased internationalisation will therefore manifest itself not only in the

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educational domain we mentioned before. Foskett and Maringe foresee that the funding that is available for research will be increasingly channelled to those with very large research capacity, strong track records in research quality, and robust and international networks. Networks have indeed become highly important in today’s world. It is not without reason that the university of the future is seen as a networked university. Moreover they expect that the relationship between universities and business will see a strong engagement between global corporations and global universities. Global corporations provide a strong outlet for the innovations of universities, while global universities provide the knowledge and research resource to enable large corporations to optimise their own business development.\textsuperscript{17}

The question arises of how universities that want to become world players in certain fields, en route to 2031, will be able to meet all these conditions, particularly as they themselves have only a limited influence on external circumstances. Whether or not there is a network with businesses, such as a local science park, is in many cases not a matter of choice. Funding and legislation are issues for regional and national governments. For many governments in mainland Europe the question will be whether they will be prepared to put extra money into one or two universities in particular, so that these universities will be able to excel on a world scale.

Foskett and Maringe expect a future in more or less four tiers: the first comprises a relatively small number of global universities whose reputation and markets are global and that operate with limited constraint from domestic policies and markets. A second tier of internationalised universities will also operate in the global arena, but from a base which is strongly rooted in their own national system. The third tier will be those that operate principally at national level, drawing students and resources largely from their own national context, but providing some opportunities for international engagement. And the final tier will be those that operate entirely within sub-national and regional contexts - they engage comparatively little with global markets, but demonstrate internationalisation in terms of curriculum design and content or through links with regional employers operating in international markets.\textsuperscript{18}

Of course, it is difficult to say what the future will look like, yet such scenarios should be on the strategic agenda of every university and every national government.

Digitisation

Internet affects everything that we do: such as the way we carry out research, our teaching, and how we recruit new students. Internet also has an effect on the bond that we are so keen to preserve with our alumni. I would just like to say a few words about these last two: digitisation for recruiting students and the relationship with our alumni.

The opportunities and threats of digitisation are not just an issue for universities. Private companies have been dealing with this for much longer. Some CEOs in banking, retail and in other business sectors have even been too late in adapting to so-called ‘rapidly changing consumer decision journeys’, and, as a result, have already lost their traditional markets.

University rectors, however, are at the head of institutions that may be less sensitive to such changing 'consumer' decision behaviour. The widening participation policies in most countries guarantee adequate growth for just about all universities. And if the expectation proves true that by around 2025-2030 some 10-15 million students will be studying outside their native countries, then research-intensive universities with established positions in the world league tables need have few worries about their clientele.

Universities and their strategic challenges:
- Funding
- Globalisation and internationalisation
- Education: massification and diversification
- Research: choosing more focus
- Digitisation
- Autonomy and professional responsibility
- Integrity and the role of the league tables
- Universities as bastions of liberty

But for sure, most universities will be eager to attract those students that best fit their chosen profile, both national and international. And here, the age of big data and widespread digitisation of customer information may provide these universities with helpful tools to attract the students they want.

Are there lessons that universities in the years leading up to 2031 can learn from the experiences of the business sector? How is big data, for example, going to affect our universities? I mentioned alumni: will the big data development make it easier for us to follow the progress of our alumni, along the lines of the American model?

Autonomy and professional responsibility

We have known for a long time that universities flourish best, and serve society most effectively, when they have strong academic direction and autonomy – in an atmosphere of freedom and collegiality. Academic freedom is the core value of the university, in combination with the confidence in the professionals' own sense of responsibility. Yet we see that in many places both this professional autonomy and this confidence are under pressure from increasing intrusiveness and activism on the part of governments.

One of the results is a growing level of tension within universities. It puts collegiality, the time-honoured unity of university governance by academics and university management together, under pressure. Andrew McGlotten, a British writer with a background in philosophy, concludes that today's academics seem about to be squeezed by the demands of new student-consumers and the pressures from management to become more efficient, productive and therefore profitable. This is, he says, exacerbated by the failure of academics to properly defend their profession:

"... pressed by workloads and atomised through research assessment, yes, but too willing to code difficult chores to bureaucrats. The 'self-critical community of scholars', which is meant to safeguard degree standards, has been eroded to a large extent by an expansionist executive and managerial class, who will now have a new range of performance metrics with which to discipline more and more pliable academics." 19

I feel that this is one of the biggest challenges for the years leading up to 2031: how should we shape our university governance and management so that academic freedom in teaching and research can be combined with the also increasing line responsibility for more and more administrative, accounting and managerial needs?²⁸

Integrity and the role of the league tables

If a high degree of autonomy has for centuries been a vital ingredient for quality, this autonomy brings with it high expectations from society: expectations of quality, impact and service, and integrity. Of all those traditional institutions mentioned at the start of this essay, the Church, politics, government and in some cases the judiciary have lost much of their reputation. Universities, on the other hand, still enjoy a high level of societal confidence, even though their teaching and research take place in a less than simple environment: increasing pressure on students about study performance and tempo, students who may start behaving as consumers, with the attendant consumer rights, research that is carried out on behalf of commercial parties, and research careers that are determined by quantity rather than quality. With rankings and league tables that increasingly resemble stock market ratings, the question arises of whether our universities will be able to withstand all the scientific, societal and financial temptations. These are things we have to be alert to.²⁹

Universities as bastions of freedom

A study published by The World Bank covering eleven universities in nine countries shows what is needed for an institution aspiring to become a research-driven university on the global scene.²⁵ In short the answer is: (i) the ability to attract, recruit and retain leading academics and high-quality students, (ii) abundant funding, as well as (iii) an appropriate regulatory framework, adequate management, and a strong and inspiring leadership. However, much of the future of European universities depends on other factors, on governments and their financial capabilities in particular.

But one thing is certain. Over the centuries, universities have been centres of freedom. And freedom is not just a nice feature to have on our website – it is a responsibility. Hundreds of millions of people live in a world that is the absolute opposite of freedom, and this world seems to be growing unstoppable. There are so many places in the world where universities, with their assumed freedom of education and research, are much less free than one would imagine; many are struggling to survive while others are engaged in tough and sometimes even dangerous uphill battles for survival, trying to map out their development to accommodate local, national and international interests and values. What can they do?

Actually, they can do a lot. We can do a lot. A university does what it is: as part of a superb and centuries-old academic network it spans the entire globe with its fine web of academics, lecturers and students who seek one another out, read one another’s works and have a dialogue with one another. We challenge one another’s opinions, we cherish academic freedom and we have contacts across the

²⁸ Carol Stolker, Rethinking the Law School - Education, Research, Outreach & Governance, 2014, Chapter 11.
²⁹ Carol Stolker, Rethinking the Law School - Education, Research, Outreach & Governance, 2014, p. 18 ff.
borders of all the world’s conflicts and troubles. Where national and international politics have often run into difficulties and even ended up in a state of war, universities worldwide are still among the few networks that continue to connect people, from country to country and from region to region. Networks, in short, of many, many ‘bastions of freedom’. Every single day, our universities give shape to their responsibility to contribute to a fairer, healthier, more just, safer and more sustainable world. We hope that, in carrying out this responsibility, we can act as agents of freedom.

I wish the University of Granada, with its wonderful past and its inspiring future, every success on its journey to 2031.

"Over the centuries, universities have been centres of freedom"