

The Future of Universities: What will we do there?

World Assembly 2023 Conversatorio: “The University: Our Mission Field”

INTRODUCTION

This is “the future of the University” report for IFES. It is a summary and survey of trends, many of which had previously arisen, but have now been accelerated by the pandemic.

Of course, **this is neither a final nor an authoritative report on the current position of universities worldwide.**¹ Such would exceed the expertise of any individual and would not do justice to the great diversity reflected by IFES movements.² As a missionary organization within the university, we need to study and to learn from it, like any other intercultural encounter. To understand the passions, interests, and especially the challenges that are inherent to the university experience. We want to be there to delight in every manifestation of God’s generous creation and design, in everything that points towards his kingdom. And, in doing so, we seek to develop the wisdom to discern idolatrous tendencies that often exist in institutions of higher education.

Universities are changing rapidly, perhaps even more than we realize or want to acknowledge. But the Gospel does not change. Our willingness to be creative, to take risks, listen and learn; and to adapt our methods and structures is crucial. As staff, we should always model a questioning and listening attitude towards the university, both by asking ourselves questions and asking them of our students. Let us humbly, boldly, and prayerfully try to be faithful stewards of God’s mission through IFES.

First, we *must* ask: “Where is the university going?” Following this: **“What impact does it have on Christian missions?”** Without these two points, we risk reducing the university to a place where we fish for people, but do not care about their needs and the needs of the institution.

One technical note: in the following, I speak of “IFES” as a fellowship of students, staff, graduates and supporters. This is because it is the people who are part of our IFES national movements who need to engage with the trends. You should therefore not expect some separate “IFES” to do something about this. Instead, *you* need to discern where God is calling you and your national movement to do something about it. And, as we do that, the IFES fellowship can provide ideas, support, models, and training that may help you adapt to and make the most of the changes.

¹ By universities, IFES means “institutions of higher learning”. This can include all sorts of vocational colleges as well.

² Perhaps we should talk about “universities”, not “the University”. Most literature and discussion about where universities are heading focuses almost exclusively on the “top 100” global universities.



SOME MAJOR CURRENT AND FUTURE TRENDS IN THE UNIVERSITY WORLD

Trends	Possible effects on mission	Remarks for IFES
Lack/misuse of critical thinking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Difficulty to develop Christian thinking and bring a Christian voice. ❖ Difficulty to encourage multiple perspectives within academia. ❖ Some critical voices question the very possibility of mission. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Evangelicalism is not known for its critical thinking tradition. This goes against the grain of traditional academic values but plays into current trends towards tribalism. What could be done? ❖ ETU presupposes critical thinking yet goes against the grain of many churches and universities. How does wise, Scripture-informed engagement look?³
Commercialization/ Commodification ⁴	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ “Pragmatic value” of any message (product) is highlighted. Christian communities on or close to campus can be “appeal product” of the church. ❖ The <i>Mission of God</i> is one of redemptive reconnection to transcendence: specific contribution to the “market of ideas”.⁵ ❖ A much greater variety of institutions of higher education make up the landscape (with many being private institutions), at which students need to be reached. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Are IFES movements actively discussing ethical issues around academic disciplines with their students? ❖ Can we foster an approach to university life and environment which sees beauty and wounds, thus going beyond utilitarianism?⁶ ❖ Are we nurturing student voices which are different (artists, poets, etc.) in the ways they serve others prophetically? ❖ We should be careful not to nourish the idea in students that the missionary ends justify the means.
Increased access to Internet, development of AI technologies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ People could seek answers about faith from robots rather than human (AI being impartial). ❖ Bible study questions painfully crafted could be reformatted> Scripture Engagement decreases in quality and becomes impersonal. ❖ Exam/paper requirements might change drastically, which might change relationships to the Bible. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Traditionally, Evangelicals have had a flexible relationship to technology and often been its early adopters. ❖ Need for teaching/modelling use of technologies; IFES staff need to be well aware of technological developments. ❖ Many people hitherto unheard in IFES will get a voice, but vastly diverging e-relationship/e-engagement traditions exist. How can the fellowship model wise

³ Emmanuel Manalo et al., ‘Do Students from Different Cultures Think Differently about Critical and Other Thinking Skills?’, in *The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Thinking in Higher Education*, ed. M. Davies and R. Barnett (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 299–316.

⁴ « On the global scale, however, universities are being transformed with stunning speed into service centres for transnational capital, creating a workforce for a commodified, financialized world. University research is complicit in the destruction of the natural world and in the emergence of a new techno-racism. The task of decolonizing universities is therefore linked to our capacity to re-think the global economy and human mutuality » Connell, 179.

⁵ “There may even be dangers that students and others will be shaped in unhelpful directions, for example, into believing that human beings are individuals designed for competition and consumption, living first for their own good.” Stephen Heap, ‘The Universities We Need’, in *The Universities We Need: Theological Perspectives*, ed. Stephen Heap (Milton: Taylor and Francis, 2016), 183.

⁶ “Place is also a way of seeing, knowing and understanding the world. When we look at the world as a world of places, we see different things. We see attachments and connections between people and place. We see worlds of meaning and experience. Sometimes this way of seeing can seem to be an act of resistance against a rationalization of the world, a way of seeing that has more space than place. To think of an area of the world as a rich and complicated interplay of people and the environment - as a place - is to free us from thinking of it as facts and figures.” Tim Cresswell, *Place: A Short Introduction* (Malden: Blackwell Pub, 2004), 11.



		intercultural dialogue/mutual learning?
Political polarization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Increasing polarization of discourse might hinder the necessary nuances of mission. ❖ Politically motivated campus closures to prevent student mobilization mean unexpected disruptions for students, raising new questions and anxieties as well as creating new needs for Christian engagement. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Can IFES groups be artisans of peace and intercultural understanding?⁷ ❖ Christians can contribute to the defence of university ideals over against political co-optation.
Universities seen and managed as business corporations. Students are “customers” and faculty are “human resources.”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Management, rather than students, faculty, and graduates, control the university. ❖ Critics of management are marginalized. ❖ Goal is to attract more students paying tuition and research grants. ❖ Education and research are subsidiary. ❖ Management is averse to controversy. Evangelism and robust debate may cause problems. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Student Christian groups will be allowed on campus provided they stay in the chaplaincy buildings and don’t “cause problems”. ❖ Christian students may buy into corporate marketing whereby the purpose of attending university is to earn a degree that will lead to a high-paying job.

SOME CONCLUDING REMARKS

It is important to acknowledge the incredible diversity and heterogeneity of the universities in which we minister. Between them is a wide range of financial, physical, and educational resources, as well as diverse academic standards, geographic focus, political stability, cultural context, and religious freedom.

These things matter. The different changes and challenges faced by national movements across global campuses will vary significantly and require adaptive approaches.

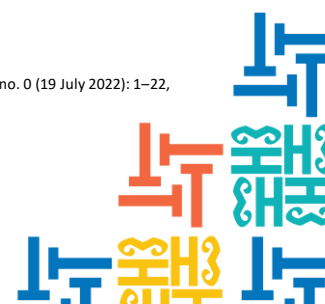
We need to be realistic. With limited resources, we can’t expect to have a significant ministry on every campus, particularly if campuses are quite distinctive.

Timothée Joset

Engaging the University Global Coordinator

The Engaging the University global team supports IFES national movements as they aspire to have an incarnational, integrated, and intellectually credible Christian witness in the university world. We support movements, groups, and individuals by providing a network, mentors, resources, and a learning community committed to the

⁷ Lies Sercu, 'Internationalization at Home as a Factor Affecting Intercultural Competence. A Study among Belgian University Students', *European Journal of Higher Education* 0, no. 0 (19 July 2022): 1–22, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21568235.2022.2094815>.



Gospel and passionate about the University. >> For more resources, go to the [IFES Connect ETU Resources page](#).

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