



Leading education  
and social research  
Institute of Education  
University of London

# The future of higher education

Ronald Barnett, University College London Institute of Education  
Seminar, CSHE, University of Melbourne, July 2018

[www.ioe.ac.uk](http://www.ioe.ac.uk)



Centre for Higher  
Education Studies

# My talk

- Sharing reflections
- Global context
- Pessimism and optimism – & realism
- Universities and higher education
  - Radically different trajectories in front of them
- My talk – neither ‘scenarios’ nor ‘futures’
- A value-based position (ie, my own values in relation to higher education)

# My argument

- Higher education is on a cusp
  - - it is not in ruins
  - - but it is severely challenged
  - - and, in the process, it is falling short both of (a) its responsibilities and (b) its possibilities (and the latter are paradoxically enlarging).
  - And we can glimpse these more optimistic openings through
    - (i) a realist perspective and
    - (ii) an ecological perspective.
- » *The future of higher education is more open than many imagine: we may fear for the worst but we may also legitimately hope for the best.*

# Does global mean universal? Yes and no!

- Common issues across the world
  - Finance
  - Access
  - Research – esp natural sciences
  - Economy
    - Isomorphism – across HE systems and institutions
      - The ministers of higher education can easily talk to each other.

## But considerable differences

- Markets
- Rel of state-universities
- Public-private sectors
- Society as well as economy
- What counts as a student

# Global differences and even global tensions

- Social, political, economic, cultural capital
- Flows of students and staff - fluctuations
- Research – international collaboration
- ‘Modernisation’
- Epistemic colonialism
- Societal contribution
- NB: *what is characteristically understood as a ‘university’ amounts to the top 4-5% of the 16,000+ universities*

# A global system

- Higher education – a global system (Marginson)
- Has a life, a reality of its own
  - And operates independently of states
- Its own movements
- Universities are networked, whether they understand it or not
  - Not least in the digital age, with knowledge flows
- A dynamic ecosystem
- But with tensions – hierarchies/ power structures/ rival ideologies
- Is it impaired?

# But the state/ nation is not at an end

- Still large differences across states
- And they exhibit movements
- Eg Chile/ Germany
- And state action is evident (China/ Australia/ India/ Japan/ England [not UK])
- So nice questions arise about the character of higher education as a global system and its relationships with the state (states).

# A key distinction

- ‘University’ and ‘higher education’ – not interchangeable (RB’s books)
- ‘Higher education’ – 2 meanings
  - (a) educational processes
  - (b) systems (of higher education)
- ‘University’
  - A social institution, characteristically still with a physical presence
  - But increasingly living in virtual space with a national/ global identity
  - Often the largest employer in a town
  - A community of tens of thousands (or more – LA) + huge turnover
  - Complex institutions (in the formal sense of ‘complexity’)

# Mistrust or puzzlement?

- Higher education has become a subject of critique
- Age of populism: 'We've had enough of experts'
- Alternative facts – a 'post-truth' era?
- Students should know their place
- 'Snowflake generation'
- 'Safe spaces'
- Free speech
- A fundamental societal division (those who have/ have not enjoyed higher education)

# Knowledge systems

- Knowledge swirls
- Internet age
- Collaboration
- Borderless
- International classrooms
- Concerns over epistemic colonialization and epistemicide (de Souza Santos)
- League tables
- Dominance of STEM (whither the humanities?)
- Part of 'services sector'

# Changing epistemologies and ontologies

- Postmodernity: Triple helix (Etzkowitz)/ Mode 2 (Gibbons et al)
- Postmodernism: performativity - the test is 'what use is it?' (Lyotard)
- New language of higher education: skill, employability, innovation, impact  
...
- The emergence of cognitive capitalism (Boutang)
- Students are economic subjects, the bearers of economic capital
- (esp marked in heavily marketized countries)

# The student class

- Students as an agentic force (Chile/ Hong Kong/ USA ...)
- Students as bearers of national identity
- Internet age
- Students as customers
- Student satisfaction
- Power is shifting towards the students
- 'Studentification'

# Students as agents

- Power of students on campuses (in marketized countries)
- Shift in the pedagogical relationship
- Learning spaces (not teaching spaces)
- Students as agents of their learning
- Devices in the classroom
- Students as a collective agent on campus (South Africa)

# The internet classroom

- In space
- Borderless
- The international classroom
- Devices in the classroom
- Flipped classroom
- The end of the lecture?

# Some issues

- Learning analytics
- Tyranny of metrics/ and measurement
- & of competition
- & of the 24 hour university
- & of income generation
- Explicitness (learning outcomes/ contracts)
- Effects on lives
- Effects on universities
- Relationship between T & R (RB's question)
- Widening and narrowing (disciplines/ epistemologies/ functions in society)

# Questions

- ‘What is higher about higher education’?
  - And what *might* it be?
- ‘What is a university?’
  - And what might *it* be?

# Some further questions

- Does the university have responsibilities?
  - How understand the concept of 'responsibility'? (cf Derrida)
- What is it to be a student?
- Is the idea of the university at an end? (Readings)
- Is the space of the university closing or (even) opening?

# The future university

- All doom and gloom?
- Big battalions
- Global systems
- State policies
- Institutional management
- Or is there space still – for imaginative ideas of the university?

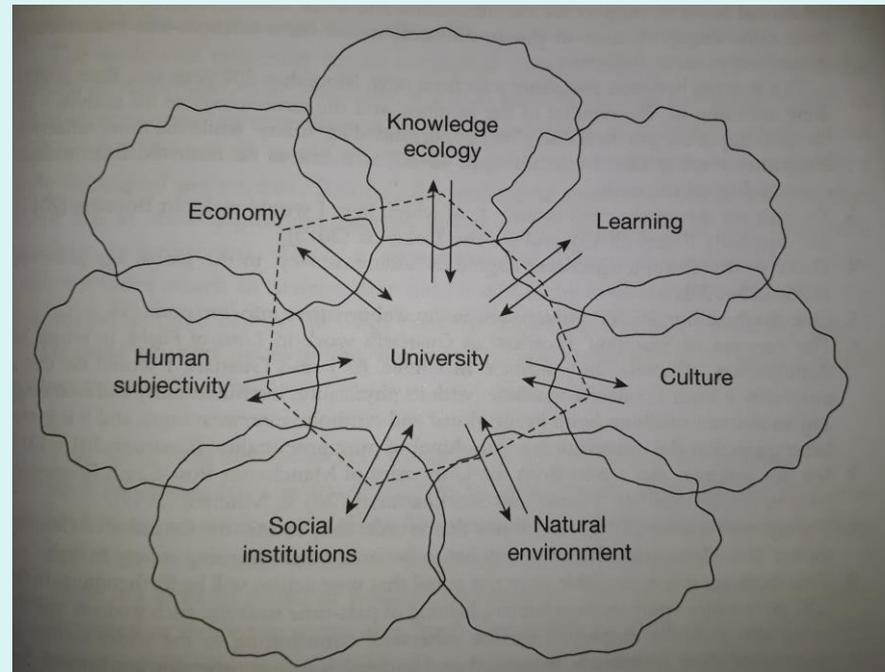
# Signs of life

- International classroom
- Societal engagement
- ‘The public philosopher’
- Teaching being given a higher profile
- Relationship between T and R is being thought about
- Some universities are thinking about their possibilities in the world
- And their ‘responsibilities’
- Social and community engagement
- Are incorporating an ethical dimension
- Cross-world collectives oriented towards civic engagement (Talloires; ACU)
- Cross-national collaboration across North-South (unforced)
- But still much to be done - eg in working out the ‘public’ possibilities

# An ecological perspective

- The university is (necessarily) entangled in 7 major ecosystems
- Knowledge, learning, social institutions, persons, culture, economy, natural environment
- Universal and particular promptings and possibilities
- Dynamic – opening spaces – and responsibilities
- Call for institutional courage, imagination, perseverance
- Options
- Discernment
- Political nous
- Value identification

# 7 ecosystems of the university



## Conclusions

- The university – worldwide – has a new presence
  - A new power
- Attracts responses: mistrust/ hand-wringing
- Sense of emptiness, distortion, manipulation, crisis
  - And no longer admired, respected, loved
- At best an instrument
  - At worst an institution whose value is passed
- But there is much to play for
  - The university enjoys much space (although varied)
- What we are short of is imaginative effort
  - Can we be utopian? Yes!
- But let our utopias of the university be feasible utopias
  - and let us work towards them and struggle for them.



**Institute of Education**  
University of London  
20 Bedford Way  
London WC1H 0AL

Tel +44 (0)20 7612 6000  
Fax +44 (0)20 7612 6126  
Email [info@ioe.ac.uk](mailto:info@ioe.ac.uk)  
Web [www.ioe.ac.uk](http://www.ioe.ac.uk)