



Leading education  
and social research  
Institute of Education  
University of London

# (Re)valuing the University: An Ecological Approach

Ronald Barnett, University College London Institute of Education  
Keynote, HERDSA annual conference, Adelaide, July 2018

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



Centre for Higher  
Education Studies

# A context of vision and possibilities

- Title of conference: ‘(Re)valuing Higher Education’
- ‘Revisiting the purpose and scope of what “being” a university means
- as well as considering what differentiates “higher” learning’
- ‘Revisiting’ – implication of a changing context
- Prompting a change in being a university
- And in the sheer meaning of ‘university’
- So a temporal horizon – historical, immediate, and future
- Possible place of the university in the future
- Utopias?

## 4 exam questions

- 1 Which values? (in considering the university)
- 2 Historical values, today's values or values of the future?
- 3 (Just) the values of each university or universal values?
- 4 What is the context in which those values have point? What is the 'real world' of the university, of all universities?

# My title and thesis

Title: '(Re)valuing the university: an ecological approach'

Thesis:

- i That the university is primarily – or should be – a place of thought
- ii This conception is in jeopardy
- iii An ecological perspective may help its recovery
- iv The university is entangled with 7 ecosystems
  - to which the university has responsibilities
- v So values emerge out of a reading of the real space of the university – values from facts
- vi Universal values but interpreted locally – each university has responsibilities to realize its own agentic spaces (across the 7 ecosystems).

# An early clarification

- The conference website speaks of both ‘higher education’ and ‘university’
- But important to distinguish them
  - They overlap but neither is reducible to the other
- ‘Higher education’ – 2 meanings (ed processes & system)
  - As an educational process, higher education is a critical concept
- ‘University’ – a crucially important social institution
  - Qs arise as to its power & autonomy – amid ‘cognitive capitalism’
    - Some talk of the university ‘in crisis’ and ‘in ruins’ (Readings).

# The twin perils – or is it three?

- The emergence of
    - (i) Cognitive capitalism (Boutang; Roggero) – and ‘performativity’ (Lyotard) and
    - (ii) Higher education falling within the neoliberal fold (+ NPM)
  - But now the emergence of a post-truth era
    - And the role of experts is questioned (for which the university is perhaps partly to blame)
- So
- (a) the value of the university is doubted and/or
  - (b) its internal values are supplanted by the external values of the market (‘value-for-money’/ students as ‘customers’)

# Values, which values?

- The 1800s? (Kantian university of reason)
- The 1950s? (Collini?)
- Today? ('The entrepreneurial university'/ 'The digital university')
- But where to now?
  - No retreat to the past
  - The value that attaches to the university changes
    - So where begin in identifying values appropriate to the C21?
      - And to mass higher education?
      - And to a major institution in the centre of society/ of the world?

# So: values desert or values overflow?

- Is the university devoid of values?

Or to the contrary:

- It is beset by multiple, proliferating and conflicting values
- ('The entrepreneurial university', 'the civic university', 'the public university', 'the corporate university', 'the comprehensive university' ...)
- Different ideas of the university
- With different and competing values.

# Values – institutional or universal?

- So each university works it out for itself
- Producing an unstable mix of inner values
- (It may attempt to ‘drive through’ a core set of values
- And even set them out in its corporate strategy)
- And so, in practice, presents multiple values to the world
- And the world responds (?) with mistrust of universities – ‘elites’, ‘experts’ with their ‘truths’ and ‘facts’ ...
- So just a value mess, as sets of values compete internally & externally
- No universal values to hand?

# A realist perspective

- Real features of the world that bear in, independently of our ideas
- Bhaskar's Critical Realism
- An ontological philosophy
- There is a world, and it is layered, some of it beyond our understanding
- But it acts upon us
- Independently of our knowledge of it
- The university – is entangled with the world, which acts upon the university
- 'Generative mechanisms'
- 'Absenting absences'
- But then the university has new possibilities – new spaces for it to be a corporate agent (List and Pettit)

# The idea of ecology

- Fact and value
- Assemblage of cognate entities
- Inherently self-sustaining
- Valuable in itself
- But liable to be impaired
- Partly or wholly as a result of humanity's actions
- So responsibilities fall upon humanity to do what it can to repair situations.

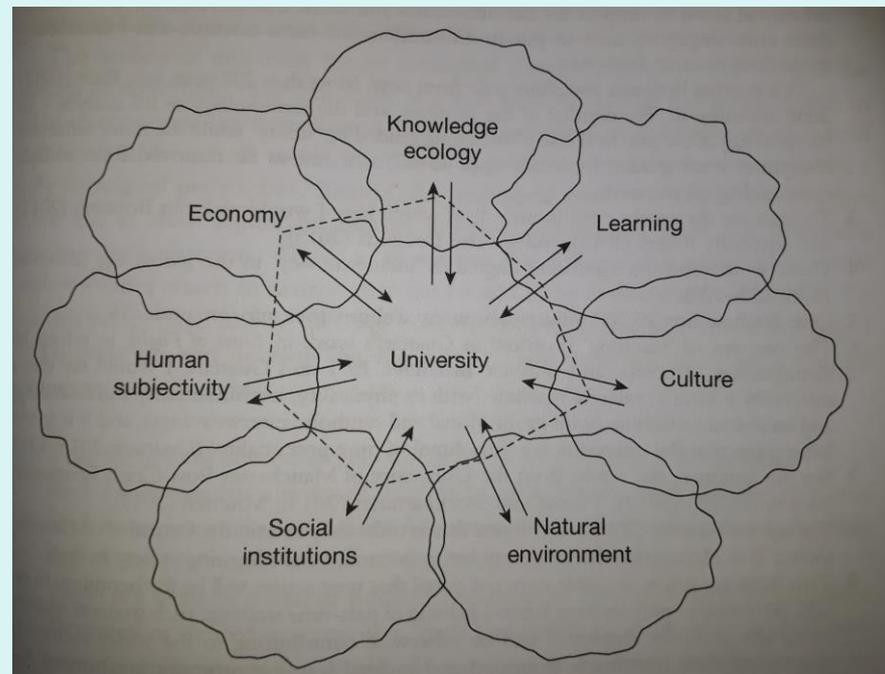
# The university's ecological situation

Universities are entangled especially with 7 ecosystems:

- Knowledge
- Social institutions
- Persons
- Learning
- Culture
- Economy
- Natural environment

*NB: The economy is significant but it has been unduly privileged and the claims of the other ecosystems have been underplayed.*

# 7 ecosystems of the university



# Knowledge ecology

- Knowledge circulates in and out of the university and society
- It has all kinds of aspects and manifestations – epistemic entities
- Think tanks, parliamentary committees, the quality press, professions, companies – all produce and circulate knowledge
- This is a knowledge ecology
- But is it robust? Is it sound? (Social media, politics, newspapers.)
- Public understandings of complex and important issues (cf Brexit)
- Experts disbelieved, ‘alternative facts’, a post-truth era
- This knowledge ecology is impaired.

# The thinking university – and addressing the knowledge economy

- Now, responsibilities befall the university to help to repair the knowledge ecology
- But this requires freedom of thought in the university
- And a willingness to engage with society
- To improve the circulation of ideas and evidence across society
- And to deepen the public understanding of matters
- Much more than ‘public intellectuals’ and reaching out to ‘citizen scientists’ or ‘citizen scholars’
- But to widen and make vibrant ‘public spheres’ (cf Habermas).

# The university as place and space

- The university has both place and space
- It is still likely to flourish partly in virtue of its having a physical space – and presence. (Often the largest employer in the town.)
- But this university also has space
- It is distributed across society, across the world
- It engages with the world
- It is a node in the information world
- The world is its oyster
- The university is a gathering, but/ and it gathers across the world
- And so it has epistemic responsibilities to the world.

# Research

- Research – deformed - ‘impact’, income gen, manipulation of the world
- (Ecol Perspective – post ‘Anthropocene’)
- Research becomes an inquiry into the total wonders of the Earth
- Humanity not privileged
- But attention is paid to the effects that humanity is having on the Earth including on human beings
- More, attention is paid to the ways in which humanity might help to improve the world, having despoiled it – again, not just the natural world
- And attention has to be paid to humanity’s ways of knowing, not least in the ways epistemologies of the West/ the North have been built around a
- 17 • separateness of humanity and the world (de Sousa Santos; Bennett)
- Requires transdisciplinarity & open conversation

# Teaching

- (Teaching distorted – student as customer/ leaning outcomes/ employability)
- Teaching now becomes a drawing forth, a beckoning into strange and disturbing places - across the ecosystems
- And draws the student into the context of the whole world
- Not merely a global citizen but even a citizen of the universe (Russell)
- Here too a gathering
- Not an obligatory extraversion
- But an encouragement to dwell thoughtfully with others
- - treads on the student's presuppositions, asking awkward questions
- A pedagogy of unsettlement, of strangeness, of risk (Biesta).

# Outreach ('engagement')

- (Impaired by academic capitalism (Slaughter), income, positioning)
- This is where the ecological university wins its spurs
- It thinks through and imagines its possibilities across the 7 ecosystems
- Plays the game of cognitive capitalism but works around it
- Reaching out to the world
- Working in difficult spaces – in the developing world, but locally too
- Attempting to improve the world
- Brings all of its disciplines into play (eg in the cultural sphere)
- Requires trans-disciplinarity and open conversation
- Puts its work into the public domain and engages with multiple publics.

# The knowledge ecology revisited

- A university of this kind attends to the knowledge ecology severally
- It ranges widely, across the 7 ecosystems
- It works imaginatively, discerning possibilities for itself
- It works not just to understand the world but to improve the world
- It widens the range of ideas in circulation
- It actually produces publics
- It helps, therefore, to repair an impoverished knowledge ecology
  - But goes further to help it to flourish.

## Conclusions

- The university is not quite in ruins but it is imperilled
- It is bounded and diminished
- And falls well short of its possibilities in the world
- Much is due to an impoverished value base
  - – of ‘value-for-money’
- All is not lost – a wider array of values can be spotted
- An ecological perspective provides a new basis for values
- Values from the Earth, from life
- Justified, since the university is entangled in 7 ecosystems
- Values from facts – from the impairments in the world
- This is utopian – but it is a feasible utopia.



**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)