



Leading education  
and social research  
Institute of Education  
University of London

# Whither the Academic Library?

Ronald Barnett, University College London Institute of Education  
La Trobe University, Australia, contribution to discussion with library  
staff

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



Centre for Higher  
Education Studies

# The exam question(s)?

- Are academic libraries like the high street, where shops close and lie empty, as they experience diminishing 'foot fall'
- Perhaps just to be replaced by 'on-line' transactions?
  - Can we imagine an institution called 'university' that did not possess a physical building called 'library'?

# Historically

- The library was at the centre of the university
- It was the repository of understandings
- And provided society's collective memory
- An authoritative record
- The library in Alexandria – hundreds of thousands of scrolls
- Consider the libraries of the medieval universities
- Even libraries of new universities – striking places
- But rapid change over the past 20 years.

# Higher education (amid) change

- World competitiveness - and world rankings of institutions
- Demands of society
- Not just economic growth
  - But also societal change
- Demands express themselves on institutions in the form of
  - Heightened teaching function
  - Digitalisation
  - Equal opportunities
  - Knowledge transfer
  - Income generation
  - Increased volume of research, oriented towards societal problems
  - Internationalisation
  - Institutional diversity – mission ‘specificity’.

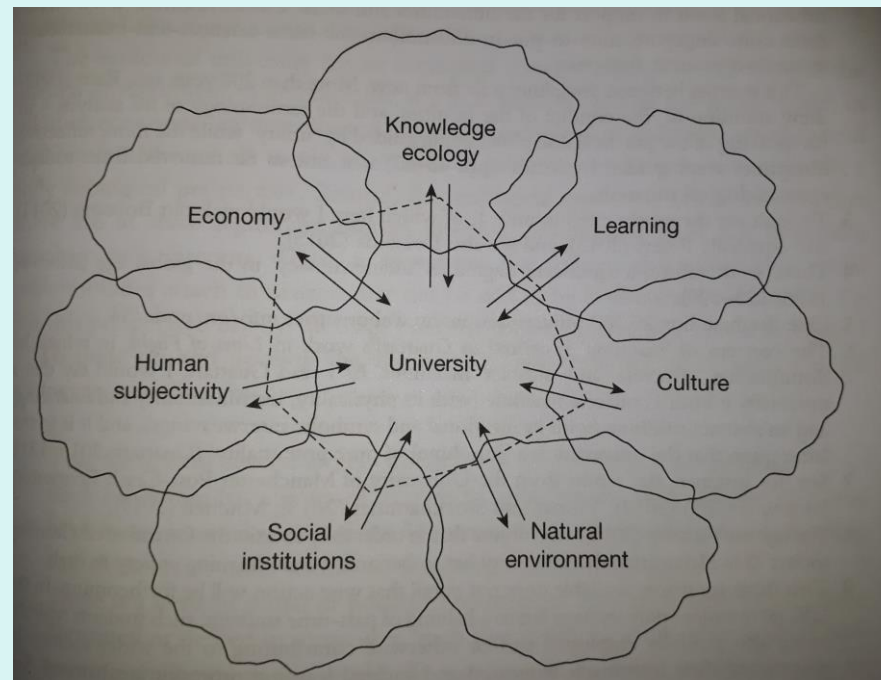
# What it is to be a university is changing

- The university lives in digital space
- Distributed across the world
- A globally networked 'institution'
- And in one's hand and on one's desk.
- Empty offices
- Cost of storing books and journals (storage and maintenance)
- Universities without books?

# The idea of the university

- Narrowing:
  - Instrumentality (given ends – eg ‘employability’/ ‘skills’)
  - Individualisation
  - Mathematisation
  - Techniques
  - Big data
  - Customisation
- Widening:
  - Global
  - International (incl flows of people)
  - Civic & regional outreach
  - Interdisciplinarity
  - Multiple publics
  - Customisation

# Towards the ecological university?



# La Trobe University - values

- inclusiveness, diversity, equity and ***social justice***
- pursuing excellence and ***sustainability*** in everything we do
- ***championing our local communities*** in Melbourne's north and regional Victoria
- being willing to innovate and ***disrupt*** the traditional way of doing things.



# La Trobe: Some goals

- Customised 'on-demand' offerings
- Life-long 'career management' and support
- Physical sites for collaboration
- Research 'excellence'
- 'One University' across its sites

# The academic library today

- Convivial spaces
- Spaces for discussion
- Within the community (Aarhus)
- Places of/ for wellbeing
- ‘The gift of the interval’
- Information
- Digital access/ gateway
- Books – ‘This is not the end of the book;’ (Eco)
- Disciplinary differences intensify? (NB multiple authorships; referencing conventions)

# Challenges

- Security and openness – physically & digitally
- Understanding the digital environment
- Learning before teaching ('learning spaces')
- T – R rel?
- Student-as-customer
- 'Civic' claims
- Changing character of research

# Does the university think?

- Space and time to think
- Thinking is discouraged?
- 'Post-truth' age
- Living with the ideologies of the age

# Possible lines of development

- A community/ civic library (indigenous communities/ knowledges)
- A global library
- An informational library
- A marketized library
- A library for wellbeing
- A library for thought, for provocation

# Relationship between research and teaching

- - at La Trobe?
- Close or separate?
- Complementary or in tension?

# Space and spaciousness

- The architecture of thought
- Design – aesthetics, sustainability and physical environment
- For individuals or collectives?
- Siting of libraries – sheer visibility (to communities)
- We now longer keep scrolls ...

# Demand

- Will it grow or diminish?
- And the form it will take?
- Different publics

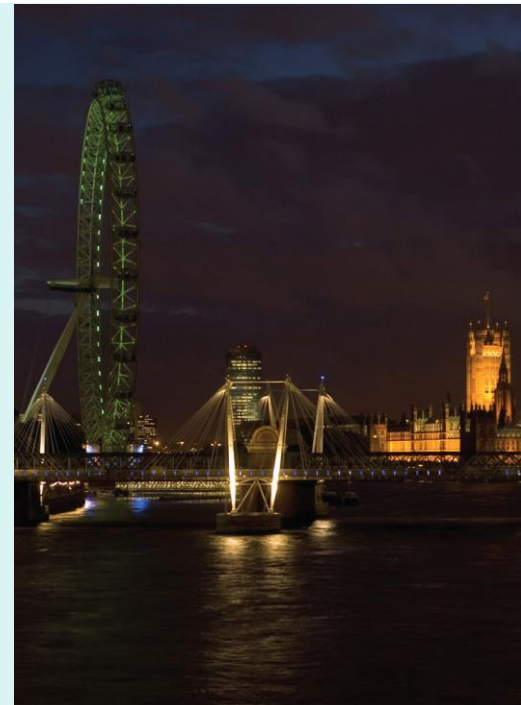


# The place of the student

- Role of the library – with a multiplicity of students from heterogeneous backgrounds
- International/ local
- Multicultural
- Student-as-customer
- (Co)learning spaces
- ‘Co-producers’
- Narrow definition – skills/ employability
- Wider understanding – students as persons/ wellbeing/ lifewide learning
- Library as personal retreat.

## Conclusions

- This is not the end of the library
- To the contrary
- Widening and conflicting challenges
- - and possibilities
- The library as a centre of widening university thought
- And as a centre of repose
- And so the library requires continually to be reimagined.



**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)