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Transforming the University: an Ecological Approach

Ronald Barnett

University College London Institute of Education

Vice-Chancellor's lecture, Victoria University, Melbourne, July 2018

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My lecture

- Thinking about what it is to transform a university
- Is it necessary?
- To what extent a technical exercise, working out the means to ends?
- And even if we include discerning ends, from where? Simply projections of our current purposes or new ones entirely?
- What might a moral purpose for the university look like?
- *Structure:* (i) Global situation; (ii) university responses; (iii) the general situation and its challenges; (iv) the ecological university; (v) reflections.
- & I shall gently tread on some toes ... (head-in-the-clouds but ...)

My thesis

- Universities worldwide are on a cusp
- They are in danger of being bewitched by the ideologies of the age
- And are in prospect of setting on unduly limited perceptions of their possibilities
- We need to alight on a wider perspective
- I suggest an ecological perspective may be helpful
- This enables us to glimpse a utopian university
- But maybe it is a feasible utopia.
 - (sub-plot: we need to think about the university; even to think – Heidegger; Russell)

A global world of higher education

- 26,000+ universities
- Tremendous change – dynamic system and sub-systems
- Networks/ interconnections
- Each university: global and national press;
- + identification of its USPs ('mission')

Strategic responses – and its vocabulary

- ‘Environmental scanning’
- ‘Risk assessment’
- ‘Scenario planning’
- ‘Civic engagement’
- [‘World-class’/ ‘Excellence’]

‘Considerations’

A world, so it is said, characterised by:

- ‘Complexity’
- ‘Uncertainty’

And yet a need for:

- ‘Innovation’
- ‘Sustainability’
- ‘Transformation’
 - A sense that universities as organizations need to re-invent themselves – but into what? The corporate strategy will tell us.

Question

- What, under these conditions – of global and national turbulence – is a corporate strategy?
- A set of hopeful fictions
 - Highly worthwhile – indeed, crucial – but we need to recognize their status
 - And then they may realize their possibilities for the university
 - » And then the awaydays for the SMT may be transformed!

But what is it to guide the (compilation) of the corporate strategy?

- Each university works it out for itself
- Peers into the ether
 - & identifies its possibilities
- Even mounts its own 'foresight' exercises or projects 'scenarios' for itself
- After all, its position is particular to itself
- And it will have its own history/ resources/ networks/ personnel/ ...
 - Capital of various kinds – financial, reputational, people, intellectual

Endorsement

Superficial/Endorsement

eg, ideas of quality - ('the world-class university')

Depth/Endorsement

eg 'the entrepreneurial university'

Superficial

A

C

Depth

B

D

Superficial/Critical

eg 'the edgeless university'

Deep/Critical

(feasible utopias
- Projects of hopefulness)
eg, 'the ecological university'

Criticality

The idea of the ecological

- From the Greek 'oikos' – house;
- Felix Guattari – *The Three Ecologies*: 3 'ecological registers': environment; social relations; human subjectivity
- To speak of the ecological brings to view the interconnectness of all things – a universality
- But this '*ecosophical perspective*' precisely allows for difference, diversity.
- '*..everything ... has to be continually reinvented, started again from scratch, otherwise the processes become trapped in a cycle of deathly repetition.*' (p19)
- And so we are led to an '*ecology of the imaginary!*' – '*according to different criteria than those of profit and yield*'. (p57)
- - '*a new ecosophy, at one applied and theoretical, ethico-political and aesthetic ...*' (67)

An ecological perspective

- Fact and value
- Systems in the world
- Inter-connected, internally & externally – and evermore so
- Dynamic & even antagonistic
- Impaired
- Human action
- Deep ecology
- Human entanglements – ecosystems are not ‘out there’ but in us/ our institutions
- Human responsibilities – careful responses
- ¹¹ • To improve the world (in all its ecosystems)

The ecological university

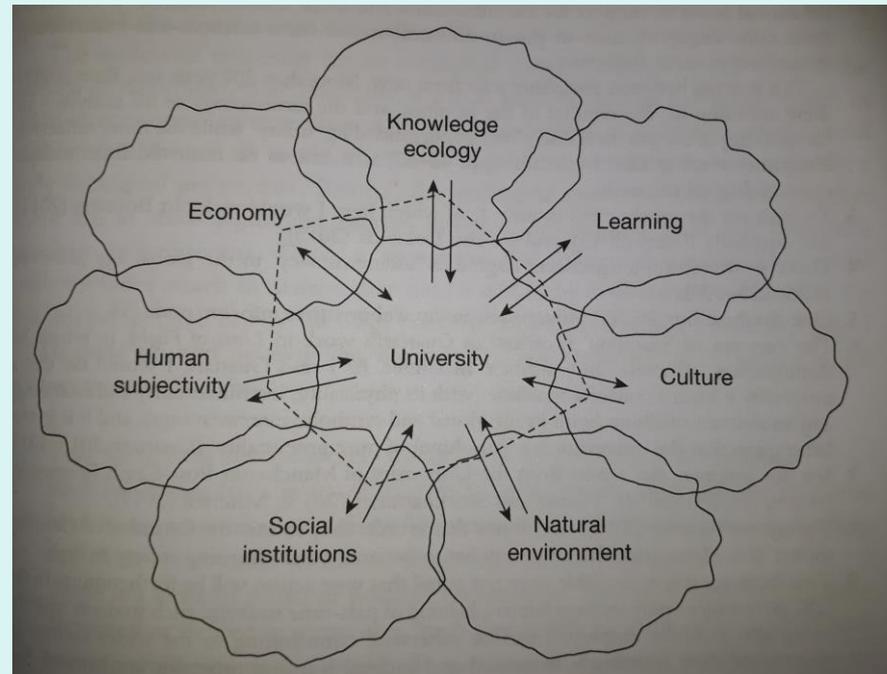
- The ecological university (EU) takes its embeddedness – actual/ potential – seriously
- The EU has a concern for (its interconnectedness with) the world
- - has a care towards its total environment – material, natural, human, ideational, institutional
- (All universities are – to some extent – global; they are or would like to be participants in global conversations.)
- So the EU acts in collective interests – *‘that, in the short term, don’t profit anyone, but in the long term are the conduits of a processual enrichment for the whole of humanity. It is the whole future of fundamental research and artistic production that is in question here.’* (Guattari, p65)
- Universities are all implicated in the global conversations of academe
- They reach out to the world, if only in their aspirations

The ecological university – its 7 ecosystems

- Knowledge
- Learning
- Social institutions
- Persons
- Culture
- Economy
- Natural environment
 - The university is necessarily entangled in all of these 7 ecosystems, whether it understands it or not

NB: This list privileges neither the economy nor the natural environment.

7 ecosystems of the university



The coming of the ecological university

- Prompts towards the ecological university:
- **Global**
 - The ecological challenge – of global warming
 - Global terrorism and crime
 - Energy crises
 - Global diseases and hunger
- **National**
 - Social disorder
 - Poverty and alienation
 - The other claims us, whether we like it or not
 - We are compelled to take account of ‘strangers’ and offer ‘hospitality’

NB: agendas of ‘public engagement’ & ‘public engagement’ opening to universities.

Possibilities for the EU

- Developing a strategy of ‘public engagement’
- Putting its academic work on-line;
- Holding public lectures – and putting podcasts on-line
- Working with local/ regional communities in addressing social issues
- Working with groups/ communities in the developing world
- Offer pro bono advice
- Producing materials for public consumption
- Its research tackling issues of wide concern
- Its academics becoming public intellectuals – communicating to publics ; enhancing the public sphere
- Teaching: putting each class in contact with a like class in another country and develop a trans-national/ trans-cultural learning space – students as ‘global citizens’
 - Pedagogies of risk; of strangeness (abandon talk of lng outcomes & diminish talk of skills and employability)
- ‘The Public Philosopher’
- Promoting inter-connectedness in its staff members & wellbeing

ie, each university discerns, imagines, develops its own *ecological footprint* across those 7 ecosystems.

Ecological curriculum

- Works across the 7 ecosystems
- Understanding oneself in relation to the world
 - Locally, regionally, globally
 - Students active in the community; in the world
- Trans-disciplinarity
- Knowledges in all their variety – indigenous/ experiential/ intuitive/ tacit (not merely 2 ‘modes’)
- Humanities (including languages) accorded proper value
- The imaginative level enhanced
- Promotes personal/ societal/ global wellbeing – [NB student suicides]
- Transnational curricula
- Vibrant pedagogies – pedagogies of strangeness; of risk
- ‘Wisdom’ – concerned with what is of value in the world (Maxwell)
 - ¹⁷ – A totally new kind of ‘general education’.

Conclusion

- The university IS beset with powerful forces
- But all is not lost
- Both possibilities and responsibilities are unfolding
- Partly we are limited by our imaginations
- If we are to transform the university, it will require imaginative effort
- Different feasible utopias can be imagined and brought forth
- ‘The ecological university’ is necessary, and feasible and desirable
- It is just in our reach
- Can we clutch it?



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
Web www.ioe.ac.uk