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Realising the Ecological University

— *and what educational development
can do about it*

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This talk

3 Aims:

- 1 Share my ideas of the university
 - Specifically the idea of the Ecological University
- 2 Illustrate some of its implications for learning and teaching
- 3 And put them into the context of academic development
 - And so raise issues about the very idea of academic development
 - » *Perhaps it's time to rethink academic development in quite large ways.*

The news today – and for the last year

- Learning from the pandemic
- *Some of the elements: viruses, pangolins, bats, air transport, natural science, virology, politics, geo-politics, cultures, beliefs, health systems, geography, space/time, ideas, health systems, mathematical modelling, social care, social attitudes, state-citizen relationships, manufacturing, agricultural practices*
- And these are all inter-connected
 - These connections are multiplying
 - Not just in the world but between knowledge and the world
- A world of total instability, contingency, and conflict ...
 - in the world **&** our understandings of the world

Two lessons from the pandemic

- (1) Discrete knowledge, within single disciplines, is inadequate
 - *(If the world is interconnected, so must be our knowledge of the world)*
- (2) We must listen to the world, be sensitive to the ways in which it affects us, our beliefs, our practices
 - – not knowledge *of* the world but *from* and *for* the world
- So, it is *not good enough* either simply
 - (i) to observe the world (scholasticism – ‘knowledge its own end’) or
 - (ii) even to seek to have impact on the world (instrumentalism).
 - **But** instead (iii) to have a concern for the world and
 - » (iv) to seek its improvement.

More broadly

- Many are asking about the *effects of the pandemic on student's learning* and higher education
 - *Focus* – on technologies
 - But this is a *totally inadequate* response
 - Given our reflections so far
 - Our *fundamental concepts all need a radical overhaul*, eg
 - knowledge
 - learning
 - teaching
 - being a student
 - critical thinking

But this means

- That *academic development has to be completely rethought*
 - We have to rethink what it is to learn, to develop, to understand, to be in this challenging world.
- (*Not time here to address all those issues in prev slide but*):
 - In the *next few slides*, by way of examples, I pick out some *key issues* to which – in my view – academic development should be alert
- *It also suggests* that the role of academic development and its place in the university has to be *recast* and *repositioned*

The issue of troublesome knowledge

- (Meyer and Land)
- Key issue: Is TK universal or contingent?
 - Given our reflections, it has to be universal
- The world is troublesome – and so should be higher education
- *A process of unsettlement*
 - To bring students out of themselves into a new space –
 - - a contentious space; an unsettled space
 - - Part of the meaning of a ‘higher’ education
 - ‘Stretching’ not just cognitively but experientially
 - *So: ‘Student satisfaction’ is problematic.*

The curriculum:

(1) *The end of interdisciplinarity*

- Talk of interdisciplinarity (ID) has been with us for 50 years
 - And it has got nowhere!
- Of course, many programmes these days are ID
 - But as an institutional strategy ...
- However, the whole idea has now to be ditched!

(2) The dawn of transdisciplinarity

- Recall our opening – lessons from the pandemic
 - Knowledge and the world are entangled
- What we need to grasp is the idea of transdisciplinarity
 - The sense that our knowledge is intimately entangled with the world
 - eg, racism/ coloniality/ gendered nature of knowledge
 - embedded in the ways in which we perceive the world
 - Peculiar stance of in-the-world and apart-from-the-world
 - » We have to be semi-detached!

Teaching

- The idea of teaching has to be ditched too (I have never ‘taught’!)
 - (If by ‘teaching’ we mean the passing of knowledge from one mind to another)
- ***If*** we are to keep the term, we have to see it as:
 - *questioning, affirming, encouraging, persuading, destabilising, enlarging, darkening, dislocating, widening, deepening, intimating, amusing, showing, inviting, cajoling, reflecting, enlarging, guiding, unsettling, inspiring*
 - In a word, teaching – at the level of HE- is a matter of provoking
 - Of provoking the mind and the spirit.
 - A pedagogy of *risk*, of *strangeness*, of *openness*
 - *Abandon ‘learning outcomes’!* (Pernicious instruments.)

Critical thinking

- Signs of its disappearance
- Where it does hang on, it is *diminished* to the *skills* of critical thinking
 - The very opposite of critical *thinking*
- My ideal of the critical thinker – the *whistle-blower* in an organisation
 - (Consider the students in Santiago, or Myanmar, or Hong Kong or Tiananmen Sq)
- Elements of:
 - *being critical spontaneously,*
 - *forming one's own judgements,*
 - *having the will to be critical,*
 - *possessing c dispositions – being critical*
 - *being prepared to take critical action (calls for courage, political nous ...)*
 - *So the whole matter of CT and bringing it about has to be completely rethought.*

Role of professors

- Not to 'let learn' (Heidegger)
 - But nor to teach as such
- Students are intelligent - it's amazing what they can do
- But it's not a matter of getting them into PBL either
- It is to set up the ped situation so that students
 - Have a will to go on (NB non-completion; suicide rates)
 - Develop their own ecologies of learning (NB: their LW learning)
 - Can situate their work in the widest possible perspectives
 - And critically so.
 - A pedagogy of planned and safe anxiety.

Recapitulation and development

- Educational development – the big picture
- Of a world in motion, its interconnectedness and indeterminacy
- The challenges of what it is to be human
- Of being and becoming
- See higher education – & educational development – against this horizon

- This is part of having an ecological perspective
- - which leads us to ‘the ecological university’

Towards the Ecological University

- Ecosystems of the university – 8
 - Knowledge
 - Society
 - Politics
 - Learning
 - Persons
 - Culture
 - Economy
 - Natural environment
 - Implications for programme development; and for student development.

Being an Ecological University

- The ecological university (EU) takes its embeddedness – actual/ potential – seriously
- The EU has a care towards its total environment – namely, the world itself.
- 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 an ... enrichment for the whole of humanity. It is the whole future of fundamental research and artistic production that is in question here.’* (Guattari, p65)
- The EU reaches out to the world, if only in its aspirations
- But NB: *each university its own ecological footprint* – or ecological niche
 - Its own possibilities – vary across the disciplines, R-T relationships, ‘engagement’ options

The digital lure

- Lessons from the pandemic
- Technological changes can help **make possible** the ecological university
- More, can offer new possibilities
 - (a) help the university to realize anew its values
 - (b) and in ways that enable it to reach out to the world
- But: technology **on tap, not on top**, eg
 - The library
 - The digital classroom
 - The student as global citizen
- **Being in the right frame of mind** – values; imagination; collective courage

Revisiting the idea of educational development

- An open/ contested concept!
- Now, not just developing the academics or their immediate practices but *the whole university*
- Conversations/ strategies, eg
 - *Research – teaching relationship*
 - *Transdisciplinarity*
 - *Academic freedom (eg raising contentious issues)*
 - *Learning outcomes*
 - *The student as a ‘global citizen’*
 - *Being a teacher*
- *So academic development becomes a catalyst for **new thinking** about crucial matters in a university.*

Conclusions

- The world is interconnected and is in turmoil
 - And the systems of the world are impaired in many ways.
- Universities and higher education cannot solve the problems
 - But they can help
- Rethinking higher education as a set of educational processes
 - But this then means rethinking educational development
 - So it becomes a catalyst for thought about higher education
- Speaking to all parts of the university (incl senior leaders)
 - Assisting the formation of a university's key strategies
 - And helping its future development
- And even its development as an ecological university.



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References etc

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- Guattari, F. (2005) *The Three Ecologies*. London and New York: Continuum.
- Heidegger, M. (2004/1954) *What is Called Thinking?* New York: Harper Collins.

Some of Ron Barnett's books which are pertinent to this talk:

- 1994: *The Limits of Competence: Knowledge, Higher Education and Society*. Open University Press/SRHE.
- 1997: *Higher Education: A Critical Business*. Open University Press/ SRHE.
- 2000: *Realizing the University in an age of supercomplexity*. Open University Press/ SRHE.
- 2007: *A Will to Learn: Being a Student in an Age of Uncertainty*. McGraw-Hill.
- 2015: *Thinking and Rethinking the University: the selected works of Ronald Barnett*. Routledge.
- 2016: *Understanding the University: Institution, Idea, Possibilities*. Routledge.
- 2018: *The Ecological University: A Feasible Utopia*. Routledge.
- 2020: (with Søren S. E. Bengtson): *Knowledge and the University: Re-claiming Life*. Routledge.
- 2020: (with Norman Jackson) (Eds.): *Ecologies for Learning and Practice: Emerging Ideas, Sightings, and Possibilities*. Routledge.
- 2021 (in press): *The Philosophy of Higher Education: Issues, Debates, Proposals*. Routledge.