
Book review

Book review: *The Philosophy of Higher Education: A critical introduction*, by Ronald Barnett

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The last half-century or so has seen higher education studies grow from a field of, at best, marginal intellectual interest into a significant social scientific area. This intellectual expansion has unsurprisingly tracked the global expansion of higher education itself over the period, first in the United States in the immediate post-war period, then in Europe, and later in all but the very poorest countries. As with all areas of intellectual complexity, the field diversified into specialisms, in this case focusing on higher education's teaching and research activities, its sociology, its economics, its history, its governance, its management, even its architecture, and more, and in doing so attracted students, researchers and research funding. One of the attractions of the field is that its products (knowledge about knowledge) are ones which public agencies around the world, with responsibilities for important national assets, are often prepared to pay for – prepared to underpay, most in the trade would say, but still.

The aim of Ronald Barnett's work, over many years, has been to offer a conceptual foundation for this diverse field, based on his own background in philosophy, while being aware that philosophy in its most abstract forms will be of limited assistance: to be useful, the approach must be 'head in the clouds and feet on the ground', as he puts it in this new book (20). This is because higher education studies must encompass both organisational structures, including universities with their 'materiality and hardness' (31) represented by complex bureaucracies, national policies and physical forms, and the educational processes dealing with teaching and assessment, with all their complex human interactions – the reasons students actually come to study in universities. Research, usually regarded as the other main plank of university activity, also defies easy conceptualisation, with the 'dominant imaginary' (65) of research in the hard sciences contrasted with context-specific approaches typically found in research in the humanities and social sciences. These interactions of real-world structures – the things most people think of when they hear the word 'university' – with the widest possible range of challenging and difficult ideas places the study of higher education (and, of course, higher education itself) in, arguably, a unique place. This double-hermeneutic aspect of higher education – real-world spaces, organisations and processes, but also 'spaces in the minds of people' (164), with each influencing the other – is, I think, the underlying theme of this book.

But a further layer of complexities lies behind the interactions just noted: what Barnett terms the 'of-courseness' problem (39). So of course the university must produce graduates with economically valuable skills; of course it should seek to advance social justice; of course its research should drive innovation – and so on. But this is to accept that the university's goals, and so its values, are set out for it in advance by various external groups. Are there, Barnett asks, values associated with the university that go beyond the 'of-courseness' set of demands? Barnett thinks there are: truth telling, reasonableness, criticality, epistemic honesty, integrity and disinterestedness are high on his list. I do not think that I have heard an education minister recently note these characteristics as being what they would expect university graduates to have gained from their studies; rather, Rishi Sunak, when contending in 2022 to be Britain's next prime minister, complained that some university degrees apparently do not sufficiently improve students' earning potential. I expect he would say that 'of course' this is a prime purpose of higher education.

But what is it about the university that means that it should concern itself with these fundamental, irreducible, values? – bearing in mind that you cannot be 'sort-of' in favour of them. Drawing on a range of philosophical writing, Barnett suggests that we think about the spirit of the university: 'Every university is pervaded by a spirit of some kind ... Spirit is pretty well everything in the educational process' (167/173), while avoiding a charge of naivety by noting that the spirit may be positive or malign. (I think that many of us will have worked in places where one or other of these spirits have been active.) But the university will not have a single spirit: different parts of it will be animated by different spirits, which may split or collide and in doing so create 'new opportunities for voice and identity' (170). The idea of spirit allows Barnett to probe the question of leadership in universities, and how it may differ from management. Both concepts, Barnett notes, are naturally vital for a properly functioning organisation, but whereas management is about 'finding ways through complex situations with the least disturbance' of spirits – perhaps, taking spirits as you find them – we may see leadership in terms of elevating, of expanding, spirits: 'if management is the art of the possible, leadership is the art of the impossible' (178).

What should university leaders and others do in practice to 'elevate the spirits' of their universities, whether in relation to teaching or research, or just the feel of the place? Barnett suggests that spirit is largely a collective matter, and is worked 'into crevices of academic life, into the students in a class, in the use of footnotes, into the mode of dress, literally into the style of movements in the laboratory ...' (171). This reminds me of the view that 'better management is less management', that high-performance organisations need only minimal levels of oversight, simply because their members all want to do their very best work and should not be distracted from this by endless reporting and monitoring requirements.

Barnett concludes by discussing the university's position in relation to the Anthropocene – the idea that we have entered a new era, where human activities are now determining the future of life on Earth and have in effect created a new geological epoch. Barnett argues that not only does the university:

find itself situated in the Anthropocene but that, as a primary producer of knowledge, it is to be in part culpable for the formation of the Anthropocene ... [so] the university has a responsibility in addressing the malformations in the new stratum ... [it] has a responsibility in deploying its resources to turn matters around. (235/244)

This, then, is where the examination of the philosophy of higher education leads us: that the university needs to act in order to preserve life on the planet. To borrow a marketing slogan, it needs to create a Plan A, because there is no Plan B.