Chapter 16

Realizing the World-Class University: An Ecological Approach

Ronald Barnett

Abstract The ‘world-class university’ has become a trope of two rivalrous perspectives. On the one hand, it is used by cross-national and national organizations and institutions (and their leaders) to promote global positioning and achievement. On the other hand, it is deployed as a target of critique by scholars, it being observed that the term – ‘world-class university’ – presses interests, of cognitive capitalism, institutional entrepreneurialism and hierarchy amongst universities. Much less evident in these rivalrous discourses is an attempt to derive a way of holding onto the term – ‘world-class university’ – that retains links with core values of the university itself, such as those of reason, inquiry, understanding, and learning. I wish to use my chapter to mount such an inquiry and to do so by deploying an ecological approach. The university is interconnected with the world in manifold ways, through multiple ecosystems, but those ecosystems –such as those of knowledge, learning, social institutions, persons, the economy, culture and the natural environment – are impaired. Accordingly, could it not be suggested that a ‘world-class university’ would be one that draws on its resources in advancing the wellbeing of the major ecosystems of the world? Such a university would be a university in a *class-of-and-for-the-world*.

Introduction

‘The world-class university’ has become a trope of two rival perspectives. On the one hand, it is used fairly unreflectively by cross-national and national organizations and individual institutions (and their leaders) to promote global positioning and achievement. On the other hand, it is deployed as a target of critique by scholars, it being observed that the term—‘world-class university’—presses particular

R. Barnett (✉)

Professor of Higher Education, University College London Institute of Education,
London, UK

e-mail: ron.barnett@ucl.ac.uk

© The Author(s) 2020

S. Rider et al. (eds.), *World Class Universities*, Evaluating Education:
Normative Systems and Institutional Practices,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-15-7598-3_16

269

interests, of cognitive capitalism, institutional entrepreneurialism and hierarchy amongst universities. In other words, universities that sign up to the self-description of ‘world-class university’ are falling away from the essential interest of the university in pure understanding. For the world-class university, understanding is pursued for external purposes.

Much less evident in this set of rival discourses is an attempt to see whether there just might be a way of holding onto the term—‘world-class university’—that, in some measure, retains links with core values and interests of the university itself, such as those of reason, inquiry, understanding, and learning. I wish to use the space of my chapter to mount such an inquiry and to do so by deploying an ecological approach.

This essay, therefore, will amount to an exercise in social philosophy. While sensitive to the empirical situation, I shall attempt to drive through to a particular concept, indeed a new concept of the world-class university, taking advantage of recent work in the philosophy of realism. In doing so, I shall offer hints as to how this new concept of the world-class university might be realised in practice. One example that will simmer here is that of the United Nations’ Development Goals, which are already being picked up by some universities as a basis of framing new institutional (‘corporate’) strategies. But while keen *both* on the contemporary background—which has given rise to the emergence of ‘world-classness’—*and* on possible practical ways forward, my target here has mainly to be conceptual and also imaginary. I am interested in nothing less than in imagining, creating and advancing a new concept. What follows, therefore, is a conceptual *argument*.

Fact and Value

The term ‘world-class university’—or ‘world-class universities’—is fact and value intertwined. It speaks of a university—or group of universities—having a certain place in the world and it is normally invoked to heap implicit praise on any such university. By ‘certain place’ I mean that in the mind of the user of the term the university in question is felt to be amongst the very best of universities in the world. Probably, if challenged, the speaker would not immediately feel able to pin-point the group of universities that were felt to constitute the ‘world-class’ group of universities but, for what it is worth, my sense is that it is often accompanied by talk of being in the top one hundred—or top few hundred—universities in the world, as represented especially in global rankings of universities. In other words, users of the term—‘world-class universities’—are implicitly wanting to point to features of the world of higher education that are taken uncritically to be present. Immediately, there are all sorts of hares running.

To what extent is it understood by those who resort to this term—‘world-class universities’—that, for example, one hundred universities accounts for less than 0.5 per cent of the world’s (28,000) universities or that the rankings that serve as the context for talk of world-class universities are highly limited in their messaging systems (Shattock 2017), being based on a small and *contestable* range of criteria

(in which, typically, research is dominant and teaching plays little part (Johnes 2016)? There are also related matters of the idea of world-class universities legitimising a competitiveness and inequalities across the global system of higher education on the one hand, and linkages between world-class universities and the emergence of ‘cognitive capitalism’ (Boutang 2011) on the other hand. All these are important matters and serve to mark out the empirical context of this essay but they are not our concerns here.

The point of registering those background features is twofold. On the one hand, it is evident that the phrase ‘world-class universities’ should not be dismissed simply as a trivial idea of the university. It is *conceptually* trivial but it signifies discursive, economic and political power across the world in relation to higher education. Bound up in this phrase, too, are matters of the relationships between states and their higher education institutions, not least as some states strive to secure a goodly number of their universities being recognized as ‘world-class’ (and so shape their higher education policy frameworks accordingly). The phrase is, therefore, part of a powerful discursive regime that is now present in and across higher education on a global scale. The university is playing a key role in the emergence of cognitive capitalism and the phrase ‘world-class universities’ bears testimony to this entanglement on the part of universities. The term ‘world-class university’, therefore, is not only an *empty* signifier; it is much more than a discourse that is sustaining a set of social relations (cf. Laclau 2007), for the social relations in question are ridden with epistemic and political *power*.

On the other hand, however, the sheer registering of these empirical matters as to the way in which certain features are developing in the world of higher education is to open a field in which matters of value also arise. The use of the phrase—as in the ascriptions that ‘This university is a world-class university’ or ‘This country wants at least a dozen of its universities to be recognized as “world-class”’—betoken value elements in the term. The vocabulary of world-classness signifies high value being granted (i) to certain institutions rather than to others, (ii) to the public rankings of universities, and (iii) to a heightened competitiveness among universities. Tacitly, too, there is, in this vocabulary, high value being accorded to the dominant criteria within the global rankings, in which (a) STEM-based research conducted by (b) large universities, each having (c) a global reach are given high marks. In short, the phrase ‘world-class universities’ is but the tip of a large underlying and emerging *value framework* that has come to possess a global spread.

It is evident, then, that the term ‘world-class universities’ is the bearer of a ‘thick concept’ (Williams 2008), with elements in it both of fact and of value. As we have glimpsed, the matters of fact open themselves to a multitude of wide empirical issues. Knowledge hierarchies between the global North and South, differential weightings accorded to disciplines, and relationships between state control and academic freedom are but some of those issues at play here. I can safely put those on one side, leaving them for others in this volume. Here, I shall address matters of value, while keeping in sight this empirical context. However, in this endeavour, I am not interested in critique as such. Perhaps I may be forgiven for suggesting that critique here is easy. The question is: where might we go from here? My aim is

nothing other than to try to drive towards a new concept of the world-class university, that is based upon a value position quite other than—indeed, is opposed to—that which is fuelling the dominant contemporary understanding.

An Ecological Situation

The contemporary university, willy-nilly, finds itself entangled in an ecological situation. It has no option in this, for this is simply a matter of the way matters are. What, though, is meant by an ecological situation? An ecological situation is a situation in which there is present one or more ecosystems. Ecosystems are dynamic—but fragile—assemblages of entities having some unity and sets of interconnections. Further, they have at least the potential to be self-sustaining although, in practice, they are liable to be impaired, falling short of their very *being*, exhibiting a state of wellbeing. Such impairments are characteristically in part the result of human actions, even if unwittingly so. It follows that human interventions can be orchestrated so as to assist the repair of such impaired systems. Further, it is always possible that human action might even bring about an improvement in an ecosystem.

For some time, and quite fairly, much attention has been directed at the ecosystems of the natural environment, amid global warming and so forth. It has been observed that the natural environment constitutes fragile ecosystems, which have been much impaired by human activity. However, over the last three decades or more, it has further been observed that the concept of ecosystem—with the features just specified—has application to a number of other spheres. Guattari (2005) pointed to three ecologies, those of human subjectivity, the natural environment and social institutions. Others have extended the idea of ecology to yet further domains and it is surely apparent that it has wide application to the university, not least in respect of the presence of the knowledge ecology. Indeed, the concept of ecology has to be *radicalised* in this context (Barnett 2018). To cut to the chase, I suggest that there are no less than eight ecosystems in which the university—any university—is entangled, those of knowledge, learning, social institutions, persons, the political sphere, culture, the economy, and the natural environment.

Why pick out the eight ecosystems just identified? Yet others might also come into the reckoning such as the digital environment or the law: surely, the university is entangled with these domains too? I pick out the eight systems just identified because they are necessary features of any higher education system. If others can be shown to possess a status equal to these eight, nothing is lost or much gained. My argument is not dependent on the number of ecosystems in question.

Each of these constitutes an ecosystem precisely in obeying the conditions just enumerated: each has a greater or lesser unity of cognate elements (even if highly fluid), is fragile, and is characteristically impaired in part as a result of human activity. Each such ecosystem is a complex system being open-ended and having characteristics that are not deducible from its parts but which exhibit the quality of emergence, being liable to produce formations that are unpredictable. Such

open-endedness, however, offers potentialities. Human action might be deliberately aimed at repairing any absence or deficiency and even at enhancing or improving each ecosystem.

A final observation in this enumeration of the features of these ecosystems: to say—as I have been doing—that the university is entangled in them is to draw upon the concept of entanglement in a particular sense of its technical meaning. It is to observe that not only is the university implicated in each of them but that this implication also works the other way around. For example, just as we can no longer provide any serious specification as to what it is to be a university in the twenty-first century without alluding to the economy, so we cannot any longer provide a proper specification of the economy without reference to the higher education system. Entanglement cuts both ways. The university is dependent on the economy and the economy is dependent on the university. This reciprocity holds, in turn, for each and all of the eight ecosystems.

It follows, from these cursory observations, that the university—any university—has a complex ecological situation; and it is complex in a number of ways. Any university has dynamic relationships with at least eight major ecosystems. It will exhibit its own ecological footprint, spreading and having impact in its own ways, across each ecosystem. It will have its own relationships with culture, the economy, knowledge, learning and so forth. Furthermore, it possesses its own ecological possibilities in relation to each ecosystem, depending on its own resources—of money, epistemological reach, technologies, personnel and reputational capital—it has options in front of. To what extent might it seek to advance society's knowledge of itself or society's learning systems? In what ways might it attend to its impact upon the natural environment? Might it work towards new clusterings of knowledge so as to address manifest global problems? Tacitly, at least, how might it contribute to the culture of society in, say, its capacities for argument, reasoning and debate?

Structure and Agency

Some large matters arise from this set of considerations. Firstly, to speak of the ecological situation of the university is to point up that this situation is one both of structure and agency. The ecological situation in which the university finds itself is precisely one of structures—in the form of ecosystems—in which and with which the university is entangled. Certainly, the ecosystems in question here—of social institutions, persons, culture, learning, knowledge, the economy, the natural environment and the polity—are each hazy and are yet dynamic formations. They are structures that are never quiescent, always on the move. This is part of the difficulty of being a university in the twenty-first century in that the total environment of any university is unstable, and so decision-making—setting up a new programme of study, establishing a new research centre, reaching out to a new constituency, inviting a speaker onto campus—is fraught with difficulty. But this unpredictability,

which arises out of the open-endedness of the university's situation, presents—perhaps surprisingly—spaces for its agency.

The university is a 'corporate agent' (List and Pettit 2011). In advancing that idea of 'corporate agent', List and Pettit were concerned to establish how it might be that an institution could acquire, in its decisions and action, the attributes of an individual (in her or his decisions and actions) and so exhibit agency. Such characteristics are, for them, dependent on it being manifestly the case that the actions and decisions taken in the name of the organization could be said to carry the acquiescence, if not wholehearted assent, of the majority of the members of that organization. This approach is not unhelpful so far as the university is concerned. We can ask searching questions as to the extent managerial decisions do in fact command the assent of a university's members. (There are, of course, additional questions as to who is to count as a member of a university, but let that pass.) However, this approach is inadequate in itself in giving an account of university agency.

In order to derive a full account of university agency, we have to add the matter of choice: agency only has application in situations of real choice being open to an actor. And just this, I want to urge, is the situation in which most universities across the world find themselves: they have options before them as to which direction to follow, which values to uphold and within which frameworks they might comport themselves. Take the matter of producing a university corporate strategy (or of seriously reviewing and redesigning an existing such strategy). This can be produced in a perfunctory way, remaining within familiar and empty tropes of 'world-classness' or 'excellence' or it can be an occasion for serious identification and imagining of options open to a university. Here, agency interacts with structure and vice versa.

For example, a university might decide, in the wake of its own value position, to deploy its resources to play its part in addressing and realizing the United Nation's Development Goals. But then such a decision has to lead on to a forensic examination of those (17) Goals in relation to the university's resources—its epistemic range, its existing research centres, its portfolio of course, its academic staff and its financial leverage. In such a setting, the university works out and realizes its agency in the context of the structures—local, national and global, and legal, financial, geographic, epistemic and so on—within which it finds itself. Its agency is both task and achievement (Peters 1970), for that agency has to be worked at continually, amid all the constraints and affordances that shape its situation.

But note, too, that there are recursive features of this situation. The structures of this situation are not given either but are, to some degree, pliable in the face of the university's decisions and actions. Through wise and astute actions, the university can, to some extent, modify the situation in which it finds itself. Perhaps it can raise monies, or it may be able to lobby in parliament, or it may be able to reach out to other agencies who can assist it and so on; and such actions can, in turn, alter (if only marginally, but importantly) the structural conditions in which it seeks to develop and realize its corporate strategy. A corporate strategy is, accordingly, a set of hopeful fictions but it is also a set of imaginative and creative aspirations, as it becomes a collective space to imagine new possibilities for the university's agency.

Fact and Value—*Again*

Here, we return unashamedly to the matter of fact and value. I suggested earlier that the trope of world-classness rides on the backs both of fact *and* value. It relies on certain taken-for-granted features of the world of higher education—not least, that rankings reflect real features of the global landscape—and it is a carrier of certain values around hierarchy, power and the global knowledge economy. But this dual nature is shared also by ecology. To speak of ecology is to speak the two languages at once, of facts and of values. It is to point to the world being in such and such a state, and it is—either implicitly or explicitly—to convey a sense that the addressing of that state of affairs is, or should be, accompanied by a set of values. Let me say something about each of these dimensions—of fact and of value—in this ecological context.

Both aspects—structure *and* agency—bring facts into play. The relationship between structures and facts is self-evident. To point to, or to make claims about, structures is in effect to state facts about the world. (There are certainly philosophical issues about the status of facts—for example, as to their being ‘pseudo-material correlates’ (Strawson 1950)—but we do not need to enter those lists now.) Since ecologies are structures—albeit hazy and mobile structures—it follows that to suggest that universities have their being in an ecological setting is to point to *ecological facts* about universities. So much, so obvious and so uncontroversial.

But I want to suggest that, simultaneously, to claim that universities move in an ecological setting is to bring in a value dimension. This value dimension is not straightforward, for it is at play in two ways. At least in its application to the social world—and arguably even in its original incarnation in relation to the natural world—the concept of ecology seeks not only to point to features of the world but also to import a value framework into the discussion. Characteristically, the use of the term ‘ecology’ is—as suggested earlier—to summon up a value background (Taylor 1992) to the effect that the world is in a fragile state, and even an impaired state, and that humanity has responsibilities in helping to repair that fragile state; and it may even be the case, in some situations, that humanity has played a part in bringing about that impaired state.

In other words, the language of ecology carries with it strong ‘ought’ overtones. ‘Ecology’ is an ethical concept. Not only is it wanting to observe that the world is in difficulty (fact) but that the difficulties are such that they generate (ought) responsibilities to address the situation.

However, as stated, this values dimension is far from straightforward, at least in relation to social institutions and, thereby, in the matter of the university; and we have already glimpsed the necessary twist in the argument. It is that to speak of the ecological university not only (i) opens a space in which we might dwell on the possibilities (structure) and the responsibilities (agency) before it in addressing the malformations of the ecologies surrounding the university (in knowledge, learning, social institutions, culture, the economy, the natural environment and so forth) but *also* that it (ii) opens a space in which we might wonder if the university has not

itself been culpable in bringing about those malformations and malfunctionings of those ecosystems.

In other words, for the university that understands that it stands in an ecological situation, values are a matter of an orientation not only towards the external world but are also a matter of an orientation *towards the university itself*. And by ‘university’ is meant here both an individual university and universities collectively: a single university has to (‘ought to’) ask searching questions about its possibly hitherto complicity in bringing about those ecological malformations, and universities collectively (cf. Guattari 2016) should be asking themselves such questions.

It is apparent that, in these last sentences, we have adopted a prescriptive tone, with ‘oughts’ and ‘shoulds’ but, as I have been trying to show, this is entirely warranted, unsettling as it may be to many. As stated, the idea of ecology is thick with value elements. It harbours laments for a lost world, regrets the impairments in the present world, secretes hopes of a better world, and holds humanity to account *both* for its part in bringing about that falling short *and* in having responsibilities for addressing the shortcomings and doing its best to usher in that better world. In short, the idea of ecology is value-laden. And it follows that to speak of the university as standing in an ecological situation is to bring forward the elements of this value framework.

In sum, then, *the ecological university*—as we may term it—is precisely a university that is embedded in a situation redolent of facts about itself and the world *and* of a complex value framework.

The World-Class University: A Barren Idea

Against these reflective considerations, let us now turn even more directly to address our quarry, that of the world-class university. It will be recalled that, earlier, we sketched some of the empirical context in which the term ‘world-class’ university has emerged—especially of world rankings, but also of a competitiveness across a small fraction of the universities in the world (say around one thousand of the 28,000 universities which might have their sights on reaching the top one hundred). The rankings themselves give priority to a limited range of features, such as the number of papers published in ‘world-leading’ journals, the flow of doctorate students, and the income attaching to research activity. Simply to enumerate these features seems to imply that the term ‘world-class’ has substance. It can be cashed out empirically (even if there is some dispute over the criteria on which world rankings are drawn up).

But solely to understand the idea of world-class universities in this way is to give it an unduly narrow treatment. It would be to metricise the term (Fuller 2018), to render it intelligible only in terms of universities’ numerical performance against a few criteria. This is not to be dismissed. This approach plays out in the world with massive power.

It is on the basis of such an understanding of *world-classness* that both states and individual universities are making major policy and strategic decisions; for example, whether, and on what basis, (in the case of states) to adopt a highly selective research and institutional funding policy; and whether (in the case of individual universities) to opt for a merger with another university or to close certain departments. The trope of ‘world-class’, therefore, has come to constitute—in Foucault’s (1980) terminology—a discursive regime: it purports to offer knowledge about universities that, in turn, comes trailing major implications of power. The knowledge/power juxtaposition (p. 113) is vividly present here.

But yet, for all these elements of fact, power and knowledge that are circulating in the company of the term ‘world-class universities’, I want to claim that *it is barren as an idea of the university*. This is not the place for a forensic dissection of the idea of the university, but we may quickly rehearse some elementary matters.

The idea of the university has both historical depth and contemporary breadth. The university began to take conceptual form in the nineteenth century, firstly in the Germanic and philosophical idea of the university of reason and then in the English and more cultural idea of the university as a place of liberal education. That tradition, of the university having value as an end in itself, spread out especially as the twentieth century gathered space, with the idea of the university taking on utilitarian aspects. The twenty-first century has seen this history open to several strands, one that in effect said that the idea of the university was at an end in the wake of post-modernism and the incorporation of the university as an arm of the state and its functioning in support of ‘cognitive capitalism’ (Roggero 2011; Peters 2013); another that stridently opted for ‘the entrepreneurial university’ (Clark 1998) and its cognates (not least in academic capitalism (Slaughter and Rhoades 2004); and yet another that sees the university as becoming an element in a global digital machine.

A sketch of this kind has only to be made, however inadequately, for it already to be sensed that, indeed, the term ‘world-class university’ is barren. Against the background of the movement of the idea of the university just set out, the term has virtually nothing to offer us. It has nothing to say about the relationship between the university and culture, between the university and the state, between the university and the development of mind or of persons, and still even less—if that were possible—about the relationship between the university and spirit (as so many of the forerunner ideas of the university, from Kant to Heidegger, from Newman to Derrida, and from Jaspers to Guattari have suggested). But this observation, as to the barrenness of the idea of the world-class university can be multiplied.

I said a moment ago that the idea of the university has both historical depth and contemporary breadth. I have just tackled the matter of historical depth but what of the matter of contemporary breadth? There is much that could be said here but let me come straight to the point. Many have suggested recently that the idea of the university is at an end, not least because the university is ‘in ruins’ (Readings 1997). The idea of the university is merely a ‘grand narrative’ and is now without substance and can be safely consigned to the flames. Nothing could be further from the truth. We are, in fact (and it is a fact), awash with ideas of the university; and these take two forms. We have before us many worked out ideas of the university; for instance,

those of the university of wisdom (Maxwell 2014), of the sustainable university (Sterling, Maxey, and Luna 2014), of the virtuous university (Nixon 2008), of the Christian university (Astley et al. 2004), of the ecological university (Barnett 2018) and of the university in dissent (Rolfe 2013). Elsewhere, I have identified over fifty contemporary ideas of the university (Barnett 2013), and they are being supplemented continually.

But even beyond such worked-out ideas of the university, a quick scrutiny of debates and developments would show that there are many ideas of the university being advanced as a matter of its unfolding praxis; for example, universities are looking to see (as noted) how they might do justice to the United Nations' Development Goals, or are looking to see how they might become exemplars of 'the developmental university' or to renew the idea of the 'civic university' (Brink 2018), or concretely to assist in programmes of national reconstruction or to advance an agenda of social justice and so on and so forth. Developments such as these are especially evident among the developing nations, in Africa and Latin America; but by no means only in those regions.

In short, the idea of the university is enjoying a contemporary breadth globally, in relation to which *the term 'the world-class university' offers us nothing at all*. It follows that, in relation to both the history of the idea of the university and its contemporary situation, the term is virtually empty. It has a rival in conceptual emptiness—as an idea of the university—only in the university of excellence (Readings 1997).

Re-conceiving the World-Class University

It will have been noticed that, in this essay, in speaking of the world-class university, I have referred simply to it as a term—'the term "the world-class university"'—and not to it as a concept; and it will have become apparent why this formulation has been adopted. 'The world-class university' has insufficient weight to allow us to refer to it as a concept. It is lacking in substance, having nothing in the way of a foundation in ethics, epistemology, or ontology. It is simply a term in contemporary policy discourse. Certainly, as acknowledged, it comes trailing components of power, status and judgement. At best, it could be said to be an *aspirational concept*, hinting at the direction of travel of both (some) states and (some) institutions, as they formulate their policies and missions. They may also harbour quite unrealistic hopes, as when a state—currently without any of its universities placed in the top one hundred universities—determines that it will have half a dozen universities in that select group in the rankings within five years. So the idea of world-classness is conceptually empty: what it lacks in substance, it currently makes up for in its force.

How then, if at all, might the idea of the world-class university be put onto a sure footing and given substance? I want to explore the possibility that a way forward might lie in the idea of a university that is in *the class of the world*. And to do that,

we shall need to build upon the background sketched out in earlier parts of this chapter, drawing especially upon the idea of ecology as just elaborated.

A university that is in the class of the world is precisely a university that has a care towards the whole world and strives to situate itself totally as an institution of the world. ‘The world’ here refers to the totality of entities in the world, from a poem to the superhighway, from the cosmos to nanostructures, from memes to mosaics, and from matters of mind to matters of the natural environment (Harman 2018). In *this* realism, all life is here. And a university that is in the class of the world opens itself to this sense of the world, in its entirety. This moves us towards a worldly context with ontological robustness.

Drawing on our earlier discussion, we may make three further observations. Firstly, a university that is in the class *of* the world understands that it is entangled with the world in manifold ways. And the significant zones with which it is entangled with the world can be understood as ecosystems. In being in the class of the world, a university recognizes that it is entangled with knowledge, social institutions, persons, culture, the economy, learning, the polity and the natural environment, each such zone now understood as an ecosystem.

Certain features of ecosystems will be recalled (from our earlier discussion). Ecosystems are hazy but real conglomerations of entities held loosely together. Left to their own devices, they have self-sustaining properties but they are fragile and have characteristically been impaired by human interventions. They are also complex assemblages in the formal sense: they are open-ended in their interior relationships (DeLanda 2013). One cannot be sure just how they might evolve and nor, by extrapolation, can one be sure of the effects of any action upon them.

Our worldly university—a university that stands in the class of the world—is minded, therefore, to orchestrate its activities so as to play its part in repairing and/or enhancing the ecosystems in which it is entangled. It has a *value position* in doing so. It does not shy away from re-working its corporate strategy or see the task as imposed upon it but does so in a positive spirit. The design of its corporate strategy is a welcome space for it to work out its value position in having a concern for the whole world. This is challenging stuff. For example, it might—as observed—attend to the United Nations’ Development Goals and determine to frame its corporate strategy on that basis. But the problems begin at that point. Just which of the (17) Goals might it address especially? Which of the Goals might prompt thinking and imagination about its possibilities? Which resources—epistemic, technological, financial, reputational, institutional (not least in its actual and potential networks)—does it possess that would enable it to shape its strategies around those Goals?

However, to draw even more specifically on our earlier discussion, the challenge arises as to which of the ecosystems with which it is entangled might offer it a canvas on which to play out its ecological possibilities. Might it wish to develop new pedagogical approaches to enhance its students’ state of wellbeing and thereby contribute to their personal ecosystems? Might it work more actively in the local community and play its part in developing the ecosystem of social institutions in the region (and perhaps advance social justice or the public sphere)? Might it look seriously at its use of the resources of the natural environment and so help to minimise

eco-degradation there? Might it consider ways in which it can draw some of its research groups together across the disciplines and help to generate new epistemic energies and a more vibrant knowledge ecosystem?

These are merely, as it were, ecological possibilities in principle. The hard work of marrying the United Nations' Development Goals, a university's total resources and a keen analysis of its ecological options, and then bringing to bear on that mix a visionary imagination and practical institutional aspirations and working that through in energetic interactions and practices across the institution, and with third parties, is a formidable set of tasks. There is a 'craft' in such a worldly orientation. (cf. Norgard and Bengtson 2018) Moreover, any such aspiration and tasks cannot be realised in a short span of time. To the contrary, they provide a continuing and unfolding landscape, not least since the university's ecosystems are always in a state of emergence and so is the university itself. The total interplay of the university—which forms an ecosystem in itself—and its ecosystems supply an unending series of challenges, responsibilities and new options.

To seize, therefore, on the United Nations' Development Goals—and it has here formed but one example of a university in a class of the world—within an ecological setting is to embark on a process of unyielding complexity. And it is a complexity that contains all manner of components, at once lateral (across a region, nation and the world), vertical (from particulars to universals) and temporal (the here-and-now and the long-term).

Space does not allow an examination of those complexities. But I think that we may gather from this example of the United Nations' Development Goals that the university-of-the-world gains its legitimacy in three ways. Firstly, the university that stands in a class-of-the-world does so in virtue not through its imposing itself upon the world but in listening to the world and so acquiring a being as a university that is not only *of-the-world* but *from-the-world* (Barnett and Bengtson 2017). It owes its being to the world. And it stands in the class of universities that are, therefore, of the world.

Secondly, this is a university that takes the notion of the world seriously. It is sensitive to the whole world and all of its major ecosystems and all of the entities in the world, both natural and non-natural, and both real and abstract, from poems to plasma, from photons to Pythagoras, from Polynices to polyhedra and from puppetry to post-humanism. But it is also a university that notices absences and impairments in the world and seeks to play its part in repairing those deficiencies. It begins from the world and is acutely *of-the-world*.

Lastly, a university that is in the class of the world understands that it is in a class in the formal sense of the idea of class. It simply is a member of a particular class—the class of universities-of-the-world. No hierarchy or status accrues thereby. Hypothetically, *every one of the nineteen thousand universities in the world could stand in this class*. On this basis alone, this understanding of world-classness is marked out as radically different and, indeed, opposed to the conventional meaning of the term 'world-class university'.

Conclusions

The term ‘world-class university’ is just that, simply a term. As a concept, it is virtually empty. That qualifier ‘virtually’ is important. While the term lacks any conceptual substance, it has nevertheless come to acquire certain associated elements of power and status. (These two aspects—power and status—operate independently of each other and, on another occasion, deserve scrutiny.) There is dual power here: ‘world-class’ actually in the world (‘world-class’ as signified) and the power of the very term ‘world-class’ as it operates as a signifier in the world (‘world-class’, indeed, as signifier). So, while conceptually empty, the term ‘world-class university’ doubly denotes power, and considerable power at that. (The power here is not just epistemic power but includes social, economic and cultural power.) Furthermore, the elements of power associated with the term are so pervasive that ‘world-class university’ has, *world-wide*, taken on a binding presence in the discourse of higher education. Ubiquitously, the term is used unthinkingly but with considerable force. It is, thereby, *a very powerful signifier even though it lacks conceptual substance*.

Two questions have arisen, therefore: might there be a reading of the term ‘world-class university’ that gives it conceptual substance and that is free, at least to a large extent, of the state and institutional power and competitiveness currently associated with the term? And might any such reading of the term ‘world-class university’ do some justice to the university’s historical relationships with advancing knowledge and understanding for the wider benefit of the world? I have suggested that there is such a concept of the world-class university that meets both of these challenges, and the tack I have taken is that of situating the term within an ecological context, albeit coupled with the new realisms (of Harman and Delanda). By placing the university in its ecological setting, it being entangled with many major ecosystems, a new concept of the world-class university might be fashioned.

This would be a concept that turns around the relationship between the university and the world. Instead of understanding the university as an institution exerting force and control over the world, the university would be seen as an institution that listens to and has concerns for the total world, in all its ecological diversity. Of course, to accede to this argument and to try to realize its implications in the context of any particular university would be to bring into view huge institutional, judgemental, imaginary, and practical challenges. And such challenges, once taken on, would be recurring. For the ecological university is never off-the-hook, as it seeks to discern continually emerging options and to juggle with ever-present value dilemmas. But it would be a university that stands in a *class-of-the-world*. And just perhaps its time is coming.

References

- Astley, J., Francis, L., Sullivan, J., & Walker, A. (2004). *The idea of a Christian University: Essays on theology and higher education*. Milton Keynes: Paternoster.
- Barnett, R. (2013). *Imagining the university*. London\New York: Routledge.
- Barnett, R. (2018). *The ecological university: A feasible utopia*. London\New York: Routledge.
- Barnett, R., & Bengtsen, S. (2017). Universities and epistemology: From a dissolution of knowledge to the emergence of a new thinking. *Education Sciences*, 7(1), 38.
- Boutang, Y.-M. (2011). *Cognitive Capitalism*. Polity: Cambridge.
- Brink, C. (2018). *The soul of a university: Why excellence is not enough*. Bristol: Bristol University Press.
- Clark, B. R. (1998). *Creating entrepreneurial universities: Organizational pathways of transformation*. Oxford: Pergamon/ IAU.
- Foucault, M. (1980). *Power/knowledge*. New York\London: Harvester Wheatsheaf.
- DeLanda, M. (2013). *A new philosophy of society: Assemblage theory and social complexity*. London\New York: Bloomsbury.
- Fuller, S. (2018, September 28). Must academic evaluation be so citation data driven? *University World News*. <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20180925094651499>. Accessed 1 Mar 2019.
- Guattari, F. (2005). *The three ecologies*. London\New York: Continuum.
- Guattari, F. (2016). *Lines of flight: For another world of possibilities*. London\New York: Bloomsbury.
- Harman, G. (2018). *Object-oriented ontology: A new theory of everything*. London: Pelican.
- Johnes, J. (2016). Performance indicators and rankings in higher education. In R. Barnett, P. Temple, & P. Scott (Eds.), *Valuing higher education*. London: UCL IOE.
- Laclau, E. (2007). *Emancipation(s)*. London\New York: Verso.
- List, C., & Pettit, P. (2011). *Group agency: The possibility, design, and status of corporate agents*. Oxford: Oxford University.
- Maxwell, N. (2014). *How universities can help create a wiser world: The urgent need for an academic revolution*. Exeter: Imprint.
- Nixon, J. (2008). *Towards the virtuous university*. London\New York: Routledge.
- Norgard, R. T., & Bengtsen, S. E. E. (2018). The worldhood university: Design signatures & guild thinking. In S. S. E. Bengtsen & R. Barnett (Eds.), *The thinking university: A philosophical examination of thought and higher education*. Dordrecht: Springer.
- Peters, M. A. (2013). *Education, science and knowledge capitalism: Creativity and the promise of openness*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Peters, R. S. (1970). *Ethics and education*. London: George Allen and Unwin.
- Readings, B. (1997). *The University in Ruins*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard.
- Roggero, G. (2011). *The production of living knowledge: The crisis of the university and the transformation of labour in Europe and North America*. Philadelphia: Temple University.
- Rolfe, G. (2013). *The University in Dissent: Scholarship in the corporate university*. London\New York: Routledge/SRHE.
- Shattock, M. (2017). The "world-class" university and international ranking systems: What are the policy implications for governments and institutions? *Policy Reviews in Higher Education*, 1(1), 4–21.
- Slaughter, S., & Rhoades, G. (2004). *Academic capitalism and the new economy: Markets, state, and higher education*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University.
- Sterling, S., Maxey, L., & Luna, H. (Eds.). (2014). *The sustainable university: Progress and prospects*. London\New York: Routledge.
- Strawson, P. (1950). *Truth*. The Aristotelian society. Virtual issue, 1. <https://www.aristoteliansociety.org.uk/pdf/strawson.pdf>. Accessed 1 Mar 2019.
- Taylor, C. (1992). *Sources of the self: The making of the modern identity*. Cambridge\Victoria: University of Cambridge Press.
- Williams, B. (2008). *Ethics and the limits of philosophy*. London\New York: Routledge.

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.