



# 'The university is dead, long live the university!': Ronald Barnett and the task of philosophy of higher education

Ronald Barnett, *The Philosophy of Higher Education: A Critical Introduction*, Routledge, 2022

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Accepted: 29 August 2022 / Published online: 14 September 2022  
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At the end of twentieth century Bill Readings (1997) gave a prophetic diagnosis. The modern University with its quest of seeking elusive excellence outlived its purpose. With the globalisation and withering away of the nation-state, the modern university lost its role as a guardian of national culture. It became a post-historical entity, which, though it lasts, has no future. What is left is to learn how to inhabit the piles of mounting ruins. If this conclusion is unsettling and fills you with anxiety, fear not! Ronald Barnett's latest book *'The Philosophy of Higher Education. A Critical Introduction'* (2022) is a great remedy as it makes a strong case for the University's future but, most importantly, a hopeful one. The reason for optimism — yet cautious and critical — lies precisely in philosophy. This, however, immediately raises the following questions. How would philosophy help us to reclaim the future for the University? Has not Hegel already pronounced that the owl of Minerva spreads its wings only at dusk? That philosophy works always in retrospect, making sense of the movement of wheels that have already turned?

For years, Barnett has voiced his staunch opposition to relegating philosophy to this retrospective role. One needs philosophy, he argues, not to deliver a eulogy but, on the contrary, to grasp the University as an entity in a constant motion — not only through its past and present but also its future possibilities, to rekindle the imaginative powers and envision lines of flight for even the direst circumstances. How exactly is this possible? Barnett started his work on higher education in a more traditional manner. Being a first-hand witness to the ongoing marketisation and instrumentalisation of higher education in the United Kingdom in the late 1980s and during the 1990s, much of his work focused on the policy discourse and how it affected British universities. With a new millennium, however, came a significant shift — leading Barnett away from epistemology to ontology, toward social philosophy of higher education (Barnett, 2000; cf. Bengtson, 2017). At the same time, this change in his perspective is accompanied by an increased interest in continental philosophy, to which his project is heavily indebted. Although the sources of inspiration are vast and multiple, Barnett clearly thinks in line with those philosophers, who reject the static

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*identity* and favour *becoming* instead. In fact, it is *becoming* that especially bears its mark on his conceptualisations. It is because of this concept that Barnett is able to forgo stability and embrace the movement and changes.

Yet, to embrace motion and change is by no means to say that Barnett gives up on the idea of the University. The University is always an interplay between the particular and the universal — undergoing a series of changes it retains something of its older self. It is in relation to this movement that the philosophy of higher education can finally emerge. For Barnett philosophy is nothing else than ‘forming, inventing and fabricating concepts’ (Deleuze & Guattari, 1994, p. 2), but not any concepts. The focus must be placed on concepts that construct *alternative imaginaries* and by doing so, introduce new possibilities.

Barnett’s latest book, *The Philosophy of Higher Education. A Critical Introduction* (2022), grows directly out of this conviction. Yet, it occupies a special place in the whole of Barnett’s rich *oeuvre*. Instead of pushing his interpretations forward and marking a new stage in his conceptualisations, something we have witnessed recently with the introduction of the concept of *ecology* in one of his most recent book (2017), he now takes a pause. It is not to say that Barnett’s philosophical work has seized. Rather, *The Philosophy of Higher Education* is an introduction in the true sense of the word. It builds on an enormous wealth of his previous works and 25 years of careful development and establishment of the subfield of the philosophy of higher education. Its first and foremost purpose is to extend an invitation to join Barnett and other scholars who elevated philosophical reflection on University and Higher Education to a distinct and autonomous activity. In this sense, it would not be an exaggeration to say that this book is a kind of an event, an event that marks an important step towards institutionalisation of the philosophy of higher education as a separate subfield. Taken together with endeavours such as establishing Philosophy and Theory of Higher Education Society and *Philosophy and Theory of Higher Education Journal* it is without a doubt a major development for the community of philosophers focused on the University. Whereas the two latter projects play an important role in consolidating and integrating the community, Barnett’s recent book brings something new, yet crucial — namely, an invaluable resource for the reproduction of this subfield.

Barnett’s aim to integrate the community of philosophers of higher education as well as to introduce it to those unfamiliar with the subject is clearly explicated at the very beginning of the book. In the introduction Barnett states the wide set of audiences he had in mind when working on the book that go far beyond fellow professional philosophers of higher education. Moreover, the style and structure of the book fully reflects this ambition. Although he draws on years of conceptual work, he is careful and mindful of newcomers — putting an effort to make the conceptual hinterland accessible. Composed of five parts, the book takes form of short essay collection that paint a conceptual landscape in which philosophy of higher education is embedded. The first part of the book builds the foundations for the field in general and for the whole book in particular, distinguishing between the ideas of university and higher education. It is here that the philosophy of higher education acquires its properties, being introduced as realist, critical, practical and imaginative. In other words, Barnett does not settle for philosophy that occupies merely the plane of the abstract. Far from disregarding the material, from the very beginning Barnett envisions philosophy of Higher Education as a dialectical activity that investigates the relations between *real* and *ideal* — *head in the clouds but feet on the ground*, as he himself puts it.

This spirit overarches the whole book. Part 2 maps key concepts on which much of philosophy of higher education turns, namely research, culture, academic freedom and reason. It is here again that one can see Barnett’s attachment to the concept of *becoming* as his readings are not focused on settling for a static meaning but rather opening those concepts

and putting them in motion. The part 3 is tightly connected to higher education as a set of educational practices. Such themes as teaching, curriculum, being a student and critical thinking are explored. Again, in line with his previous work he rejects the notion that education exhausts itself in knowing. The whole point of education must be about a process of becoming in a way that enables enacting oneself in the world in a meaningful way. After covering teaching, in the part 4 he moves to discuss the university not only as an idea — something that philosophers usually were preoccupied with — but as an institution, proving his earlier point that philosophy of higher education has to be able to take the concrete into account. Finally, in the part 5, Barnett rejects the university as a monolithic being and exposes it as porous — connected and deeply embedded in the world.

It is this last part that in a sense connects the vast set of topics covered in the whole book and transforms them into a coherent proposal for a specific purpose. For many years Barnett retained a certain degree of scepticism towards the proliferation of discourse on the crisis of the university, opposing those narratives not only with his philosophy of possibility but simply pointing out a resilience on the part of the university which was able to withstand many catastrophic events in the course of modern human history. Yet, both the idea of *ecology* (Barnett, 2017) as well as the experience of the multi-crisis that manifested itself most prominently in a Covid-19 pandemic bear a clear mark on his recent book. Despite his earlier caution, he acknowledges that what we face now is in fact *ecological* crises.

By bringing *ecological* crises to the fore he means at least two things. First, we must acknowledge the deep relationality of all entities in the world. Calls for the University's autonomy cannot obscure the fact that the University, just as any other entity, is inevitably connected with other beings. Second, and this is something that connects the argument developed in his recent book with the long-term idea of the necessity of creating concepts, concepts do matter. They even matter in a much more profound manner than we might envision. It matters whether our understating of the world conceals the relational nature of the world or embraces it and pushes the world to be something else. Although Barnett is fully aware that such a task is well beyond the reach of the University itself, he nonetheless in the closing part — 'Envoi. A constitution for universities on Earth' — calls for a new constitution between the university and the world, one that will rest on care and not only on a continuous flow of resources. The whole conceptual work that Barnett sketched before his readers clearly culminates in this task, to *repair the impartments* not only on the inside of the University, but also beyond its boundaries and to ask a bold question regarding ways in which the University itself can partake in a grander challenge of healing the wounds caused by the instrumentalisation of knowledge and passing the costs on to nature by treating it as resource, a story in which the University was and to a certain extent still is not always a hero. As such, even in this introductory book Barnett reveals his true face of philosopher of the actuality, always thinking from within the present but with eyes set on the possible futures.

Yet, no matter how brilliant and insightful, *The Philosophy of Higher Education. A Critical Introduction* is not free from articulations that might be debatable, hence a word of caution. Building his philosophical project over the years on the multiplicity of sources one can object Barnett's idea by pointing out that his philosophical inspirations do not always align with one another. Although in philosophy the conceptual movement is usually produced by tension, there are some instances where Barnett's project seems to be torn from the inside, pulling in different directions. To some extent, this problem manifest itself in his recent shift towards *ecological* perspective, built on relational approach to being and highlighting the interconnectedness of the world. At the

same time, Barnett's answer to the *ecological* crises seems to relay to a certain extent on philosophical vocabularies that makes this task even harder. For instance, such is the case with persistence of Habermasian themes in Barnett's work — formation of *critical citizens* and promoting a *critical public sphere* (Barnett, 2022, p. 151–152). This is problematic to the extent that once making an important conceptual development, Barnett's philosophy of higher education folds back on concepts relying on dichotomies that had to be questioned in the first place. Instead of reimagining critique and its subject anew amidst the interconnectedness of the world, in some instances Barnett remains on a more familiar ground of modernity with its discontents, one that is constituted by the set of dichotomies such as the public and the private, the very same dichotomies that produced a conceptual deadlock in the debates on the future of higher education (Szadkowski, 2019) in the first place.

In this sense one could argue that the philosophy of higher education, as painted by Barnett, is at the crossroads, pointing in one direction, but held back at the same time; being not fully able to acknowledge that the uncovered relationality and interconnectedness is in fact traversed by different power relations and hierarchies; and ones which have to be profoundly questioned if we are to move forward: first, through the rupture in theory, by investigating closely our own theoretical vocabularies and being cautious of concepts that reproduce the status quo, and second, by following and connecting with the struggles within the higher education sector. However, as Barnett pays close attention to keeping his ideas open and the fact that this book is also an invitation to a collective practice of thinking, it is up to us to decide which turn we should take and how to proceed.

Despite this reservation, which will rise inevitably in the face of a dispute around the direction we are heading, *The Philosophy of Higher Education. A Critical Introduction* is a must-read for anyone concerned not only with the higher education past and present, but more importantly — its future. A short review is hardly able to do justice to the breadth of argument and richness of insights encountered throughout the volume. It truly serves its purpose set at the very beginning — turning to a wide set of audiences and making a strong case for a persistence of philosophy in the context of higher education. As such it is an invaluable resource not only to anyone who enters the subfield of philosophy of higher education but also to academic teachers who ponder how to incorporate more philosophical and theoretical themes into their curriculums in higher education research. By showing the deep connectedness of the higher education, it can serve anyone entangled in academia who, in the face of *ecological crises*, struggle to make sense of his or her experience. Moreover, it constitutes an important milestone for the subfield of the philosophy of higher education, which now has a resource for the purpose of its own reproduction.

Finally, this book presents a rare opportunity for intensifying the dialogue between higher education research and philosophy of higher education. Higher education research, as a relatively young field that only recently entered the stage of synthesis and meta-reflection (Tight, 2019), can clearly benefit from conceptual developments. In turn, philosophy of higher education, if not reduced to a mere abstraction, has much to learn about particular manifestations of higher education on all of the planes of its existence. After all, to borrow Barnett's phrase, the University is at once an institution and an idea. There is no definite boundary between the two — but a constant interplay, in other words, a possibility of a true dialogue in which we should engage. As Barnett probably would add, now more than ever as literary everything is at stake.

## Declarations

**Conflict of interest** The author declares no competing interests.

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