

Thinking about Higher Education

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Introduction

The very idea of ‘thinking about higher education’ implies two things. Firstly, that it is worthwhile to think seriously and hard about higher education and secondly that higher education opens itself to complexities and options. We do not often, after all, think seriously and hard about toothpaste or cabbages; typically, they do not warrant hard and serious thinking; and nor do they much open themselves to manifold complexities and options. Higher education, on the other hand, seems to possess features of complexity, worthwhileness, elusivity and options.

But what then is it to think seriously about higher education? To what end? And what form should such thinking take? What forms, indeed, has thinking about higher education taken? How, for instance, might the thinking embedded in the chapters in this book be characterised? Just what are the options? And why might thinking now about higher education be especially timely?

This essay, accordingly, offers a kind of meta-thinking about higher education. It will offer some reflections about the state of play in such thinking. In tackling this chapter in this way, I want to suggest both that thinking about higher education is important and that some species of thinking about higher education may be in rather short supply and deserve to be developed. In particular, imaginative and even utopian thinking is—I shall suggest—rather thin on the ground and unless it is more in evidence, higher education as a social institution is liable to be somewhat rudderless, and will be subject to the buffeting of large global forces.

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An Emptying of Thought

What might it be really to think about higher education as intently, say, as a poet thinks about her or his topic; really to focus on higher education with that kind of almost forensic vision? Might we just see higher education anew, as a poet might see, say, a leaf or a view of a landscape or a set of clothing anew. Could there be a chance that the familiar will come alive, being presented to us differently from its customary apperception?

Suppose that such a viewpoint, such a clear-sighted and fresh vision was possible in relation to higher education, would we want to engage in such work? Would not such thinking cut us off from the contemporary debates about higher education? Perhaps any such insight or picture would be so adrift from contemporary thinking that it would have no purchase; it might be met—as perhaps the works of Picasso or Schoenberg were met—with bewilderment.

And yet is that effort not worthwhile at the present time? Doesn't the present time present us with a set of stock phrases and terms that hardly any longer convey serious meaning? And doesn't that set of terms betray a poverty of thinking about higher education? 'Globalisation', 'the knowledge economy', 'the knowledge society', 'entrepreneurial', 'skills', personal 'benefit', and 'knowledge transfer' are surely characteristic terms of the public debate. In response to this linguistic tsunami, and struggling to make itself heard, is a counter vocabulary that includes terms such as social engagement, public benefits, public goods, gender, rights and citizenship: the central idea here perhaps is that the student is a player in society with its sets of mutual obligations. A connected but somewhat separate counter vocabulary in part offers a view of the student as a centre of thought in her/his own right. Enlisted here—from time to time—are to be found terms such as authenticity, mind, person, voice and personal development.

It will be observed that many of the chapters in this volume invoke the latter more expansive and even—as we perceive it—more oppositional vocabularies; and several of them attempt to essay the extent to which the dominant vocabulary—that places higher education in an economic market—can be reconciled with a more human and socially-oriented vocabulary. And so the structure of this volume is shaped very much with the human (especially the student) and social angles, through which higher education might be discerned.

But the matter can and surely should be pressed further. When we speak of higher education having social or human aspects, just what might be understood by 'higher education'? The term 'higher education' hadn't come into play when Newman wrote his essays on *The Idea of the University* (and that linguistic history is of interest in itself here) but he sketched out a very large view of higher education nevertheless. For Newman, the educative process in question was to offer an 'ascent', a 'philosophical' outlook. Is it not of the moment here that Newman employed the metaphor of going up, of 'ascent', when today we speak of a 'higher' education? What is this height?

Some will doubtless say that, today, an enquiry of this kind is a *cul-de-sac*; and on two grounds. The critics will point out that Newman's metaphor of going upwards—in that idea of 'ascent'—is an evocation of what we might term the metaphysical university. It was a carry-over, it could be said, from the earlier formations of the university, from the mediaeval university onwards, in which the university was seen as forming an association variously between education and God, or Spirit or Truth, embodied in a critical dialogue (vividly encapsulated in mediaeval disputations). The essential idea here was that higher education offered a transcendence, a leap out of conventional thinking and perceptions of the world and of humanity's place in the universe. Connected here is the allegory of Plato's cave, as an opening into the light, which in turn has evident pedagogical implications.

Such metaphysical ideas are now *outré*, so the critic will suggest. Whether on grounds of the world now having passed into a post-metaphysical age or into a post-modern age (or even now, as some say, a post-post-modern age), any such intimations of education opening up imaginative new worlds, and worlds connected with large and bold ideas are now, we are told, without substance. Such meta-narratives are no longer seriously available. The whole language of an ascent into a different world and of education opening a philosophical outlook has to be ditched.

A second critique is more down-to-earth. It starts with the observation, as intimated, that we now are faced with mass higher education. Consequently, that there can be much conceptual content to the idea of higher education can only be sustained at the price of incredulity. The scepticism here takes two forms, a weaker and a stronger form. The weaker form takes the line that no concept of higher education of any substance can hold across millions of students and thousands of higher education institutions. Even the UK alone boasts two million students and around one hundred and fifty institutions. The idea that there can—or even should—be a holding onto a unitary conception, or even an essence, of higher education is implausible.

In its stronger form, the sceptical critique would allege a close relationship to the idea of a 'higher' education and an education for an elite. A higher education, as originally conceived, looked to the development of forms of understanding, outlook and even character that were coincident with the upper socio-economic strata; and, indeed, there was much compelling evidence to back up that case. The adjective 'higher' had a not so subtle association with a social hierarchy in which a higher education came to be tacitly promoted as the education appropriate for the upper classes. On the empirical level, sociological ideas of cultural and social capital served to endorse this association.

In the face of such sentiments, some have argued that the idea of higher education has been hollowed out. And, indeed, that suggestion could be pressed further for, amid the marketisation of higher education in which students are encouraged to be customers of their educational experience, higher education comes to be precisely that which the students-as-customers desire. It is no accident that—in the UK at least—a national student satisfaction survey has come to be

highly influential in shaping institutions' internal policies and provision. Higher education is now oriented precisely at and towards the student's 'satisfaction'. Accordingly, any attempt to think about higher education in itself can be seen to be an exercise in dilettantism, being both inappropriate and having no purchase on the real world. Thinking about higher education is, at best, a problematic venture. It may even be emptying.

Glimpsing Possibilities

Is there no place for serious thinking about higher education then? This volume, at least, is testimony to the value of scu thinking but we are then faced with the question: what kinds of thinking about higher education are possible, and what value might be accorded to each of them?

We may begin with what I hope is a fairly uncontroversial observation. Thinking about higher education may be situated in a context of time. Thoughts may be directed to higher education as it has been in the past, is now at the present time, and may become in the future. But this simple observation plunges us into difficulties straightaway. It may be thought that thought about the past and the present is, in a way, straightforward. For in both temporal situations, one has evidence on which to build the thoughts. In thinking about the future, on the other hand, no comparable evidence is to hand. The imagination can come into play and be given free rein.

However, this contrast between thinking about higher education in the past and the present on the one hand and in the future on the other hand is far from watertight. It is by no means the case that the imagination comes into play only in relation to the future, in thinking about higher education. For example, to pick out the market as a defining feature of higher education at the present time, or to pick out, say, enculturation as the meaning of higher education in the first half of the nineteenth century, calls for acts of the imagination. In each case, what may seem a self-evident empirical fact of the world requires a reading of the world; it requires an imaginative act to identify higher education alternatively with markets or with disciplinary forms of understanding. In each case, there is an entreaty to enter into an imaginative reading of the world (to associate it alternatively with markets or general education): readers or listeners are being invited to see higher education in such-and-such a way, rather than in another way.

The imagination, therefore, is present in any reading of higher education, in any depiction of higher education. That being so, questions arise as to the kind of imagination that might be called upon. Is it an optimistic or a pessimistic imagination? Is it a rather conservative and endorsing imagination, or is rather critical and even radical, seeking to bring about a new kind of higher education? (Barnett 2013).

A critical voice may already have raised itself. In that critique, it may be urged that a key distinction needs to be made, one not yet fully apparent. It is that between concept and institution, between seeing higher education as a social

institution and seeing it as an idea. This is a crucial distinction, and it allows for various argumentative ploys. In a way, all concepts—at least, those that are concerned with social processes and institutions—are critical concepts. Once they have attained any clarity and depth, we can then interrogate the institution in question as to whether it really does live up to the hopes in the concept. With a concept of health established, we can inquire into the extent to which a so-called ‘health service’ really does live up to its billing (of improving the levels of health in society). Correspondingly, with higher education: we can inquire into whether an institution of higher education—a university, say—really is providing a genuine ‘higher education’. The issue would be whether that institution was meeting the conditions felt to be inherent in the concept of higher education. Thought about higher education can become a powerful weapon in the reform and improvement of institutions claiming to offer higher education (including, obviously, private providers of higher education).

This distinction—between concept and institution—should itself be seen as different from another key distinction. This is a distinction between what might be termed internalist and externalist conceptions of higher education. The *internalist* concepts of higher education call attention to the connections between higher education and the development of the mind, of an individual’s understanding, and of the student’s entry into a form of reasoning. There are a number of different, although related concepts here, in which attention focuses separately on concepts of mind, reason and understanding. Not far away are other concepts such as those of truth, knowledge, initiation (into worthwhile forms of understanding), and epistemic virtues (which, it is argued, are part of a disciplined initiation into disciplines).

In contrast to such internalist concepts of higher education are *externalist* concepts. Such concepts look to the actual and potential carry-over into the wider world. Again, there are multiple concepts of higher education, focusing variously on the economic, social and cultural value of higher education.

Fashion can be seen in the weight that characteristically attaches to these different concepts. The modern age has surely seen as a slide, in which externalist conceptions of higher education are being preferred to internalist conceptions; and this is surely the case, not only in the wider political and public spheres but in the academic literature as well. Today, attention focuses on the wider benefits of higher education. But here, too, preferences are evident. A fork has opened. As higher education comes to be interpreted in terms of its wider context, the economic and social spheres beckon. It is, however, the economic sphere that is winning the palm at the moment. Social and cultural benefits of higher education are, consequently, downplayed if not downright neglected.

There is a hybrid conception of higher education that has been struggling to gain its voice for at least 65 years and arguably for 200 years. This is the idea of higher education that is concerned with the human qualities that it is sometimes said that are imparted by higher education, at least in its better incarnations. Residing here lies an interest in the ‘epistemic virtues’ that are claimed to accompany higher education, such as truth-telling, persistence, courage, sincerity,

appropriateness, care, criticality, vigilance, and otherness (in listening to and yielding to the world). It is further claimed that these epistemic virtues have some carry-over into the graduate's life-world. Through higher education, the student comes to take on worthwhile qualities and dispositions. His and her character is formed.

This is at once both an internal and an external conception of higher education, which make it doubly powerful. It builds from the demands that flow from an initiation into worthwhile forms of thought (an internalist conception) and moves outwards to the societal advantages that such an education bestows on the individual (an externalist conception). The graduate becomes the embodiment of the rational life, promoting society as a space of reason (Bakhurst 2011). So possibilities may be glimpsed, possibilities that are at once conceptual *and* institutional.

Conceptual Fragility

As implied, conceptions of higher education are far from static. The term 'fashion' was used earlier but it can profitably be used only with some care. Over the last half a century or more, across the world, we have seen a slide from internalist conceptions of higher education to externalist conceptions. At the moment, too, economic conceptions dominate. To put it formally, they have come to constitute a discursive regime (Foucault 1974).

'Fashion' is a rather too flimsy a term here. This slide in conceptions of higher education, from internalist (epistemic and individual growth) conceptions of higher education to externalist (especially economic) conceptions of higher education can be understood as the outcome of the changes that higher education as a social institution has undergone. As a matter of public policy, it has grown—across very many countries in the world—from a small activity on the fringes of society bestowing social and cultural capital on elites to a massive institution, consuming large resources and involving upwards of 40 % of young adults. (The figures vary but there are now between 150 and 200 million students worldwide.) This expansion has been encouraged against a background of the emergence of the knowledge society, a global knowledge economy and 'cognitive capitalism' (Boutang 2011), a context in which higher education has been repositioned much closer to the heart of society. From a medieval process barely in society to a major institution *of* society: this has been the trajectory of higher education over the past half century across the world.

Both at the personal and at the societal and political levels, higher education has come consequently to be seen in economic terms, a conceptual shift encouraged by a state-sponsored marketisation of higher education. It follows that the conceptual shift that we have witnessed over the past 50 years or so has been prompted by changes in the deep structures of higher education.

In the sociological literature, there is much debate—not to say angst—over the so-called 'structure-agency' issue. Is human agency a function of deep-seated

societal structures or are those structures susceptible to human intervention? (Archer 2000) Less remarked upon is what might be termed the structure-concept issue. To what degree is a concept—a concept of higher education, for example—a function of the forms that higher education is assuming, and to what extent might higher education be influenced by newly formed concepts? For example, the idea of openness has been influencing higher education for at least half a century. Over time, across the world, open universities have been established showing an evolution of ‘openness’ (in terms of accessibility, of reach, of technological capacity and of communicative interactions) (Peters et al. 2012). Concept and form—of openness—have been intertwined.

There opens the possibility despite the societal and global structures at work—which are themselves dynamic—that concepts can help to influence the shaping of our institutions of higher education and of our curricula and pedagogical practices. If that is so, it is all the more remarkable that the contemporary world surely reveals a contraction in the range of concepts that inform the public understanding of higher education. The terms that dominate the public understanding of higher education have, as implied, come to focus on its economic value, both personal and societal. In government documents, in the material of the think tanks and in the public discourse, the terms that are called up to depict higher education are those of work, employability, salary, knowledge economy, skills and fees.

Not far away are debates about the relative value of ‘public’ and ‘private’ institutions; although it is increasingly noted that even so-called ‘public’ institutions are becoming entrepreneurial and self-sustaining, relying on the public purse only to a very limited degree. The academic literature fares not much better, with a dominant strain being critical of the form now assumed by higher education, and drawing on concepts such as neoliberalism, performativity, commodification, cognitive capitalism, students-as-customers and new public management. This academic pessimism harbours its own rather limited conceptualisation of higher education.

In short, the contemporary conceptual canvas offers two depictions of higher education: largely an endorsement of changes underway in the light of shifts in the direction of global cognitive capitalism and a pessimistic critique of that position. This is a gross simplification, of course. Struggling to make itself heard are more optimistic voices, evoking conceptions of higher education that are at once critical and yet positive. Here, we find a cluster of ideas, all intent on discerning in higher education elements or outcomes that have a public character. In this camp can be found, for example, Maxwell’s (2012) idea of the university of wisdom, Michael Peters’ idea of socialist knowledge (Peters et al. 2012), Parker’s (2005) idea of the theatrical university, Standaert’s (2012) idea of the world university, and Stearns’ (2009) idea of the student as a global citizen. All of these ideas lend themselves to—or explicitly identify—social and public goods that flow from higher education.

Serving as a canvas here is the theorisation of the very idea of ‘public’, in which perhaps the most significant theorist is Simon Marginson. Marginson (2007) has forcefully made the point that, in contradistinction to goods in a market

place, knowledge does not lose its value either in its free circulation or in being held by increasing numbers of people. It is a 'non-rivalrous' good. Indeed, the value of knowledge in those circumstances—its being distributed widely across society—may actually grow. This observation has two profound implications: firstly, that higher education should be as widely dispersed across a people as possible; and secondly, that higher education, in its curricula and pedagogical processes, should be turned outwards, such that the wider world can itself gain as much benefit from higher education as possible.

It follows from these reflections on the relationships between concepts and society in relation to higher education that characteristically they stand in a limiting relationship to each other: society tends tacitly to set boundaries—albeit weak boundaries—to the range and orientation of concepts of higher education in play. In turn, the power of concepts of higher education to change matters—institutions of higher education and their practices—is limited but yet possibilities can be glimpsed. *Prima facie*, it makes sense to go on thinking about higher education.

Feasible Utopias

Internalist/externalist; public/private; individual/collectivist; pessimistic/optimistic; superficial/deep (sensitive to the deep structures of the university): these, then, are just some of the fault lines on which conceptions of higher education are built. And fault lines are notoriously prone to instability. Securing any stable and sure basis for thinking about higher education seems fraught with difficulty. The Descartes problem of higher education emerges (as it might be termed): can ideas of higher education be discerned that have *any* sureness to them?

Sureness, of course, is a loaded term: sureness in pointing to its inescapability—certainly not; sureness in its reasonableness—possibly yes (both in its empirical basis and its actual reasoning). Opening here is a further incisive question: *Is it possible to derive conceptions of higher education that are non-ideological, not prone to undue pessimism, are duly sensitive to the deep structures underlying universities (the rise of the global knowledge economy and cognitive capitalism), are properly critical of contemporary forms of higher education, open themselves to the realisation of new forms of higher education, and are appropriate to the twenty-first century (and even beyond)?*

Surely, such a question points us towards a quest for utopian thinking. Utopian thinking, after all, tends to be optimistic, gains its traction from its setting up desirable alternatives to conventional forms, and proffers visions of new possibilities. It may, however, be objected that they fall at the remaining hurdle: being detached from the here-and-now, they can hardly be sensitive to the deep structures of the university. Consequently, utopias are destined to remain just that: never realised and never realisable. It follows that, if utopian thinking is to be of substantial help, conditions have to be placed on it. Its conceptions of higher education would need—in the first place—to demonstrate that they were both attuned

to the deep structures of the university and opened themselves to some degree of feasibility.

All this amounts to a call for—as it might be termed—*feasible utopias*. Feasible utopias are utopias that just might be realised. They are utopian in that they are nowhere to be found, at least in their fully realised form. They are feasible in that there are good reasons for believing that they *could* be realised. They are not castles-in-the-air but have a degree of feasibility about them, even if—given the weight and power of the contemporary forces besieging the university—they are unlikely to be realised. That they could just be realised imparts hope and energy in the possibly daunting project of bringing them about.

But feasibility, while necessary, is not a sufficient test of the worthwhile-ness and robustness of a feasible utopia of the university. Other criteria should surely come into view. These might include (i) range (does it have application on the personal, societal and global levels?); (ii) its capacities for emergence (does it open itself to evolving in the light of changing circumstances?); (iii) wellbeing (does it offer a hope of improving the world in some way?); and (iv) time (does it have a due sense of time, of building on the past but of moving purposefully into the future?). Together, with the feasibility criterion, these five conditions amount to five criteria of adequacy: they offer tests by which putative feasible utopias might be assessed.

Prospects

What are the prospects for such imaginative thinking? The question requires an answer at two levels. At the first level, the stratospheric level, there is the issue as to the conditions that permit, encourage or discourage imaginative thinking. Here, we have to acknowledge the global situation of higher education: higher education is a global phenomenon. It is not just that student mobility is global in nature, with universities competing in an international student market, but it is also that universities are global in their reach and are subject to massive forces of global cognitive capitalism and internet communication. Speed, in particular, as Virilio has repeatedly insisted is power—‘the greater the speed, the greater the control’ (Virilio 2005/1984, p. 65); and the universities, despite a general perception of their inertia, have come to understand this new situation very well.

This is a world that is never quiescent, and is characterised by speed of information flows, dynamic knowledge formations, transnational education, orchestrated global networks, internationalisation strategies and now ‘massive on-line open courses’ (again global in their reach) on the part of universities. Under such conditions—of global neo-liberalism and cognitive capitalism—it might be felt that universities simply have to become forms of ‘the entrepreneurial university’ or ‘the virtual university’ or ‘the corporate university’ or ‘the digital university’. Imaginative thinking has no place in the contemporary university; or so it may seem.

Another level of response, however, is available. At this level, we move back to the level of the individual institution. What is striking here is that around the world many universities are reviewing their higher education offer. Old and newer, research-led and teaching-led, liberal and vocationally-oriented: we see evidence of higher education being reconsidered. The disciplines and their inter-relationships, the possibility of some form of general education (perhaps in a new cross-university foundation programme), the identification of intended graduate qualities and new forms of pedagogical relationship (derived through forms of open learning), and large educational ideas such as the student as a global citizen: all these and many other projects are coming into view. In short, at the institutional level and at the disciplinary level, we see much innovation going on around the world. We can surmise, accordingly, that the imagination is being well-stretched, in the evolution of higher education.

Pessimism or optimism, then: which disposition should fairly colour our imaginations about higher education? Is higher education now bound in by massive global forces that severely constrain individual institutions or are there still significant spaces in which the imagination can work, to conjure quite new images of higher education? My view, paradoxical as it may seem, is that both situations are present: universities are caught amid swirling global currents—of student flows, of neoliberalism, of the internet age, and of cognitive capitalism—but it is still the case that, by and large, universities have considerable room for manoeuvre. The imagination can and should be brought into play.

As stated, however, the play of the imagination is no guarantor of worthwhile new conceptions of higher education emerging. We need not just more ideas of higher education but *better* ideas. Our imaginative ideas need to be able to prove their worth in the real world, as utopian as they may be. They have to constitute feasible utopias, able to measure up to the five criteria of adequacy that we identified earlier.

The prospects, then, as to imaginative thinking about higher education coming more into play turn on the *possibility of possibilities*. It is at least possible—empirically and conceptually—that new possibilities may be imagined, that can be seen to hold water. This may not seem very much; but it is a large observation. In the possibility of possibilities, the possibility arises ultimately of new practices being sighted and even realised.

The Coming of the Ecological University

Where, then, have we reached? I have suggested that characteristically, as a matter of fact, our thinking about higher education is unduly limited. Higher education is framed within a narrow band of concepts; and those concepts have been tilting in the direction of externalist conceptions of higher education, typically associated with the economy ('marketability', 'skills', 'employability', 'personal financial gain'). The conceptual playing field is far from even, a fact explicable in

terms of the power of the underlying empirical forces in the world. Matters seem weighted against imaginative thinking but yet some room for conceptual manoeuvre may be discerned. And indeed, many universities—both at university level and at programme level—are being adventurous in conceptualising higher education in a wider way. Ideas of ‘general education’, ‘wisdom’, ‘citizenship’, ‘lifewide learning’ and ‘service’ are being heard and promoted and are being realised.

A shorthand commentary here is to observe that more public conceptions of higher education are being opened alongside the dominant economic conceptions. As yet, this is but a front that is opening: the economic conceptions surely still hold the high ground. But it may be that that economic strain in thinking about higher education is far from being unassailable. It may be that we are not far from a world—of global and national instability and incomprehension—in which more social and more public conceptions of higher education will be called for and may even come to occupy the dominant position.

In these shifting conceptual sands, another feature is pertinent here. This is the emergence over the past 50 years or so—in the English language at least—of the very term ‘higher education’. Still a loose concept, the term is now in widespread usage and is frequently used as a synonym for and interchangeably with ‘university’. This terminological move is explicable in the development of mass higher education: in spite of the rise of research as the high status activity of universities (on which the world leagues tables are mainly based), still teaching constitutes the main activity of almost every university around the world. And alongside universities have emerged a plethora of largely teaching-based institutions of higher education. So the conceptual distinction between higher education as an educational process (of a particular kind) and the university as an institution which offers programmes of higher education has become blurred. ‘University’ and ‘higher education’ at least have come significantly to overlap each other, even if they are not quite yet identical.

Against this socio-conceptual backcloth, the ground may be becoming propitious for the coming of *the ecological university* (Barnett 2013). The ecological university, we may say, would be a university that was not just aware of the many ecologies in which it has its being, and was not just wanting to sustain those ecologies, but was intent on enhancing their wellbeing. By ‘ecology’ is meant here all the networks in which a university is characteristically situated, networks of reasoning, of inquiry, of knowledge, of personal development, of social institutions, of culture, of economy and of communication. All these are ecologies, being webs of interconnected points and processes, in which the university is implicated. And these networks spread out regionally, nationally and globally (with individual universities being placed differentially in those networks).

The idea of ‘ecology’ is, in Bernard Williams’ terminology, a ‘thick concept’ (Williams 2008/1985): it is fact and value combined. To put ‘ecology’ and ‘university’ together is both to point to the embeddedness of the university—and higher education, thereby—in ecologies and to point to the responsibility that the university has to sustaining those ecologies. A related concept here, in ecological debates, tends to be that of sustainability: questions arise as to whether an ecology can be sustained

and what has to be achieved to bring that end about. Here, however, as implied, a stronger idea can properly be entertained: we can ask not only as to what a university might do in order to sustain its various ecologies—of knowledge, of learning, of communication, of understanding, and so on—but also what it might do to enhance those ecologies. So we can ask, for instance, in what ways might a university work to enhance ecologies of understanding, reasoning, and communication, and of culture and economy across society, and even across the world.

An Ecological Higher Education

The ecological university, therefore, does not have a narrow sense of higher education and nor does it act only in its own interests. It has societal and global horizons and it seeks to enhance the wellbeing of the multiple ecologies in which it is embedded. And such a conception of higher education can be played out in very concrete ways in the provision made available to its students. The promotion of students' service learning, the encouragement to students to engage in their own 'lifewide learning', the instantiation into curricula of the idea of the student as a 'global citizen', the stretching of curricula to include social dimensions of a discipline, the inclusion of student projects oriented towards community matters, the challenge of value conflicts: these are only a sample of the possibilities that reach out towards an ecological curriculum.

Such an ecological higher education stretches out in different directions. It stretches beyond the campus, as the student is encouraged to venture outwards, both in forms of understanding and in action off-campus. For instance, students will be encouraged to engage with other cultures, both physically (with some overseas experience) and virtually (through virtual travel, for example, to students on a comparable course in another country). But it also stretches back into the campus. Firstly, it has pedagogical implications: curricula innovations of the kind identified here prompt a pedagogical relationship in which the student is given both space and responsibility to take up far-reaching options (perhaps involving action in community either in students' home country or in other countries), and challenged to develop their reasoning, communicative and action-oriented capacities. Secondly, it has institutional implications, in which the university is understood as an environment that can work in encouraging forward the ecological student. Opportunities to bring students together (on multicultural campuses) so that they can learn about each other's cultures will be seized. Students will be treated as adults and as co-directors of their total experience.

This ecological higher education opens up both time and space: time horizons are opened, both into the future and backwards into the past (for the present cannot be understood in the absence of its history); and space is opened, as the student is encouraged into a global space, not only geographically but also epistemologically. The student comes to understand herself and himself amid multi-cultures. Boundaries of time and space are weakened.

An ecological higher education also presents with continuing possibilities. In pointing towards spacious curricula, it points also to spacious pedagogies, in which the student is afforded space to come into new kinds of strangeness in their own way. Emergence is not only a meta-concept, working at metaphysical, global and system levels but it is a practical concept that speaks to the student finding his or her own possibilities in a networked world. The student not merely teaches herself in profound ways but also comes into herself. Heidegger's idea of 'being-possible' (Heidegger 1998/1962, pp. 183–185) is concretely realised in an ecological higher education.

Conclusion

Thinking about higher education is characteristically hedged in. It is somewhat unthinking, unreflectively content to work within conventional boundaries. Of course, conceptions of higher education are more or less restricted, and are more or less open. The presence of a concept of higher education, however, does not entail thinking about higher education. Conceptions of higher education are prompted by the large and even global currents to which institutions of higher education are subject. In the world of higher education, concepts tend to follow form and influence them only marginally. But still, much may happen in the margins. Ultimately, the conversation in the margins may even come to constitute the main text.

Can thinking about higher education leap out of its own traditions? Can it reach over its own shapings? Two kinds of question arise: Are there directions in which any such attempt to free up thinking *should* go? And, are there *conditions* that should attach to any such thinking afresh? Surely, in answer to the first question, such thinking should be oriented towards deriving concepts that extend higher education towards the fullest realisation of its possibilities. Such a consideration itself implies conditions in response to the second question. For thinking about higher education, if it is to work in favour of a full realisation of its possibilities, has to take account of the deep structures within which higher education is placed. Thinking can open the possibility of possibilities.

In short, thinking about higher education has to become a kind of social philosophy, a reflective exploration of the possibilities before higher education. And here, the 'possibilities before higher education' have to be both conceptual and practical. 'Higher education' is both a concept and a complex social institution, containing manifold practices. Opening up here is an even larger and more challenging task, for thinking about higher education now is charged with becoming what might be termed an *imaginative and practical critical realism*. This thinking about higher education strives to be as imaginative as possible but yet has its eye on the considerable social and economic embeddedness of higher education. 'Head in the clouds and feet on the ground': this could be said to be the motto of this kind of thinking. Such thinking is extremely demanding. Little wonder that its presence is in short supply today; but such thinking about higher education *can* be discerned. It is a feasible possibility.

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