

Only Connect: Designing University Futures

Ronald Barnett

Outline

Across the world - whether in low-, middle- or high-income countries; whether in market-led or state-controlled systems of higher education; whether in high- or low-participation settings; and whether research-intensive or teaching-intensive - universities are giving thought to their futures. University futures, therefore, have become a matter of *design*.

To what extent, though, can a university design its future? Are there issues to which a university should attend that are *universal* - or is it legitimate for a university to focus just on its own (local and regional) interests? To the extent that it enjoys institutional autonomy, do any *responsibilities* befall a university? Do conditions attach to being a university as such?

These, then, are the questions that I wish to open in my talk; and they amount to a filling out of the *sub-title* of my talk, and they provide boundaries to the ground I want to cover. The *main title* of my talk, however, gives an indication as to my direction of travel.

The world is interconnected. That much we should be learning from the history of the Coronavirus. Of course, we should have learnt this lesson sixty years ago, when the climate crisis and global warming were first noticed, but we failed to do so. We are, though, still failing to learn a fundamental lesson of the world's interconnectedness. It is not just that all the entities in the external world are connected but human beings are part of this global interconnectedness, and that includes human thought. The world affects human thought and human thought affects the world.

This, then, has to furnish the context for the matter of university futures and design, the dynamic embeddedness of the university in the world, not least through the thoughts that it is or could provide to the world. The university - any university - has *new responsibilities* to connect itself to the whole world, not least through the thinking that it offers to the world.