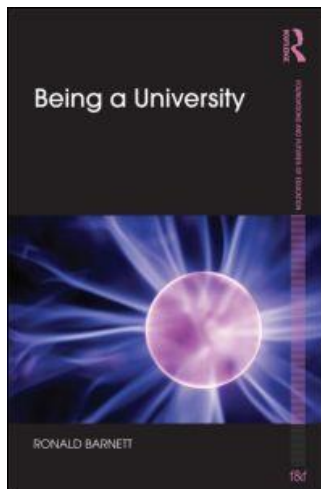


Review of Ronald Barnett’s “Being a University” (2010, Routledge)

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This book presents educators with a variety of possibilities to consider as their respective academic institutions evolve into 21st century universities. The author suggests that the original spirit of the university can be rescued and preserved by studying its development history over the last several hundred years, as well as by understanding better the state of contemporary higher education and how it is likely to evolve in the future. Knowledge of higher education’s academic and historical past and its current trends, and recognition of the different aspects of its behaviour may equip educators with the skills needed to successfully guide their institutions into the future.



The book is written for professionals and academics in higher education and for all who are interested in education policy, although at times the reader is expected to have some background in pedagogical and academic research regarding educational trends. The author follows a formal presentation and writing style, splitting up the book in three parts and subdividing each part in chapters. The first part describes six different types of universities based on their current status and academic and managerial practices. The second part treats the university as a part of a number of different networks from an academic and a managerial perspective, and from different viewpoints. The third part describes four possible and feasible “utopias” considering a variety of scenarios and viewpoints. The book ends with a conclusion that brings together the main points: the necessity of rescuing and preserving the original spirit of the

university, and the need not only to accept students but also to accompany them through the learning process till they graduate and help them embrace the continually evolving university values. At times the author uses a particularly “technical” language that is not always easy to follow; however the references and the bibliography help the reader understand the concepts and the inferences.

Three major themes emerge across the three parts of the book: the purpose and nature of education, the interdisciplinary approach to university education, and the theory-practice divide. The author begins with some of the well-known and well understood concepts about what the university is from different perspectives. The main focus is on the definition and analysis of the university historically, contemporaneously and in the context of multiple networks. Thus the first part of the book draws the reader’s attention to a logical end by piecing together the facts presented and the ideas introduced. However, later the author digresses somewhat with bringing in unusual concepts about the university’s behavior; these could be a little confusing for a reader not immersed in academic research.

Further, the author describes universities in the increasingly knowledge-based society as immersed in a triple helix model of academic-industry-government relationships; this is the "entrepreneurial" university, with technology being a strategic variable. In the emergent entrepreneurial paradigm universities play an enhanced role in technological innovation. The entrepreneurial university is a global phenomenon with an isomorphic developmental path, despite different starting points and modes of expression. The concept of the entrepreneurial university was introduced in (Etzkowitz, Webster, Gebhardt, & Cantisano, 2000) which is recommended for further reading and a discussion of the salient points.

Regarding the two contending concepts of "being" and "becoming" discussed in the second part of the book (chapter 5) the reader expects a definition of the university of the present and of the future; however, these needed definitions are somewhat understated. Rather, the author reveals his fondness for philosophy and poetry, and attempts to provide a philosophical and poetical context for the content of this part of the book. A recommendation for further reading and reflection is Hashimshony and Haina's (2006) article about designing the university of the future.

Hashimshony and Haina describe six main layout prototypes and identify several factors that are particularly important in defining the nature of the future university: financial challenges, collaboration with industry, increasing student population and greater diversity, new patterns of teaching and learning, growth of interdisciplinary fields of knowledge, and openness to the community. Hashimshony and Haina point out that universities will undergo major organizational and physical changes as they adapt their activities to meet present and future needs since the physical layout of the future university will need to respond to these changes. This vision complements Barnett's ideas about the university's evolution by adding a physical and a design perspective. While Barnett focuses on the university from a social and philosophical perspective, Hashimshony and Haina's analysis covers industrial and technological issues.

Furthermore, in considering the entrepreneurial university as the academic university of the future, the author provides a compilation of 'entrepreneurial university' perspectives based on examples from universities in the United States and in Europe. These points of view are analysed along two axes: scale (small-large) and risk (innovative-high / conserving-low). A further review of some experiences in countries and universities around the world could make for a richer discussion regarding the "becoming" concept of the university. It would also be relevant and useful to review the history of medieval European universities in order to add to the author's past and present of the university concept, and to include a vision of the new American university concept as the future of his university concept (Kauffman-Planck Summit on Entrepreneurship Research and Policy, 2008).

As discussed at the Kauffman-Planck summit, European universities are opening up to the challenges and opportunities of the future. One of their main concerns is about the rather rigid process that students need to follow in order to enroll, study and obtain a degree. I would suggest considering government policy as another important variable involved in the transition to the entrepreneurial university especially as it may encourage a collaboration between academic and applied researchers.

In relation to the concept of "institutional courage" the author adds a quotation from a Walt Whitman's poem which talks about "negative courage" for doing things. Even though it is interesting to read a poem about space, time and the unknown, in my view it does not support the "time and space" concept developed by the author.

Further forward, in chapter 8 concerning two other contending concepts ("authentic" and "responsible") and their interrelationships: in practical terms universities do not really lend support for some of the definitions. For example, by being authentic and responsible, Barnett describes the university's behaviour as turning inwards and beyond itself without the need of external support, and by being inauthentic and not responsible, Barnett describes the university's behaviour as working for its own interests. Such extreme behaviours are not witnessed in the real universities we know – indeed the author later clarifies that the behaviours described are not necessarily found in real universities.

The author also provides some theoretical and empirical examples for a better comprehension of each type of university; these examples illustrate the flow of the argument and help justify the introduction and analysis of the university types including critiquing and contrasting them. By the end of the book (the "Coda" chapter) the reader is ready to accept the author's thesis about the need of rescuing the spirit of the university, even if some of the interrelationships between the contending concepts about the university mentioned in Part II of the book could be better supported - either because the concepts may not be totally realistic (e.g., an irresponsible and inauthentic university) or because in the case of some concepts (e.g., being and becoming) the definitions derived from poetry and philosophy could be more succinct or precise. Nonetheless, the reader is able to appreciate the value of the author's vision about the university: it goes beyond understanding the university solely in an academic setting (i.e., providing a learning process for students), or in an administrative setting (i.e., providing a framework for selecting students to enroll and complete a degree).

To conclude, through reviewing, analysing and critiquing ideas and visions about university types and models, the author is successful in introducing and explaining the concept of "being a university" by both charting its history and critically examining future development trends.

My personal experience reading the book was that it opened up my mind about what a university was, immersed like I am in both the undergraduate and graduate university environments. To gain an appreciation of the normal daily behaviour of the academic and administrative environment enriched my experiences as a student and now as an academic. In the context of my own academic and technological background the book broadened my own overall understanding of the university (the place I work for) by highlighting it from a social and philosophical (even poetical!) perspective.

The author successfully argues that a university's past needs to be viewed from a social and philosophical point of view, in order to understand actual and future university behaviour - one of the main points made in the book. Thus the book will be an important source for further social sciences research that aims to create new knowledge by adding a science and technology dimension. The university's behaviour will no longer be perceived as static; rather the university will be seen as a dynamic, non-stationary environment, with research considering variables that

evolve with time. Furthermore, this book can help deans and other education decision makers in transforming their respective departments, schools and faculties into ecologically and socially responsible organizations that meet the broader actual and future needs of the professionals they educate.

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