

Ronald Barnett, University College London, UK

### **Constructing the University: Towards a Social Philosophy of Higher Education**

Almost forty years ago, a book appeared by J S Brubacher entitled *On the Philosophy of Higher Education*. Today, we have neither its successor nor a sense as to what such a book might contain. We lack a recognized sub-field of study that might be termed 'the philosophy of higher education' – and this present conference is perhaps an indication that matters are changing significantly. However, the issue remains: just what might such a field – the philosophy of higher education – look like? I shall respond to this question by assembling the main planks of such a field, and identifying broadly the kinds of resources that might be brought together. I shall argue for a particular approach that builds from a recognition of the university both as institution and as idea. This approach would understand both that the university possesses a social ontology and that the university is accompanied by a *widening* conceptual hinterland. Much contemporary scholarly work on higher education is characterized by an *undue* pessimism, such that the contemporary university is sometimes seen as being subject to overwhelming global forces, which underplays the university's potential as a corporate agent. In contrast, I suggest that an adequate philosophy of higher education would be at once realist, have empirical warrant, recognize the agentic powers of the university, be critical and optimistic (identifying *possible possibilities*). The field should seek to identify *feasible utopias* that discern universal and imaginative concepts that not merely assist in understanding the university or in defending the university but in changing it.

**Ronald Barnett** is Emeritus Professor of Higher Education at University College London Institute of Education. For forty years, he has been trying to advance a social philosophy of the university, in which he has been attempting to identify creative concepts and practical principles that might enhance universities and higher education. With the recent publication of *Understanding the University: Institution, Idea and Possibilities* (2016), he has just concluded a trilogy of books on comprehending the university, the first two volumes of which were *Being a University* (2011) and *Imagining the University* (2013). His books have been translated into several languages and several have won prizes. He has been described as 'one of the most eloquent defenders of the university of reason' (Michael Peters, 2014). He is the inaugural recipient of the EAIR Award for 'Outstanding Contribution to Higher Education Research, Policy and Practice' and has had a higher doctorate of the University of London and Fellowships of the Academy of the Social Sciences, the Society for Research into Higher Education and the Higher Education Academy conferred upon him. He has been an invited speaker in around 40 countries.

Paul Gibbs, University of Middlesex, UK

### **Who is to speak to the truth in the contemporary university?**

Seeking truth from its faculty and students is an obligation linked to academic freedom but at what risk? Given the overt political policy towards the nature of higher education through an embeddedness of the economic imperative, a mission for societal restructuring and funding regimes dependent on political imperatives, I wondered where the truth tellers have space and courage to emerge within the university.

I suggest that reasons for the privileges gifted to higher education provision have been eroded within the institutional boundaries of the University, which risks a narrative of indistinctiveness, corrosion of values and an anxiety of consumerisation. I ask; what are the alternatives, how uncomfortable are we prepared to be and what benefits might be achieved from the inevitable suffering that must be endured for change.

**Paul Gibbs** is Director of Education Research at the University of Middlesex. He is a professor of the University, founder of the Centre for Education Research and Scholarship and an Honorary Research Fellow at the Open University in Hong Kong and the University of Cyprus. He has written and taught on aspects of higher education in the UK, USA, Hong Kong and Cyprus. His current interests centre around values in higher education. In 2017 he will publish three books on Contentment, Compassion and Transdisciplinarity and is series edit of Educational Thinkers and a coeditor of Debating Education for Springer.

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**To be announced...**