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The homeless student – and recovering a sense of belonging

Ronald Barnett

University College London, United Kingdom, ronaldbarnett@ucl.ac.uk

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The homeless student – and recovering a sense of belonging

Abstract

There is much empirical evidence to suggest that many students today feel alone *and* experience anxiety. These phenomena – loneliness and anxiety - have long existed but there is reason to believe that they are heightened in the twenty-first century; and universities are putting in effort to alleviate levels of student stress. However, largely missing is a sense that a degree of destabilization is *necessary* for an educational process to be worthy of the name of 'higher education'. It is part of higher education that a student should be, to some extent, *epistemologically unsettled*. And that unsettlement has to include students becoming reflective of their taken-for-granted frameworks and recognizing the contingency of those frameworks. The student comes ultimately and continually to unsettle her/himself. Higher education, accordingly, is a site of homelessness, in which students embark on a process of permanent – that is, lifelong – self-unsettlement. Fundamentally, therefore, a genuine higher education is not so much a matter of acquiring knowledge (an epistemological process) or skills (a practical process) but about taking on a *nomadic* form of being (an *ontological* process); a being always on the move. The student develops a will to *unlearn* and comes even to revel in it. It is a responsibility of the university to provide the institutional and the pedagogical wherewithal to elicit this kind of student *homefulness* even alongside a continuing homelessness.

Practitioner Notes

1. Universities are expending effort to alleviate levels of student stress but largely missing is a sense that some destabilization is *necessary* for a 'higher education' process to be worthy of the name.
2. It is part of higher education that a student should be, to some extent, epistemological unsettled, an unsettlement that has to include students becoming reflective of their taken-for-granted frameworks and recognizing the contingency of those frameworks.
3. Higher education is a site of homelessness, in which students embark on a process of permanent – that is, lifelong – self-unsettlement; and this is an *ontological* process.
4. The student develops a will to *unlearn* and comes even to revel in it.
5. It is a responsibility of the university to provide the institutional and the pedagogical wherewithal to elicit this kind of nomadic student *homefulness* even alongside a continuing homelessness.

Keywords

student, higher education, universities, anxiety, homelessness, destabilisation, self-unsettlement, a will to unlearn, contingency, nomadic learning

The lonely student

In a recent national survey in the UK (Neves & Brown, 2022), nearly a quarter of the students surveyed admitted to feeling lonely most of the time and over half felt lonely at least once a week. Prima facie, this is extraordinary. These are highly intelligent (mostly young) people at university, surrounded by others, with the extraordinary opportunities for interaction afforded by modern-day higher education, not only on campus but also in students' study programmes; and with the infinity of interactions immediately available in social media. How can this be, this loneliness among the immediacy of so much human presence, virtual and real, pedagogical and institutional? How might we understand this seeming paradox?

Being a student – especially but not only for the younger student – has probably long been a position of awkwardness. The mediaeval student was faced with multiple strands of awkwardness, in travelling among the universities of Europe, in being part of hazy pedagogical relationships between teacher and taught, and in tense town-gown relationships which were always liable to break out into terrible riots. The student mind has characteristically been bombarded with, and has had to make sense of, a surfeit of impressions. Student homelessness, in this phenomenological sense, is nothing unusual. But perhaps it has new forms in the twenty-first century.

Today's students are faced with a double set of uncertainties: those that characterise the contemporary age *and* those that characterise the more internal character of being a student. Anxiety has been a recognized feature of society for many decades – it has been a central feature of modern (European) continental philosophy for at least a hundred years – but it is understandable if it has picked up yet more steam of late. Global crises of wars, famines, ecological degradation, climate warming, poverty even in rich societies, turbulent labour markets, technological revolutions (plural), rival knowledge systems, a 'post-truth' environment, culture wars and identity crises heap upon each other. Even the news itself is suspect, it being suspected of being just 'fake news'.

Being intelligent, students intuit all of this but are then faced with their own travails in simply being students. To some extent, these vary across higher education systems, but many phenomena have a ubiquity about them: family relationships, pedagogical responsibilities (in more open and active settings), juxtaposition of multiple courses in a single programme of study, waiting for feedback on assignments, costs of fees and finance more generally, accommodation, investment in one's education by one's family, and so on. Being a student is a series of dislocations and sources of anxiety.

That report to which I referred earlier holds, though, still more disquieting data. In a set of data on wellbeing, the report places the data for students alongside those for the general population. It is apparent, if not surprising, that most members of society are severely troubled. Roughly, two-thirds are anxious, and only one-third finds happiness, or feels that life is worthwhile. Only a quarter gain satisfaction from life. These data are worrying in themselves but it seems as if students are in a far worse state of anxiety than the population in general. Only one in six of students finds life worthwhile or enjoy happiness and only one in eight finds satisfaction in life. And most students exhibit a significant measure of anxiety, a level far worse than the wider population.

These data prompt a number of questions: is it that students are *especially* prone to feeling anxious and despondent and unable to find meaning in life *OR* is it that they acquire these syndromes as a result of their being a student? Is it that, characteristically, students are relatively young and 'will grow out of it' or are there aspects of their higher education experience that exacerbate any such anxieties that they possess? And, to the degree that it is the latter, is it that students' unease is provoked mainly by their immediate experience, in their curricula and/or their pedagogies that they

encounter, or is the unease somehow a feature of being a member of a university as such, *or* is it the result of the wider lifeworld of being a student, with all the practical, inter-personal and ideational discomforts that they must experience?

This is not the place to begin to answer those (largely empirical) questions directly, although they are surely important and insufficiently raised, let alone addressed. They do, however, prompt this provocative consideration: that in the twenty-first century, student anxiety is a *necessary* feature of student life. I would like, at least, to entertain this hypothesis here.

We hear much these days about students' mental health. There are serious problems with this way of construing the matters before us, in locating the matter in the mind and being of individual students. If, as it appears, that the overwhelming of students *are* prone to feeling lonely, being unhappy, and finding little solace in life, we are in the presence less of a psychological situation and much more of a *structural* situation. And this structural setting, in its bearing upon what it is to be a student in the 2020s, is a complex, which deserve to be unravelled a little. This is not to pour cold water on efforts of universities to provide support to individual students who are experiencing forms of undue stress but it does suggest that the net of explanations and remedial actions should be cast more widely than is common.

Provoking the unprovoked

It is, I want to suggest, part of the meaning of the idea of higher education that students be destabilised, to some extent. If we are not in the presence of *some* destabilisation, then we are not in the presence of a genuine higher education. This line of thought can be found for the past two thousand years, from Plato's image of coming out of the cave into the light, the Germanic idea of *Bildung* (and its sense of being formed anew, partly through the student's self-formation), the Newmanesque notion of 'ascent', and the ideas – promoted by Deleuze and Guattari (both together and separately: Deleuze & Guattari, 2007; Guattari, 2016) – of 'lines of flight', 'becoming' and 'nomadic' movement across 'smooth' surfaces (Deleuze & Guattari, 2002; Guattari, 2016). My own idea of the student being faced with 'supercomplexity' (Barnett, 2022, p. 133) is intended to be both descriptive (as a matter of fact, this is the nature of the world in which students find themselves) and normative (it being part of the educator's task directly to bring students face-to-face with intractable, conflictual and value-laden discourses and irreconcilable readings of situations). In such a higher education, students are pulled out of themselves, and confront the world and its counter-factual and antagonistic representations and, thereby, confront *themselves*.

To put matters another way, it is the task of the university to produce a particular kind of *homelessness* among its students. It is to unsettle *epistemically*, to help bring about a recognition that every reading of the world is ephemeral, contingent, indeterminate and subject to multiple rival readings. There is nothing outré here. The very notion of criticality – at its best – does justice to this idea of higher education. In the full state of criticality (Barnett, 1997), the student is autonomously able and willing to pass judgements on all she experiences in the world ('just why is my curriculum so white?'), and that includes being critical of herself. More than that, criticality includes the moment of critical action: the student – or graduate now in the world – is able and willing to venture into the world with her critiques of the world. She puts her critiques into some kind of action.

The student – in a higher education worthy of the name – comes to unsettle *herself*. Ultimately, the epistemic unsettling produces an ontological unsettling. The student intuits that anything she says or does is open to critique in that there are always alternative readings of a situation she could have offered or other courses of action that she could have taken. But this criticality has also to be turned on herself. She becomes self-critical, able and willing to interrogate what it is she is saying and

doing, and how she herself is in the world. In a genuine higher education, there is an element of self-formation (Marginson, 2014) but that has to imply a prior and even an ongoing dimension of *self-unsettlement*.

Catching the student

At its best, higher education witnesses extraordinary accomplishments on the part of both the student and the teachers. Students – again when all goes well – are transformed in their study programmes and they are even aware of it. Many universities have glitzy degree ceremonies where, after the formalities have been concluded, the student introduces proud parents and tutors to each other. In that moment, in that intimate setting, the student may be overheard to say something like ‘Being here has transformed my life’. Note that they do not typically say ‘Being here, I have gain lots of knowledge’, or ‘Being here, I have acquired many skills’. Animatedly, they note that they have changed as persons.

Despite the challenges, the self-doubt, the contemplation of withdrawing from the course (or even worse), they usually come through it all, undergoing an extraordinary shift in their being. In Heideggerian terms (Heidegger, 1998), we may say that the student passes from a relatively unreflective state of being where entities in the world are simply ‘ready-to-hand’, available for deployment (tropes, materials, facts) to a state of being where entities are ‘present-at-hand’, always ready to be inspected, scrutinised, and evaluated – including, as stated, the student herself. The student now lives in a state of permanent unsettlement and yet purposely. The student has a new sense of herself, a new self-awareness, and new resources for flourishing in the world. (Heidegger, we may note, was much more interested in the first mode of being, the relatively unreflective mode of being as concerned with that which is simply ready-to-hand and, rather unremarked, his philosophy is rather distant from and even antipathetic to a genuinely critical and self-critical conception of higher education).

There is a fourfold responsibility here, therefore, on the educator. It is to expose the student to challenging situations, to encourage their engagement with those situations such that they commit themselves (they come to mean what they say, and say what they mean), constructively to judge those accomplishments on the part of the students and, abidingly, to ensure that the students cannot harm themselves. The student is encouraged to throw herself forward and into the void but, almost out of sight, a safety-net is present: the student cannot fall to any great extent. This is a complex of tasks and responsibilities for the educator and, amid mass higher education systems, it is perhaps not surprising if – from time to time – students do fall through the net.

Homelessness in an anxious world

Students are already anxious. As intelligent persons, and having concerns about the world, the crises of the world and the turbulence of their own lives conspire to heighten natural anxieties about their being as such. And it is a function of a genuine higher education to add to these anxieties. *Higher education is and should be an anxiety-provoking set of experiences.* How else might we account for students apparently feeling more anxious than the people at large? But we noticed, too, that students are often feeling lonely. Practically, they are far from being alone but they *feel* lonely; they feel their aloneness. Anxiety and loneliness: higher education contains tendencies to provoke anxiety and to render students into an aloneness in coping with that anxiety.

A way of capturing this is to observe, as suggested, that higher education is – all too often – a site of *student homelessness*. The idea of home has multiple connotations. With a home comes a sense of belonging. Characteristically, that belonging accrues in part from the presence of others but also

from the presence of familiarity; a familiarity of place, of technologies, of tasks, and of epistemology and practical frameworks. However, in all these senses, a higher education is liable to present a homelessness. In modular or interdisciplinary programmes, the students around one change, the tasks and the frameworks change, the mode of being required by the various disciplines – within the student's programme of studies – alters, the teachers change and the character of the assignments change.

Moreover, as stated, we are wanting students to step outside of themselves, and to find some distance between their taken-for-granted understandings of the world and enter a new form of understanding, where all is recognised as being contingent. We are wanting students, in short, to *make themselves* homeless, to leave their earlier homes and throw away the key. We are asking our students to be pedagogical nomads.

This, then, is the challenge in front of higher education in the twenty-first century, *to afford the students a home even while it renders them homeless*. And, remarkably, this is often achieved by the pedagogical processes in higher education. Students come to feel that they have entered a new kind of home, a home without a home; a *nomadic* home indeed. Now, in a world of supercomplexity, the intelligent reflective person is destined to be forever homeless but yet find a home in this very uncertainty and challengeability. This is, in part, what it means to be a professional in the contemporary world, where all is uncertain, even one's understandings of oneself.

Finding a new home

How, then, might universities help students gain a sense of belonging, of finding a new home for the homeless? Currently, much effort is being put into systems, systems of support and of curricula and of pedagogies. Alongside enhanced student counselling systems and learning analytics, curricula are reshaped with topics taken sequentially, and assessment and marking regimes are modified (so that non-completion rates are minimised and students characteristically gain high marks). The jury is out in judging the validity of these arrangements. The question looms, however, as to whether the main issue is yet being addressed.

On the analysis here, the main issue is precisely one of the sheer being of the student, of their sense of belonging in an anxious world. Immediately, it follows that a characterisation of higher education as the acquisition either of knowledge or of skills not just is grossly insufficient but is quite misleading. For it is students as persons who commit themselves to acquiring knowledge and skills, or who decline to do so, or, having done so, use that knowledge or those skills in malign ways. In short, the matter of higher education is fundamentally a matter of being. Putting it formally, ontology trumps both epistemology and praxis.

Note that both knowing and acting, at the level of a genuine higher education, require understanding – a much neglected concept in the theory of higher education. But, then, understanding has to bring in students as agentic persons, since reaching any level of understanding of difficult topics and practices is highly demanding. And this brings us back again to ontology and so to the student having a sense of belonging. The will to learn – and to try to get under the skin of a demanding topic or practice – will not be elicited unless the student feels at home. If there is a major dislocation, a serious discomfort, in the student's hold on the world, and if her experience of higher education is playing a significant part in that dislocation, the student's will to learn is most unlikely to be forthcoming.

An ecological coda

There is much in that last sentence, it pointing in two directions. Students are persons in the world, their higher education experience forming but a part of their total life-world. Moreover, they are learning in a multitude of ways, certainly informally and often formally, beyond their programme of studies in the university. They will have family and personal relationships, they may be working to earn some money, they will have their own leisure pursuits, and they may be engaged in a parallel learning process (perhaps learning a language or learning how to sing or taking a course with a non-governmental agency). They possess – each one – their own learning ecology (Barnett & Jackson, 2020), a learning ecology that is likely to be impaired in some of its places.

Helping students to have a sense of belonging, therefore, has both internal and external components, the life of the student within the university and beyond. The latter – the student's lifeworld learning and being (Jackson, 2020) – has to come within the university's purview and for two reasons. If they are totally destabilised in their extra-mural experiences, they are unlikely to feel settled in their higher education experiences. Being cannot easily be compartmentalised. Correspondingly, it may be that students feel a greater sense of belonging outwith their programme of studies. A music technology student that I interviewed had found a more congenial home in meeting regularly with a small group of like-minded students where they formed their own music-composition group than on his course, where the kind of music in which he was interested was outlawed.

However, *homefulness* and belonging *on campus* is itself a set of complexes. There is the issue as to whether a programme of studies can be ontologically and epistemologically and practically *stretching*, while maintaining the student's engagement with her studies. There are *pedagogical* challenges: Is a student being given confidence to believe that she can overcome the challenges being put her way? Is the student being inspired, such that she has new energies to sustain her progress? There are *curricula* challenges: are the topics exciting the student's interest? Are the educational processes of each module conducive to the student? And there are *assessment* challenges: is each student receiving the timely, supportive and informative feedback that they wish for? Does the assessment regime evaluate that which is central to the aims of the course? If the student does not feel at home in any of these respects, her sense of belonging must falter.

In concert with these pedagogical aspects of a student's belonging is that of the university as an institution. Is the university really welcoming of all of its students, or do those from certain socio-economic classes or bearing certain ethnic or religious markers tacitly feel unrecognized, or even worse? And the means of feeling lost are far from obvious. An experienced academic who 'spent a couple of weeks at [a famous university] recalls [that] he kept getting lost. "For me, it was annoyance. But if you come from [a poor neighbourhood] and can't find the places you are meant to go, the overwhelming message is: obviously, you don't belong here ..."' (Reisz, 2022, p. 39).

In short, the university *qua institution* (that is, beyond its programmes of study) has pedagogical properties and can do much to enable students to feel lost or, to the contrary, find a place to which they can belong and feel is their home. The evidence suggests that there is much for universities to consider in becoming more of a place of belonging for their students, especially its students who are drawn from backgrounds unfamiliar with higher education or from countries abroad or communities or who identify with religions other than those that are dominant. Pedagogically provoked, a *degree* of anxiety on the part of students is necessary and will be educationally *beneficial* but only insofar as it is coupled with the university – in all of its components – being also a place of belonging.

Emeritus Professor Ronald Barnett
University College London Institute of Education

Ronald Barnett is Emeritus Professor of Higher Education, University College London Institute of Education and is President of the Philosophy and Theory of Higher Education Society

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