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Shaping a higher education system:

diversity, hierarchy, connectivity - an ecological approach



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Centre for Higher Education Studies

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Matters of intended difference (policy)

- Discipline range – eg arts/ leisure/ finance/ nursing/ education/ humanities
- PG/ doctorate awarding powers
- Private/ public (NB: Catholic institutions)
- Research
- (PT)
- Presence of sub-degree programmes
- Numerus clausus
- Governance

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Matters of unintended (?) difference

- Age/ maturity
- Socio-economic class
- Ethnicity
- Proximity to home
- Cultural capital
- Market position
- Labour market position
- Money (unit costs/ financial resources & independence/ course fees)
- Rankings
- Global situation

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Murky issues

- Standards
- Quality
- T-R relationships
- Perceptions/ status
- Transfer
- Access
- Fairness
- Bias/ prejudice/ justice
- Autonomy from state
- Size

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The nature of the world

- Motion
- Complexity
- Inter-meshing of ecosystems
- At different levels
- 8 ecosystems of higher education:
- Knowledge, learning, persons, social institutions, polity, culture, economy, natural environment
- Each is impaired - & higher education is (partly) culpable.

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The immediate context

- Global science – an ‘ecosystem’ of its own
- ‘Cognitive capitalism’
- STEMM
- Bio-informational economy – incl robots, big pharma, AI, military
- Nationalism (+ populism) – state steering
- Localism (the civic university)
- Rankings

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A higher education system – an *ecosystem*

'**Ecosystem**':

- Cluster of cognate entities, but yet some diversity
- Always in motion + multiplicity of vectors
- ***Inter-connected***
- Self-reproducing – but changing over time
- Some degree of tension & even conflict (functional)
- Q of its alignment with its milieu
- Flexibility
- Fact and value

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BTW – the policy network

The wider hinterland (of the HE ecosystem):

- Coordinating bodies
- Interest groups (Europe and global)
- Think tanks
- Research groups/ units
- Development bodies
- Funding agencies
- Advocacy bodies – UNESCO
  - ***These aid the vitality of the ecosystem*** (*relationships/ recognised context*)

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3 (initial) Models

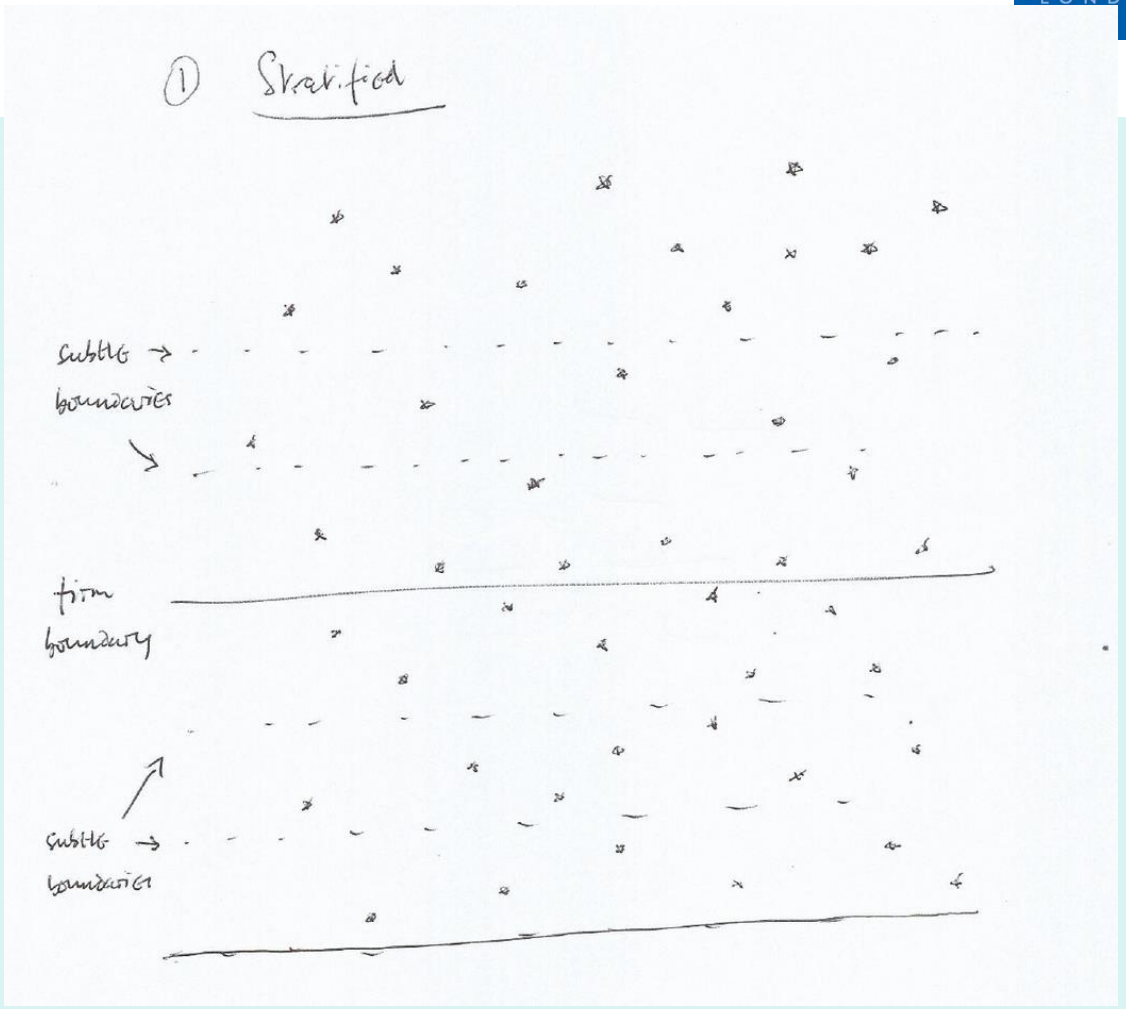
1 Stratified: stable (more or less) *but* tight boundaries

2 Separate but different – 'parity of esteem', *but* never is realised

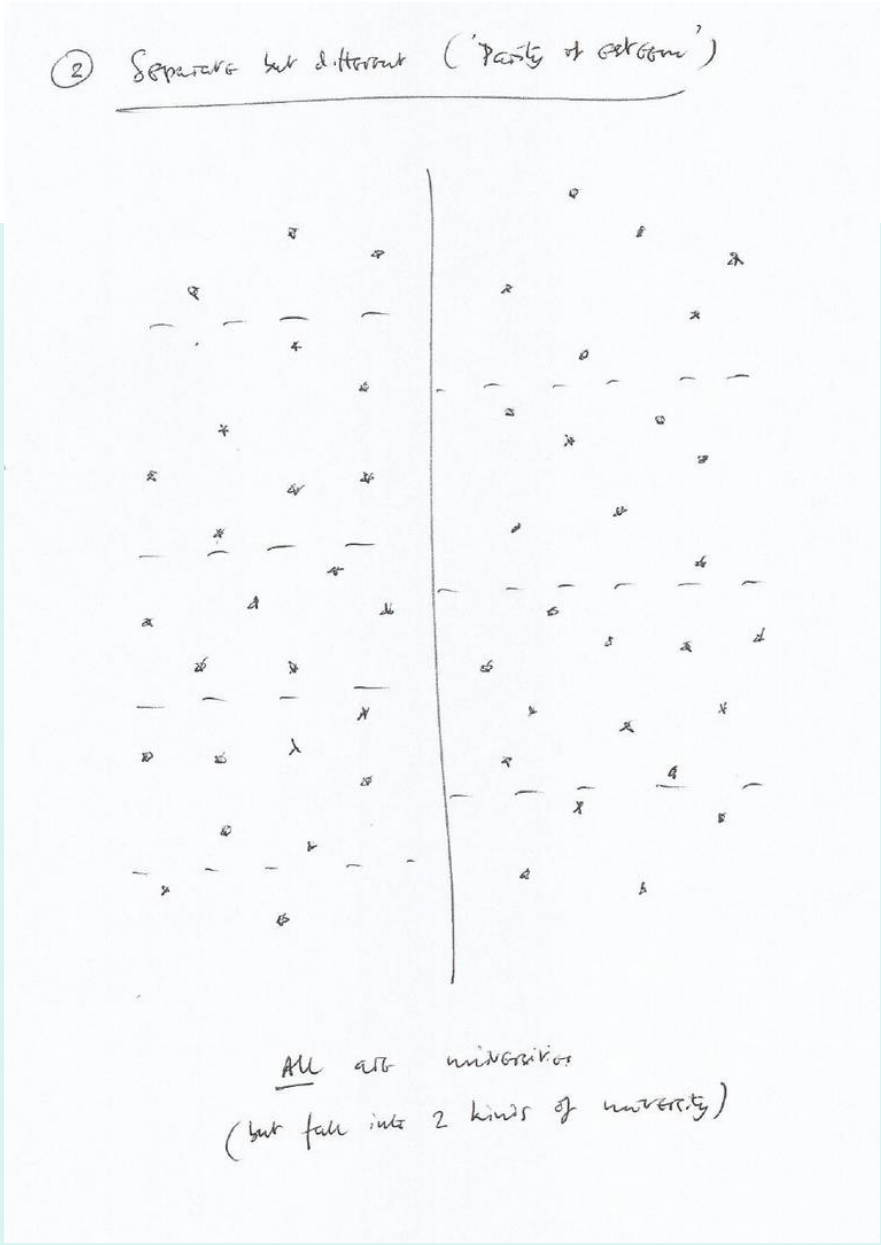
3 We're all in it together – *but* utopian

- so difficult choices ahead

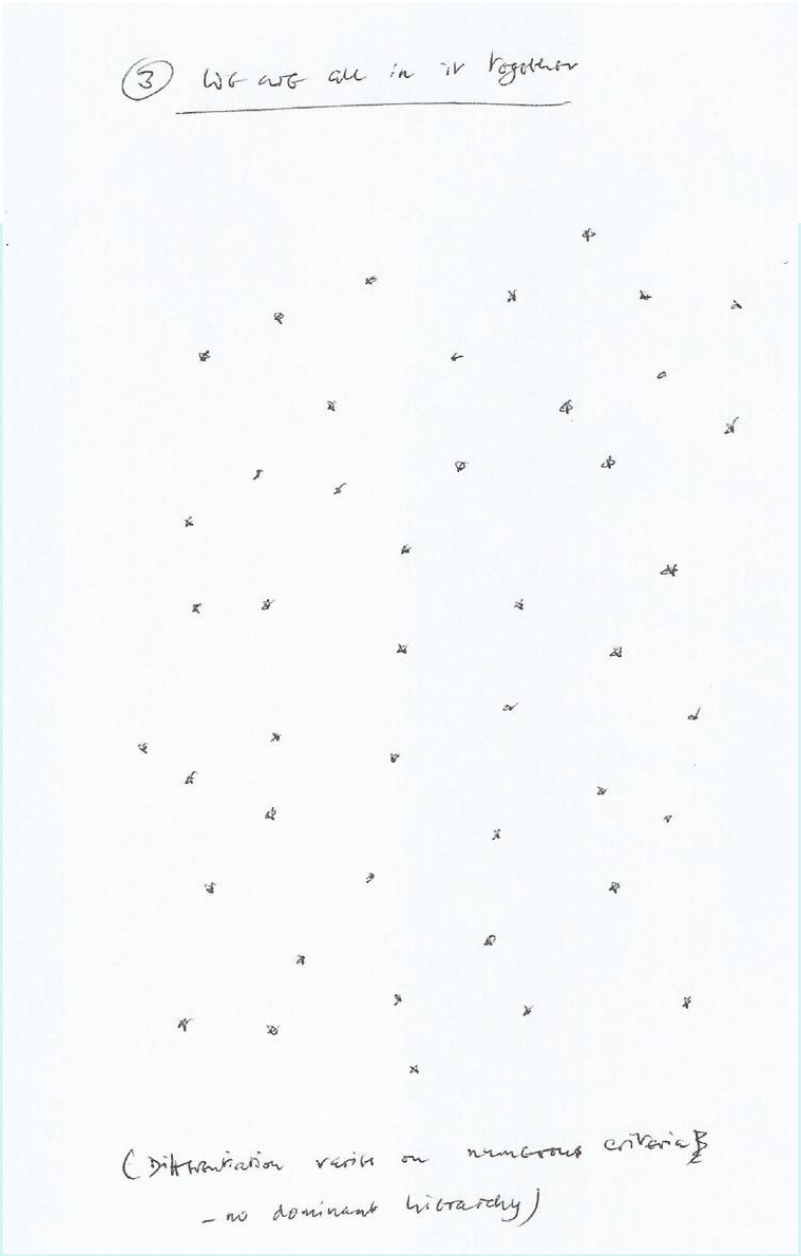
  – if the system is to *maximise its potential as a more or less unitary ecosystem*.


1 Stratified
Subtle
boundaries
firm
boundary
Subtle
boundaries

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Network

Q: Character of the network, of the relationships?

- Single flat ontology
- Or differentiation – but not burdened by dominant value-background
- Or hierarchical/ stratified
- Do they recognise each other? *'Are you one of us?' Are you really a "Professor"'?*
- Who talks to whom at the meetings of the Rectors?
- Relationships are characteristically impaired
  - Students/ staff/ research/ teaching programmes
- The network frays (the assemblage falls apart)
- *Look not at individual universities but the sector as a whole.* (DW)

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Diversity & closure/openness

- *Some diversity is functional* – crucial in a mass HE system
  - But ***not too much***
- All universities have to teach at the *level* of higher education
- But then *nice questions* arise:
  - Are all to conduct research?
  - Can there be different standards?
  - Other differentiating conditions … (progs (PhD); finance; subjects (medicine))
  - Socio-economic/ ethnic/ etc backgrounds (the social geog of HE)
  - Public/ private …But this boundary is fictitious …

Theorem: the more diversity, the more there are points of closure …

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Epistemic relationships

- Distribution of disciplines
- But goes deeper
- Theory – practice: application/ epistemic purity/ pollution
  - ‘The gift of the interval’
- Esteem goes to abstraction (Nobel prizes) – ‘blue-skies’ & ‘translational’ R
- Practice downvalued (cf ‘praxis’)
- Humanities confined …

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Inner mobility

- Mobility of staff
- Networks
- Drawing on staff mutually (eg doctorate examining)
- Interchange – seminars
- Collaboration – joint papers; joint research programmes
- Local geography & place (cf English cities)
- Student spaces
- Opportunities for movement - appointments

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Title

- Title of university not necessary (UCL; LSE)
- ***But*** it offers *reputational* advantage …

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The problem of academic drift

- Problem of intended separation
- Programmes/ disciplines attract reputation & resources
- Parity of esteem (& resources)
- Need for *some* clarity & boundaries over roles and relationships

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Axes of demarcation

1 Research/ Teaching %

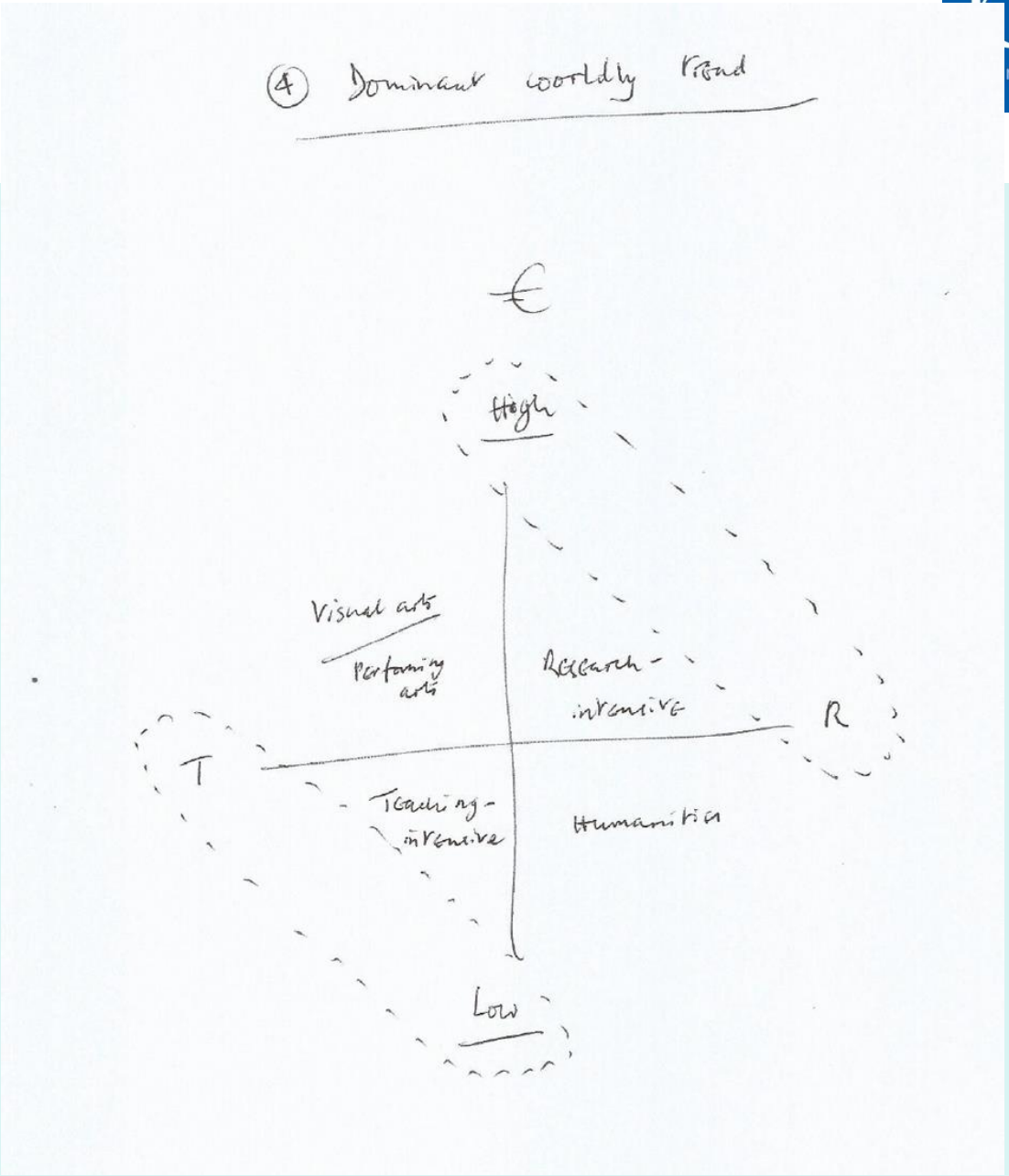
2 Unit costs/ Income (NB: T subsidises R?)

NB:

(a) Disciplines (NB: music/ creative arts)

(b) Size (counts) – critical mass

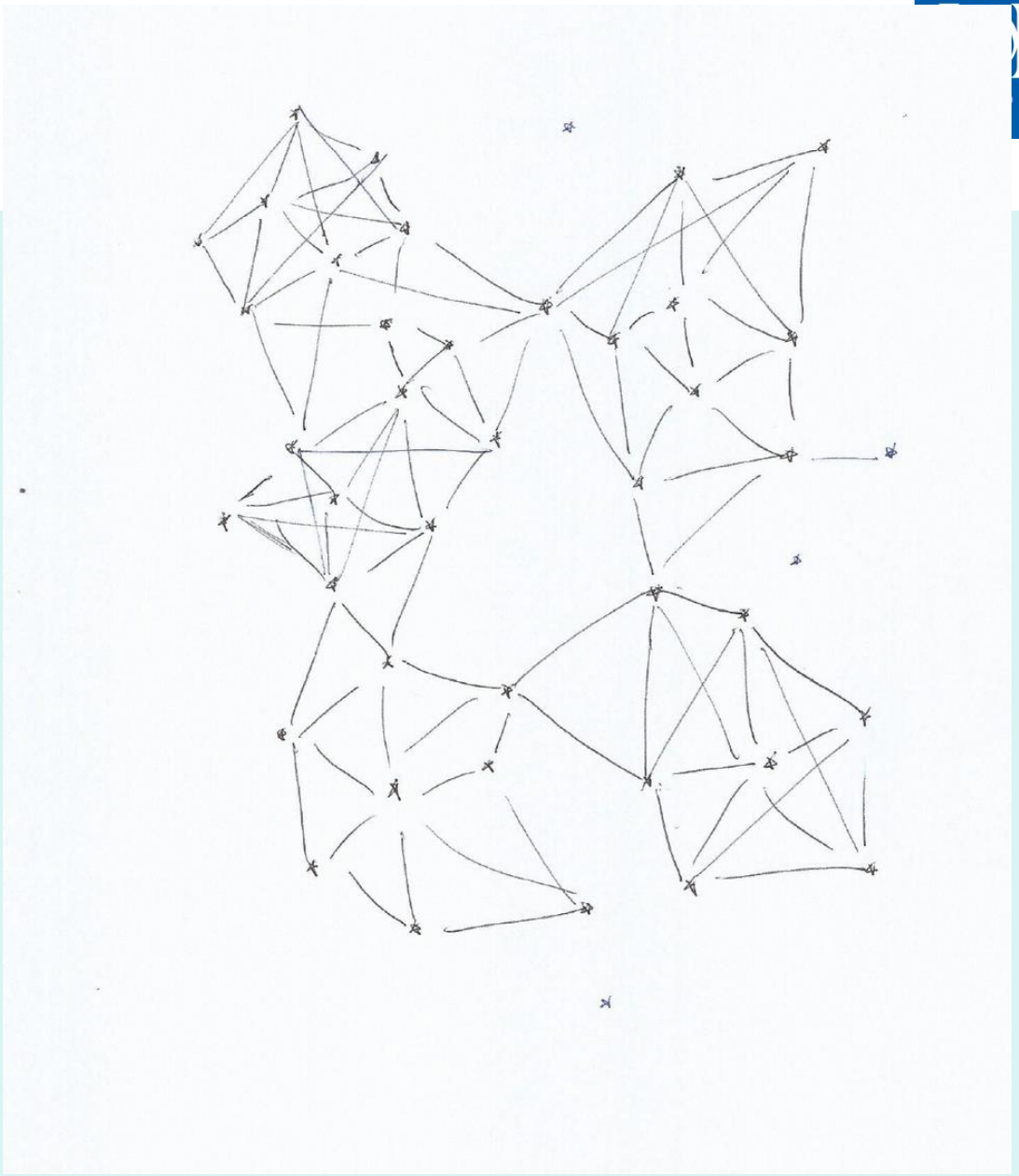
(c) Rankings *visibility* (case of IOE)


④ Dominant worldly field
€
High
Visual arts
Performing arts
Research-intensive
R
T
Teaching-intensive
Humanities
Low

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Exam Q: binary or unitary system?

- A: Neither – but certainly not binary.
- Better A: *unitary but with inter-connected clusters (a galaxy)*
  - *& no solid line of demarcation*
- ***Flattish ontology***
- Albeit with some clusters closer to power (Polity)
- Loose permeable boundaries
- Modes of difference



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NB: Conditions of entry (to a 'unified system) OR '*What is a university?*'

- Size
- Standards
- Range of disciplines
- Internal quality system
- Governance arrangements
- Scholarship
- (Research)
- 3rd mission?

NB: *The ecosystem requires some openness – but could there be relegation? On what grounds?*

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Conclusions

- From binary to? Diversity or Stratification? S cannot be avoided ..
- NB: what matters is the system as an ecosystem
  - Strength/ vitality of system as a whole – implies:
    - Parity of esteem
    - Parity of possibilities
- ***But***: *Neither* are feasible
- Connections/ interactions are crucial
- The *more numerous* the demarcators,
  the *lesser the integrity* of the total system
- R (incl PhDs)and $ are crucial demarcators
- There are always trade-offs: value judgements have to be made
- Ultimately, the Q is the old one: '*Just what IS a university?'*



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