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Trust as an ecology: relational, institutional, and systemic conditions in precarious higher education

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Abstract

Overlapping crises increasingly shape trust in higher education (HE): metric-driven governance, funding volatility, and pervasive precarity among staff and students. This article asks what it means to trust and to be trustworthy within the precarious ecosystem of English HE. Drawing on Baier's ethics of accepted vulnerability, O'Neill's conception of institutional trustworthiness, Fricker's account of epistemic injustice, and Biesta's world-centred education, this article develops an ecological framework of trust that operates across relational, institutional, and systemic levels. Short vignettes show how trust is enacted or eroded in everyday academic practice, revealing the moral and epistemic labour the university depends on. The analysis shows that breaches of trust at any level reverberate across the wider ecology, exposing the fragility of HE's moral infrastructure under neoliberal conditions. Reclaiming trust, I argue, requires a reflexive, world-centred commitment to recognition, responsibility, and moral courage. This article ultimately advances a philosophical account of trust as an ethical and educational practice rather than an instrumental or managerial resource.

Keywords: trust, precarity, recognition, epistemic justice, higher-education philosophy

Introduction: precarity and the conditions of trust

Overlapping crises increasingly define English higher education (HE): metric-driven governance, algorithmic grading controversies, and widening well-being pressures for staff and students. In England, for example, the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) assesses and rates universities and colleges for excellence in student experience and student outcomes; its public ratings influence institutional reputation and inform student choice ([Office for Students 2023](#)). Particularly acute in post-1992 English universities, where commuter demographics and funding volatility are pronounced, these conditions corrode confidence in universities as trustworthy communities of enquiry. However, philosophical work on trust has rarely attended to the ecology of precarity in which it now operates. The assumption that universities remain stable and self-regulating

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institutions sits uneasily alongside the everyday realities of insecure contracts, escalating student debt, and the bureaucratization of care. This article extends philosophical enquiry into trust by situating it within the lived, precarious conditions of HE rather than treating it as an abstract moral ideal.

This article asks: what does it mean to trust and be trustworthy within the precarious ecosystem of English HE? It argues that trust is not a static virtue or managerial resource but a fragile, distributed, continually enacted moral ecology. In [Butler's \(2016\)](#) and [Lorey's \(2015\)](#) sense, precarity is both economic and existential: the shared vulnerability that underpins, yet also threatens, our capacity to rely on one another. In contemporary universities, that vulnerability is structured by short-term contracts, competitive metrics, and policy volatility, rendering trust structurally brittle, simultaneously indispensable and endangered. Precarity is not merely a social descriptor but an ethical condition. As [Standing \(2011\)](#) observes, insecurity alters how people work and imagine the future, cultivating a sense of conditional belonging. For academic staff, this manifests in casualized employment and intensifying audit regimes; for students, in financial precarity, commuter isolation, and consumer expectations of 'value for money'. The result is a landscape in which the moral risks of speaking openly, disclosing vulnerability, or challenging injustice are heightened for everyone involved. When the possibility of betrayal feels built into institutional life, trust cannot be assumed; it must be cultivated.

The vignettes used throughout this article are not empirical data in a positivist sense but phenomenological illustrations drawn from recognizable academic practice. Their purpose is philosophical rather than evidential: they disclose the moral texture of trust as lived experience. Following a phenomenological style of argumentation, the examples function as reflective provocations through which the article examines conceptual claims about trust. The article develops theory through interpretive illumination rather than inductive generalization. The argument proceeds from the view that trust is always relational and context-bound. [Baier \(1986\)](#) conceives trust as a moral stance of accepted vulnerability: to trust is to rely on another's goodwill while acknowledging the possibility of harm. [O'Neill \(2002\)](#) extends this insight to institutions, arguing that trust depends on institutions demonstrating trustworthiness rather than simply calling for greater trust.¹ [Fricker \(2007\)](#) shifts the lens to epistemic justice: trust is distributed unevenly through systems of credibility that privilege some voices over others. These perspectives suggest that trust, far from an abstract ideal, is an embodied ethical practice shaped by power, recognition, and discourse. This discussion focuses on the English sector within UK HE; its dynamics of marketization, audit, and precarious employment have broader resonance across the UK and beyond.

However, in HE research, these dimensions are often treated separately: ethical, procedural, and epistemic. Drawing on [Foucault's \(1977\)](#) analysis of disciplinary power, this fragmentation reflects how institutional practices organize and regulate knowledge, authority, and conduct.

The article develops this argument through an ecological framework that understands relational, institutional, and systemic forms of trust as interdependent. Fractures at one level, such as a student's loss of confidence in the fairness of assessment, reverberate through the institutional and public layers, eroding the legitimacy on which universities depend. Conversely, credible macro-level policy and moral care can stabilize trust locally. The argument unfolds in three stages. First, it situates trust within contemporary philosophical debates and explains how theories of recognition ([Honneth 1995](#); [Fraser 2003](#)), power and reflexivity ([Foucault 1977](#); [Archer 2007](#)), and world-centred education ([Biesta 2022](#)) can be integrated into a coherent framework. Second, it develops the relational, institutional, and systemic ecology using vignettes drawn from English HE practice to illustrate how trust is enacted and endangered. Third, it advances a reparative account of trust as ethical praxis, proposing that trustworthiness must be performed collectively through recognition, fairness, and reflexive care.

¹ See also [O'Neill \(2014\)](#) for her later discussion of how forms of accountability can support rather than supersede trust.

By reframing trust as ecological, this article contributes to an emerging philosophical conversation that resists managerial reduction and restores trust to its moral and political significance. In conditions of precarity, the university becomes a testing ground for how societies negotiate vulnerability, whether through control and audit or renewed commitments to ethical interdependence. Work in the *Journal of Philosophy of Education* has foregrounded the relationship between trust, legitimacy, and university governance (Carson 2020). Building on this work, this article develops a distinctive ecological account of trust that links individual ethics to institutional and systemic precarity, addressing the *Journal of Philosophy of Education*'s broader concern with how moral concepts take institutional form under neoliberal conditions. Taken together, these concerns point to the need for a philosophical account that can hold relational, institutional, and systemic dimensions in view at once. The argument proceeds systematically: it first develops the philosophical foundations of trust, then explores how trust operates within relational, institutional, and systemic contexts. A later section presents an integrative case to illustrate how these levels interact, and concludes with a discussion of trust as ethical praxis and its wider implications for HE.

Theoretical framework: interdependence and precarious agency

To clarify the philosophical stakes of trust, I draw on eight thinkers whose work, though distinct, converge on the theme of moral interdependence. To think philosophically about trust within HE is to acknowledge, as Ball (2012) argues, that trust unfolds within conditions shaped by performativity and continual demands for accountability. In such environments, relational care and intellectual risk become liabilities rather than virtues. The moral vocabulary of trust, care, goodwill, and recognition sits uneasily alongside the instrumental language of metrics and accountability. Yet in these conditions of performativity and precarity, trust acquires heightened philosophical importance. It has become not a luxury but a moral infrastructure that allows education to continue.

Baier (1986) defines trust as a moral stance of accepted vulnerability: to trust is to rely on another's goodwill while recognizing the possibility of betrayal. This conception grounds trust in relational ethics rather than contractual guarantees. In HE, every interaction between student and lecturer embodies moral risk; speaking, submitting work, or confiding in difficulty presumes that the other will act in good faith. Baier's account foregrounds the asymmetry inherent in educational relations and reminds us that trust is not neutral but exercised within hierarchies of authority and knowledge.

O'Neill (2002) extends Baier's insight into the institutional sphere. O'Neill argues that trust cannot be secured simply by increasing audit, regulation, or compliance; it depends on institutions demonstrating trustworthiness through their practices. For O'Neill, institutions demonstrate trustworthiness through reliable practices, proportionate accountability, and openness about their purposes and actions. In universities, governance structures, safeguarding systems, and quality assurance mechanisms should cultivate rather than corrode the moral climate of trust. O'Neill provides the institutional spine of the ecological model developed here.

Fricker's (2007) theory of epistemic injustice adds a critical dimension. She demonstrates that trust operates through social credibility: whose words are believed, whose testimony counts, and whose knowledge is dismissed. In the classroom or committee room, epistemic injustice occurs when prejudice deflates a speaker's credibility. Drawing on Medina's (2013) account of epistemic injustice, such practices can also produce forms of *epistemic silencing* by limiting whose knowledge is heard, recognized, and taken seriously. Fricker's work situates trust within the politics of recognition: to trust is to confer epistemic respect. Her framework shows how structural inequalities—race, class, gender, or contract status—distort the moral ecology of trust in HE.

Honneth's (1995) *Struggle for Recognition* and Fraser's (2003) theory of justice as recognition and redistribution provide scaffolding for understanding why trust is sustainable only where recognition circulates. For Honneth, social cooperation depends on mutual affirmation of worth; trust is sustained only where individuals experience recognition and regard. Fraser extends this to institutional design, arguing that recognition without redistribution produces performative equality:

symbolic inclusion without material fairness. Trust in universities thus requires both moral and structural justice, the acknowledgement of dignity, and the fair distribution of resources and opportunities. The ecology of trust proposed here holds these together as moral and material preconditions for credible relationships.

Foucault's (1977) analysis of disciplinary power introduces a necessary caution. He shows that modern institutions sustain themselves by orchestrating visibility: observed, measured, and rendered accountable. Within universities, this surveillance manifests through metrics, student evaluations, and data dashboards that make performance endlessly legible. Trust becomes displaced by monitoring. However, Foucault also implies that resistance is possible through counter-conducts: local practices that reintroduce care, discretion, and ethical judgement into bureaucratized systems. This reading offers an ecological understanding of trust that is not naïve: power circulates across all levels of the ecology, shaping what can be said, known, and believed.

Archer (2007) offers a bridge between structure and agency through her theory of reflexivity. Individuals, she argues, are not passive recipients of structural constraint but engage in internal conversations that mediate between personal concerns and social contexts. In precarious academia, reflexivity becomes a moral practice: lecturers deliberate on maintaining integrity within metrics, acting justly towards students, and balancing care with compliance. Archer's contribution anchors the ecological model in human agency, the capacity to sustain trust despite systemic pressures.

Finally, Biesta (2022) reframes education as world centred rather than child centred or curriculum centred. His notion of world-centred education repositions trust as an orientation towards the unpredictable other and the shared world of meaning. To educate is to embrace the beautiful risk of education (Biesta 2013), recognizing that educational encounters cannot be fully controlled or predetermined. Within a trust ecology, Biesta's thought represents the macro or systemic horizon: education as a public, relational enterprise whose legitimacy depends on openness rather than certainty. If Baier and Fricker illuminate trust's moral and epistemic dimensions, Biesta shows its ontological one: trust as openness to what exceeds the self and institution.

Together, these eight thinkers form the philosophical constellation underpinning the ecological framework. Baier provides the moral core: trust as vulnerability and goodwill. O'Neill supplies the institutional ethic of trustworthiness. Fricker, Honneth, and Fraser articulate the conditions of recognition and justice that make trust equitable. Foucault reveals the power relations that distort those conditions, while Archer and Biesta recover the possibilities of agency and openness. Their combined insights justify an ecological synthesis: trust cannot be confined to personal virtue or policy compliance but must be understood as a web of moral, epistemic, and structural interdependencies. Without supportive institutional and systemic conditions, trust devolves into mere reliance or procedural obedience; when those conditions align, trust becomes a generative ethical resource that sustains learning, belonging, and legitimacy in precarious times.

The argument proceeds as follows: I develop the philosophical premises, then apply them to relational, institutional, and systemic contexts, integrate these through a practical case, and conclude with ethical praxis and implications.

The ecology of trust

Relational trust: moral recognition and the 'little moments'

Relational trust arises through the minute, often unnoticed, exchanges that make teaching and learning possible. It is grounded in goodwill (Baier 1986) and the ethic of care (Noddings 2013), a disposition to respond attentively to another's vulnerability. In massified universities, where students and staff alike navigate bureaucratic systems and performance pressures, these 'little moments' matter particularly because student outcomes remain uneven across social groups (Mountford-Zimdars et al. 2015). They remind us that education is not merely transactional but also a moral work.

assumptions guide our processes? Whose voices are missing? Reflexivity encourages administration to become ethical deliberation rather than mere procedural decision-making. Without it, policy remains procedural rather than moral. Institutional trust also depends on recognition and redistribution. [Honneth \(1995\)](#) reminds us that solidarity requires material acknowledgement of worth. If emotional and pastoral labour continues to be feminized and under-rewarded, universities enact symbolic recognition without redistribution, as [Fraser \(2003\)](#) identifies: performative equality. This undermines institutional trust from within: members see care celebrated rhetorically but unsupported materially. Repairing institutional trust therefore demands moral courage. It involves acknowledging harm, addressing inequity, and protecting the spaces in which relational ethics can operate. When universities communicate decisions transparently, respond promptly to disclosures, and value the labour of care, they not only fulfil procedural duties but reconstitute the moral legitimacy on which their authority depends. In the ecology of HE, institutional trust mediates between micro-level goodwill and macro-level legitimacy. It translates moral intention into structural reality.

Systemic trust: policy, public legitimacy, and precarity

Systemic trust extends beyond institutional boundaries to the broader architecture of policy, funding, and public legitimacy. It represents the ecology's macro level, where universities interact with governments, the media, and society. In the UK, this layer has become increasingly unstable. Policy volatility, the marketization of student choice, and the bureaucratic choreography of the TEF have recast HE as a competitive marketplace rather than a civic good. A national policy ties teaching grants to TEF-derived performance metrics. These shifts alter not only how universities are governed but how they are trusted. At the systemic level, trust operates as a public covenant: the belief that universities serve interests beyond private gain, act as custodians of knowledge, and contribute to social justice. When that covenant erodes, the academy's moral authority does, too. [Biesta \(2022\)](#) argues that education is legitimate when it remains world centred, oriented towards the shared world rather than inward institutional survival. Within a marketized HE system, this orientation is threatened by processes of economization described by [Ball \(2012\)](#), in which relationships are increasingly evaluated through efficiency metrics and performance indicators rather than educational legitimacy.

This becomes apparent when funding reductions lead universities to increase class sizes and discontinue pastoral support; staff and students experience this financial adjustment as an ethical withdrawal, showing how systemic precarity becomes lived distrust. Systemic precarity is therefore experienced phenomenologically as distrust. [Biesta's \(2013\)](#) concept of the beautiful risk of education provides a way to interpret this. Trust, at its most profound, involves openness to the unpredictable encounter between learner and world. Systemic policy regimes that suppress uncertainty through performativity or algorithmic predictability undermine the conditions that make educational trust possible. They demand assurance where only openness can sustain meaning. A world-centred perspective would instead frame policy as stewardship of shared vulnerability, recognizing that education's value lies precisely in its unpredictability and relational depth.

Systemic trust, therefore, demands a public language that reconnects universities with society's moral imagination. When government rhetoric frames students as consumers, academics as service providers, and universities as economic engines, trust discourse gives way to contractual compliance. Restoring systemic trust requires universities to articulate and embody alternative narratives: those of recognition, care, and social responsibility. This may involve participatory governance, community partnerships, and transparent communication about values rather than mere outcomes. [Foucault's \(1977\)](#) analysis of power helps diagnose why systemic distrust becomes endemic: power operates most effectively when diffused through neutral procedures. Funding metrics and league tables present themselves as objective but function to normalize competition and dependency. [Lorey's \(2015\)](#) analysis of precarization offers a useful way to understand this dynamic: insecurity becomes a mode of governance that keeps institutions anxious and compliant. Within

such a regime, trust must be reimagined not as faith in authority but as solidarity across vulnerability: a shared commitment to sustaining education's public purpose despite its fragility. Archer's reflexivity remains relevant, but at this macro scale it is collective rather than individual. Sector leaders, policy bodies, and professional associations engage in moral reflexivity when they ask: what kind of university system are we creating? Whose futures does it serve? Collective reflexivity enables institutions to move beyond a survival logic towards a deliberative ethic of trustworthiness, in which accountability is oriented towards the common good rather than short-term metrics.

Systemic trust is thus the most abstract and consequential dimension of the ecology. It determines the moral horizon within which relational and institutional mechanisms for trust formation are possible. When policy frames HE as civic investment, institutional cultures can cultivate care; when it frames it as a commodity, even the most ethical individuals labour under suspicion. The ecology's vitality depends on whether systemic narratives amplify or erode the moral work occurring below.

Comparative ecologies of higher education

This analysis contributes to scholarship that re-examines ecology as a philosophical lens for HE. [Barnett's \(2018\)](#) account of *the ecological university* and [Wright's \(2016\)](#) analysis of universities in the knowledge economy emphasize interdependence and adaptability. In contrast, the ecological model developed here centres trust as the connective tissue of educational ecosystems, foregrounding vulnerability, recognition, and moral labour rather than harmony. The ecological metaphor has become pervasive in educational philosophy, but its meanings vary. [Barnett's \(2018\)](#) ecological university presents HE as interconnected with several fragile ecosystems. [Wright \(2016\)](#) analyses universities as embedded in social relationships rather than solely as drivers of a knowledge economy. [Schildermans \(2021\)](#) develops an ecology of study that extends beyond institutional enclosure and foregrounds collective enquiry. These accounts connect the material, cognitive, and ethical dimensions of HE.

The framework advanced here diverges from these accounts in two key respects. First, it centres trust rather than knowledge as the connective tissue of the educational ecosystem. Where Barnett and Wright focus on the interdependence of ideas and actors, a trust ecology foregrounds the moral conditions that enable that interdependence. Without moral recognition, epistemic fairness, and credible institutions, knowledge exchange becomes extraction rather than dialogue.

Second, the trust ecology explicitly incorporates precarity and asymmetry. Most ecological metaphors in HE imply harmony or balance, yet the contemporary university is characterized by disequilibrium. Precarity is not an external disturbance but a constitutive feature: the tension that keeps the ecology alive. Trust does not unify the system but keeps it precariously open, a living network sustained through moral labour rather than structural stability. This reframing acknowledges that risk and fragility are not failures of trust but its medium. By integrating philosophical and sociological insights, trust ecology bridges normative and descriptive accounts of the university. It views trust as both an ethical commitment and a material condition, linking micro acts of care with macro politics of legitimacy.

Integrative case: the ripple of distrust

This section traces a plausible UK scenario in which a single policy shift triggers a cascade of moral consequences to illustrate how the three levels of trust—relational, institutional, and systemic—interact. The case is synthetic but grounded in patterns familiar across the sector. It reveals how ecological fragility manifests: when systemic precarity intensifies, institutional defensiveness grows, and the everyday relations of care that sustain learning begin to fracture.

Systemic shock

The TEF assesses student experience and student outcomes using provider and student submissions alongside benchmarked indicators drawn from national datasets ([Office for Students 2023](#)). Its

public ratings influence institutional reputation, inform student choice, and may affect provider fee limits. The scheme is intended to encourage providers to improve teaching, learning, and student outcomes. In practice, the reform recalibrates trust at the macro level. Public legitimacy becomes quantified; universities are rewarded for *appearing* trustworthy rather than for *being* trustworthy. As Ball (2012) notes, performativity regimes replace moral intention with measurement: credibility becomes performance. Drawing on Lorey's (2015) analysis of precarization, this policy creates conditions in which insecurity becomes a mode of governance. Anxious about reputational consequences, universities redirect resources towards metric management. In doing so, they unintentionally erode the trust they hope to evidence. The ecology begins to tilt: systemic volatility destabilizes institutional ethics.

Institutional response

Senior management announces 'efficiency reforms' to meet the new criteria at a mid-sized university. Staff development budgets are frozen, pastoral hours are reduced, and student complaint handling is centralized in a digital portal. The streamlining rhetoric masks a deeper shift from moral to procedural reasoning. O'Neill's (2002) critique of excessive audit and transparency offers a useful lens for understanding this dynamic: documentation begins to substitute for dialogue. This dynamic is evident when standardized feedback templates are introduced to ensure consistency: trust becomes equated with predictability rather than intelligibility, and judgement is displaced by compliance. The institution seeks reliability through uniformity, yet the effect is the opposite: it displaces moral judgement with compliance. The episode clarifies the philosophical distinction between procedural assurance and trustworthiness: one standardizes communication, the other makes reasons intelligible.

Relational consequences

At the micro level, lecturers cancel one-to-one tutorials to meet administrative deadlines. Automated emails replace personalized replies; the warmth of dialogue gives way to formulaic reassurance. Students sense the shift immediately. For commuter and first-generation students already negotiating marginality, these lost encounters feel like a withdrawal of care. For commuter students, a significant group within post-1992 English universities, these 'little moments' of recognition become acts of quiet resistance. This is clear when a student seeking clarification receives only an automated response: the dialogue closes, and the student's epistemic agency is denied, exemplifying *testimonial injustice* (Fricker 2007). As Archer (2007) observes, reflexive deliberation now concerns survival: how can I care without penalty? The ecology's energy turns inward, consumed by defensive self-talk.

Collapse and repair

The moral ecology of trust collapses sequentially: systemic volatility reframes trust as a metric; institutional defensiveness allows procedures to displace judgement; and relational erosion makes care unviable labour. This chain illustrates that precarity is not merely an external pressure but an internal logic that reproduces distrust. Each level amplifies the next until the system circulates suspicion rather than confidence. Nevertheless, even within collapse, seeds of repair appear. When an academic representative raises concerns, a dean convenes an open forum. Staff share stories of lost connection; students describe feeling unseen. The meeting leads to the pilot of small-group feedback circles, co-designed by tutors and students outside the metric timetable. These sessions re-establish conversation. The initiative accrues no immediate policy credit but rebuilds relational trust and gradually influences institutional practice. Management later cites the pilot as evidence of 'engagement', ironically fulfilling the policy's intent through human rather than procedural means.

This episode demonstrates that trust repair cannot be delegated to individuals alone; it requires alignment between ethical commitments, institutional cultures, and systemic conditions. Baier's (1986) moral stance, O'Neill's (2002) institutional trustworthiness, and Biesta's (2022) world-

centred openness converge here: education recovers legitimacy when it acknowledges shared vulnerability rather than denying it. The dean's forum exemplifies education as a public, relational practice in which trust is sustained through collective moral dialogue rather than compliance.

Interpreting the ripple

The 'ripple' metaphor underscores that trust is not additive but relationally contagious. When policy enacts distrust, its effects radiate through organizational life, shaping emotions, time, and identity. Conversely, the ecology rebalances when even small moral gestures occur, such as listening forums and collaborative feedback. The ripple of distrust thus becomes a potential ripple of restoration. For HE philosophy, this integrative case demonstrates the analytical value of ecological thinking. It shows that ethical life within universities cannot be parsed into discrete domains of policy, management, and pedagogy. Each level refracts the others, and moral failure at one level reverberates throughout the others. Repair is not an act of return to order but an ongoing process of moral recalibration.

Reclaiming trust as ethical praxis

Trust is both fragile and reparative. [Baier's \(1986\)](#) relational account shows how trust creates the ethical conditions that make vulnerability and cooperation possible. In HE, that moral climate has thinned under managerialism and constant evaluation. Reclaiming trust means redefining education as a moral, not transactional, enterprise and recognizing that intellectual life depends on ethical relations. The aim is not to restore a nostalgic collegial past but to cultivate trustworthiness as a daily institutional practice amid precarity. [Carter \(2022\)](#) describes trust as performative: it is assessed through the norms governing successful, competent, and apt performance. [Faulkner and Simpson's \(2017\)](#) edited collection explores the broader philosophical significance of trust. This performativity distinguishes trust from faith or optimism; it is sustained not by declarations but by observable conduct. Within universities, such conduct includes fair assessment procedures, transparent decision-making, and genuine care for staff well-being. Each act, however small, signals that moral responsibility outweighs procedural convenience. When repeated, these acts accumulate into what Baier might call an ethical atmosphere, a background sense that good faith remains possible. Trustworthiness must be enacted institutionally rather than asserted rhetorically. [O'Neill's \(2002\)](#) argument that institutions earn trust by demonstrating trustworthiness is pivotal here. Institutions build credibility not by demonstrating compliance but by acting in ways that merit confidence. In practice, this means proportional accountability oversight that clarifies purpose without paralysing discretion. A university that communicates reasons for decisions, listens to dissent, and admits error performs trustworthiness far more effectively than one that issues polished values statements. Such openness re-embeds governance within [Archer's \(2007\)](#) account of reflexive deliberation, in which individuals and institutions, understood as collective actors, reflect on whether their actions align with their moral commitments. At the relational level, reclaiming trust involves revaluing pedagogical gestures often dismissed as emotional labour, such as knowing students' names, offering formative feedback, or making time for informal dialogue. These are not peripheral niceties but expressions of epistemic respect. As [Fricker \(2007\)](#) shows, *epistemic injustice* occurs when prejudice withholds credibility; conversely, everyday acts of listening redistribute credibility more justly. When tutors treat students as knowers capable of insight, they repair not only individual confidence but the *moral ecology* of the classroom. Recognition operates simultaneously as pedagogy and ethics.

At the institutional level, [Honneth's \(1995\)](#) notion of recognition, as the foundation of self-realization, underscores that organizational structures must affirm members' contributions in both material and symbolic ways. Where workload models disregard mentoring and pastoral support, mis-recognition occurs: labour essential to trust is rendered invisible. [Fraser's \(2003\)](#) extension of recognition to redistribution sharpens the point that justice demands that the moral work of care receive both esteem and resources. Therefore, policies addressing equality, diversity, and well-

being function not merely as human resources instruments but as vehicles of moral repair. They signal that trust is valued as collective infrastructure rather than as a discretionary act of kindness.

At the systemic level, [Biesta's \(2022\)](#) concept of world-centred education offers a horizon for reclaiming trust as a civic virtue. To educate is to accept the beautiful risk of encounter, stepping into a world shared with unpredictable others ([Biesta 2013](#)). The vocabulary of resilience can individualize responsibility for distress, turning attention away from the structural and collective conditions of the neoliberal university ([Gill and Donaghue 2016](#)). Systemic trust requires that universities articulate their public role in terms of relational responsibility rather than economic utility. When institutional leaders speak publicly about learning as a moral practice, acknowledging uncertainty, dependence, and care, they counter the discourse of market assurance with one of ethical openness. This reframing invites society to trust universities not as service providers but as stewards of vulnerability and dialogue.

Reflexivity threads through all three levels as the method of ethical praxis. For Archer, reflexivity enables agents to mediate between structural constraint and personal concern. Applied collectively, it invites institutions to interrogate their own complicity in distrust: how do our procedures silence or sustain moral agency? Reflexivity turns compliance meetings into moral deliberations, reframing managerial rationality as ethical conversation. When leaders model such self-questioning, they legitimize it for others, transforming cultures of fear into cultures of enquiry. Reclaiming trust also demands attention to language. The vocabulary of resilience, often celebrated in policy, individualizes responsibility and obscures systemic precarity. By contrast, the language of trust foregrounds interdependence: it acknowledges that safety and integrity are co-produced. To speak of trust is to speak of shared risk, mutual recognition, and temporal patience, qualities that resist commodification. This shift in discourse reorients education as a moral and public practice, reflecting [Biesta's \(2022\)](#) understanding of educational purpose.

Crucially, this praxis is not sentimental. Trust is not naïvely restorative but, as Baier and Foucault suggest, inherently agonistic: it requires courage to expose the institution to critique and the self to uncertainty. The moral labour of trusting colleagues, students, and leadership is sustained as much by vigilance as by generosity. What distinguishes ethical from naïve trust is precisely this reflexive awareness of power. Foucault's account of counter-conduct reminds us that trust sometimes manifests as principled disobedience: refusing to reproduce systems that corrode integrity. In precarious contexts, such dissent is an act of care for the institution's moral core. The praxis of trust operates across temporal and structural dimensions. Individual gestures matter in the moment, but trust's restoration requires endurance. Institutions must demonstrate consistency over time: repairing harm, maintaining fairness, and admitting when they fall short. Over time, these patterns create moral reliability, the slow rebuilding of expectations that promises will be kept. This temporal dimension is often neglected in discussions of organizational culture, yet it is vital to ecological health; ecosystems regenerate only through sustained equilibrium, not episodic repair. To reclaim trust, then, is to engage in disciplined, world-centred labour of recognition. It involves trusting others to exist meaningfully in a shared, precarious world and acting in ways that make that trust credible. This labour is ethical rather than affective: guided by principles of fairness, transparency, and recognition, and enacted through governance and pedagogy. When universities embody these principles, they become sites of knowledge production and moral imagination, spaces where vulnerability is held collectively rather than weaponized. Trust is education's condition of possibility. Without it, enquiry collapses into compliance; with it, learning becomes the practice of freedom. Attention to discourse is ethical: language shapes what we can trust, and whom we can trust.

Conclusion: what it means to trust and be trustworthy

To trust in precarious HE is to inhabit vulnerability with moral courage. It requires accepting [Biesta's \(2013\)](#) conception of the beautiful risk of education: the unpredictable encounter with others and the world, while holding institutions accountable for sustaining that risk ethically.

Trust cannot be legislated, audited, or demanded; it must be continually enacted through moral and institutional practice. Within a precarious ecology, this enactment becomes both an ethical challenge and a condition of survival. The argument developed here has reframed trust as an ecological phenomenon spanning three interlocking levels: relational, institutional, and systemic. Each level is distinct yet interdependent, and all are conditioned by precarity. The ecology functions like a living system: if one layer deteriorates, the others weaken. Therefore, trust breaches cannot be repaired piecemeal; they require ecological, moral, procedural, and political alignment. Although framed through the English HE sector, the argument illuminates how similar conditions of managed precarity shape trust ecologies across global HE systems.

At the relational level, trust is enacted through micro-level gestures of recognition that dignify learning. These 'little moments', remembering a name, writing a compassionate email, and listening without defensiveness, carry moral significance disproportionate to their scale. They embody Baier's (1986) insight that trust involves accepted vulnerability and Fricker's (2007) insistence that epistemic fairness underpins intellectual community. Relational trust is not sentimental; it is ethical attention in practice.

At the institutional level, fairness, responsiveness, and moral clarity in governance sustain trust. Institutions demonstrate trustworthiness through rigorous procedures, transparent reasoning, reflexive listening, and the courage to acknowledge error. O'Neill's (2002) argument that accountability must be proportionate to its purpose is crucial: transparency without moral substance can undermine confidence, whereas openness that supports trustworthiness can cultivate genuine confidence. Institutional trust thus bridges ethics and administration, translating moral intention into collective reliability.

At the systemic level, trust depends on coherent policy and public narratives that treat universities as civic goods rather than market commodities. Biesta's (2022) world-centred education offers the necessary horizon: HE serves democracy not by producing compliant workers but by sustaining shared spaces of thought, critique, and care. When policy frames education as an investment in collective flourishing rather than an individual return, it creates conditions for trust to circulate. Without such framing, even the most virtuous institutions labour within distrust's gravitational pull.

Across all levels, ecology reveals that trust is simultaneously moral, epistemic, and political. Morally, it expresses recognition of others as subjects of worth. Epistemically, it enables the exchange of knowledge through credibility and dialogue. Politically, it underwrites education's legitimacy as a public institution. To regard trust as a surplus virtue, a desirable but optional good, is to misunderstand its constitutive role. Trust is fundamental to education's ethical and public purposes. Reclaiming trust requires recognizing shared precarity, embedding reflexive ethics within institutional life, and reaffirming education as a relational commitment to the world. Together, these commitments position trust not as an optional virtue but as the ethical condition through which HE fulfils its public purpose. In this sense, trust is not ancillary to HE but constitutive of its ethical purpose. Following Biesta (2022), trust calls universities to look outward: to engage with the public sphere as institutions committed to the shared world rather than merely as service providers. This world-centred orientation situates education within a *moral ecology* that transcends market logic. Across this ecology, education's legitimacy depends less on compliance than on cultivating moral imagination, the capacity to envision shared futures despite uncertainty.

To trust is to act with care amid uncertainty; to be trustworthy is to make that care credible through sustained, transparent, and just practice. In precarious times, trust becomes the medium and the measure of HE's integrity. Its repair is not a managerial project but an ethical vocation, a collective promise that learning will remain a space where vulnerability is held rather than exploited. When universities honour that promise, they restore confidence and reimagine themselves as moral communities capable of contributing to the wider world's renewal. Trust, in this sense, is the quiet but indispensable condition of HE's legitimacy and hope. To trust and be trustworthy, then, is to participate consciously in repairing this moral ecology to act, teach, and lead as if education itself were an act of care.

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