

# Making Sense of Legitimacy Across Universities: Ecocritical Ontological Perspective

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**Abstract:** This paper reflects on research methodological considerations of how legitimacy of publicly funded universities occurs. From an ecocritical ontological perspective the paper uses a metaphor and sense-making techniques to shed light into effective modalities universities use to connect with local economies. The Milky way Galactic ecosystem metaphor is used not only to make sense of the ecocritical ontological stance taken to make sense of legitimacy but is used as a metaphor to make sense of the findings. The paper asserts that the legitimacy theoretical lens is particularly appropriate to probe universities' legitimacy and connectedness to the local communities they are embedded in. The rationale behind this assertion is that legitimacy is only conferred to the extent the actions of an entity are perceived as desirable, efficient, proper, or appropriate by the ecosystem stakeholders. The theory is thus useful for examining connectedness of publicly funded universities to its local community. The paper argues that the university system that is delinked from local economic development is like a Milky way Galaxy delinked from its Galactic ecosystem. Against this backdrop, the paper juxtaposes Mondragon University, located in a rural part of Northern Spain with two South African universities embedded in poverty stricken rural South Africa. Mondragon University is presented as a hallmark of success when it comes to local community legitimacy. The paper is centered around the following question: (1) how does university legitimacy yield impactful local community outcomes? Using the Milky way Galaxy metaphor, the findings show a considerable variety in local community connectedness depending on bureaucratic arrangements of the universities. The findings also showed that alternative income sources, outside the public purse, just like the gravitational force in the galactic ecosystem, is the key force that determines legitimacy in a university setting. The paper contributes to business research methods by fusing metaphorical as well as sense-making research techniques to bring to sharp focus permeability of the university space to enable local economic development.

**Keywords:** Ecocritical ontology, Sense-making methodology, Legitimacy theory, University ecosystem, University governance, Mondragon University

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## 1. Background

This paper explores how metaphors can be used to make sense of theoretical concepts using a case study methodology. The legitimacy theoretical concept is thus critiqued to make sense of how universities are linked to local economic development. Legitimacy as Suddaby, Bitektine, and Haack, 2017 explain is conferred to the extent an entity is perceived as desirable, efficient, proper, or appropriate. The paper uses the Milky way Galactic ecosystem with its known and unknown components as a metaphorical device to conceptualise legitimacy in a university setting. The paper argues that the higher education system that is delinked from local economic development is like a Milky way Galaxy delinked from its Galactic Ecosystem.

## 2. Problem Statement and THE RESEARCH Question

There is a crisis of legitimacy in the university sector in South Africa that is characterised by the centrality of students from the working class and poor households who require university education funding which has been diminishing over time. Students from the working class and poor households are not only the majority in South Africa; they are also the majority social actors that confer legitimacy, by virtue of their presence or absence in the university space. The paper is centered around the following question: (1) how does university legitimacy yield impactful local community outcomes?

## 3. Research Design

Sense-making is a methodological approach that focuses on understanding three scenarios: (1) what is the issue and the situation related to that issue? (2) What is the envisaged outcome, if the issue is resolved; and (3) what is the gap or what are contradictions/paradoxes that need to be resolved in order to yield the desired outcome. Sense-making data can be sourced from secondary sources, secondary case study data, or case study augmented with primary data or from primary sources including observations, interviews or surveys. For the study reported in this paper three case study universities were used: (1) Mondragon University; (2) University of Limpopo and (3) University of Fort Hare.

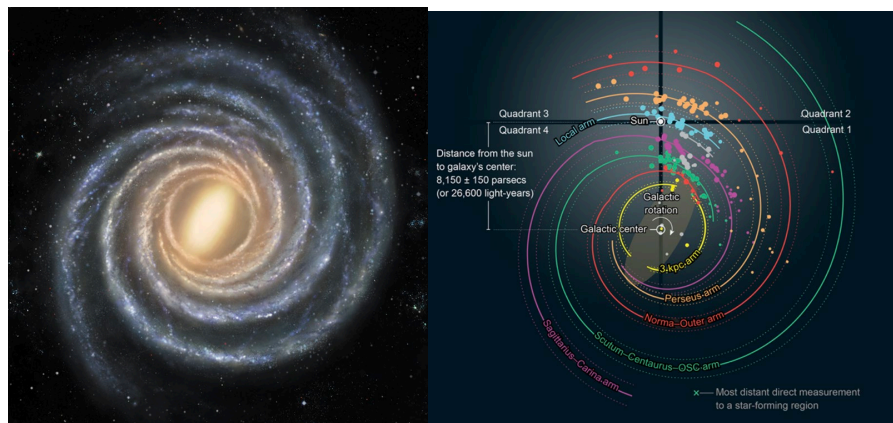
The rest of the paper is structured as follows: The next section describes the ecocritical ontological stance taken to understand how legitimacy is gained. The Milky Way Galaxy metaphor is used to make sense of the ontological

position taken to present arguments in this paper. This is followed by a section that makes sense of the South African university legitimacy crisis using the sense-making methodological approach. Thereafter, Mondragon University is presented as a barometer against which to measure legitimacy and connectedness of universities with to their local communities, on the basis that Mondragon is a U-Multiranked university for excellence in local and regional development. The last part of the paper closes the sense-making loop by discussing how the legitimacy paradox may be resolved by making sense of how it conceptualised as a resource or gravitational force that holds the university ecosystem together, borrowing from the Milky Way galaxy metaphor.

#### 4. Ecocritical Ontological Stance and the Milky Way Galaxy Metaphor

In order to address the question of how university legitimacy yields impactful local community outcomes, this paper takes an ecocritical ontological approach. As explained by Biloslavo, Bagnoli and Edgar (2017), the ecocritical analytical approach views the environment, nature and future generations as part of core elements of society. The same authors (Biloslavo et al, 2017) define society as the public, the partner, and the customer. Likewise, a university exists within a society, has external partners, and multiple stakeholders with internal customers (employees, the labour movement and students) and external customers (companies and organisations that purchase and consume the services of the university). The ecocritical approach takes a view that human beings are *“inextricably woven in the social and natural fabric of the world that shaped them”* (Bislavo et al: 750). The Milky Way Galaxy is a metaphor and image that expresses very clearly the inextricability of each star to the galactic center (see Figure 2). Astronomers (see for example Reid, Menten, Zheng et al. (2009) identify at least five structural features of the Milky Way Galaxy: (1) galactic center; (2) extended bulge of stars that is nearly spherical in shape around the galactic center; (3) the disk where most of the hot and young stars/planets are located (disk contain very large quantities of gas and dust ); (4) rotation forming spiral regions (arms) of active star formation – the stars bend the waves into spirals and stars pass through the waves as the orbit the Galaxy center; (5) dark matter as explained by astronomers (see Buzea, Agop, and Butler, 2020) is substance that neither reflects nor absorbs light, but seems to make up most of the mass-energy content of the Milky Way Galaxy. The most humbling definition of dark matter is offered by Bagdoo (2020): *“It has the particularity of emitting no radiation and interacting only by the action of gravity... More than 80 percent of the mass of the universe is invisible... it escapes the telescope...”*

These views about our universe offer a fresh insight on what research conversations can develop when looking at a university as a space and place that crisscrosses the public, local communities, industries, customers and nature beyond anthropocentric values, in ways that we do not always know and understand.



Source: Reid, M.J., Menten, K.M., Zheng, X.W., Brunthaler, A., Moscadelli, L., Xu, Y., Zhang, B., Sato, M., Honma, M., Hirota, T. and Hachisuka, K., 2009.

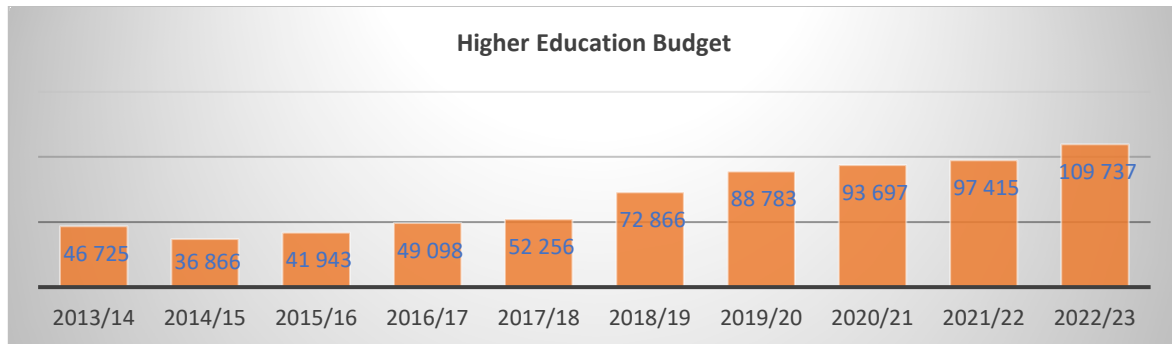
**Figure 2: The Milky Way Galaxy**

Back to the ontological position of the paper, Heise (2006) asks the following question to invoke an ecologically balanced way for humans and their institutions to co-exist with non-humans and nature: *“Is it possible to return to more ecologically attuned ways of inhabiting nature, and what would be the cultural prerequisite for such a change?”* Heise (2006) explains that the ecocritical approach seeks to think *“beyond conceptual dichotomies and the separation of subject and object, body and environment, nature and culture...”*. Heise emphasises the view that nature should not be seen as a resource, a commodity to be technologically manipulated and economically exploited as this empties the essence and the connectedness of humanity with the environment and nature.

From the foregoing discussion it can be observed that ecocritical ontology seeks to infuse multiple threads of diverse disciplines, diverse political and socio-cultural influences in ways that highlight interdependency of human, nonhuman, society, nature and the environment. Following on the same line of logic, the paper compares two traditional university case studies located in rural South Africa with Mondragon university, a Spanish university located in rural Spain to understand how legitimacy is conferred. But first let us try to understand the South African University context.

### 5. Legitimacy in South African Universities

Extant literature as useful as it is in understanding the higher education landscape, tends to focus on the transformation and pedagogical issues without bringing to sharp focus issues and expectations of the immediate local communities, especially those located in rural and peri-urban parts of the country, (see for example, Bovill, 2020; Chinyamurindi, 2023; Gallagher and Savage, 2023; Hlatshwayo, Shawa and Nxumalo, 2020; McKeveer, 2017; Moyo, 2023; Mzileni and Mkhize, 2020; Ntombela and Ntombela, 2022; Van Staden, Khaile, October, Human-Hendricks, and Roman, 2023).



Source: Developed by author from Department of Higher Education Annual Reports

Figure 3: South Africa’s Higher Education Budget 2013-2023

The legitimacy crisis symptoms are observable in the way universities in South Africa are funded and governed. Take for instance the governance and finance model of two case study universities located in rural Limpopo (University of Limpopo) and Eastern Cape (University of Fort Hare). Both University of Fort Hare and Limpopo are located in the Provinces that are characterised by high levels of poverty and high incidence of impoverished schools. Fort Hare university, based in the Eastern Cape, was established in 1916 by British settlers who at the time were on a colonial expansionist programme. The colonial programme required a knowledge base or a think-tank and an education system to grapple with the challenges of coloniality. The university has evolved from being the South African Native College to what is fondly known as KwaNokholeji. The university is the *alma mater* of illustrious personalities including the former president of South Africa – Nelson Mandela and other luminaries including Bishop Desmond Tutu, Robert Sobukwe, Robert Mugabe, Govan Mbeki, Mangosuthu Buthelezi and others who have impacted their nations including *Elius Mathu* and Charles Njonjo from Kenya (UFH, 2023). University of Limpopo on the other hand took a different persona to Fort Hare in its establishment in 1959 under the apartheid regime’s separate ethnically-based institutions of higher learning policy (University of Limpopo, 2024). The establishment of University of Limpopo, then known as the University of the North, is the hallmark of the Bantu Education Act that was promulgated in 1953. As explained by Mouton, Louw and Strydom (2013) Higher Education policy legitimacy was premised on meeting the needs of White minority.

Different restructuring processes from the time each of the case study university was established right through to a restructuring process that resulted in the Merger of universities with Technikons and creation of FET universities, created a phenomenon akin to the “dark matter” in the Milky Way galaxy. The effects of the merger to the local economy have not been measured. Whether the growing rate of unemployment over the past 20 years is spuriously related to the merger of universities or legitimately related is a matter that has not yet been tested. That notwithstanding, the restructuring process is evident in the similarities in the faculty governance model of the two case study universities where Council is the highest decision making authority. UFH and UL’s legitimacy while conferred by the government as the largest source of revenue to fund the universities, it seem to also focus on the power of the voice of either labour movement that represent staff as well as the student representative bodies. Figure 4 illustrates the revenue structure of the two universities; and shows that subsidy from government is the largest source of revenue.

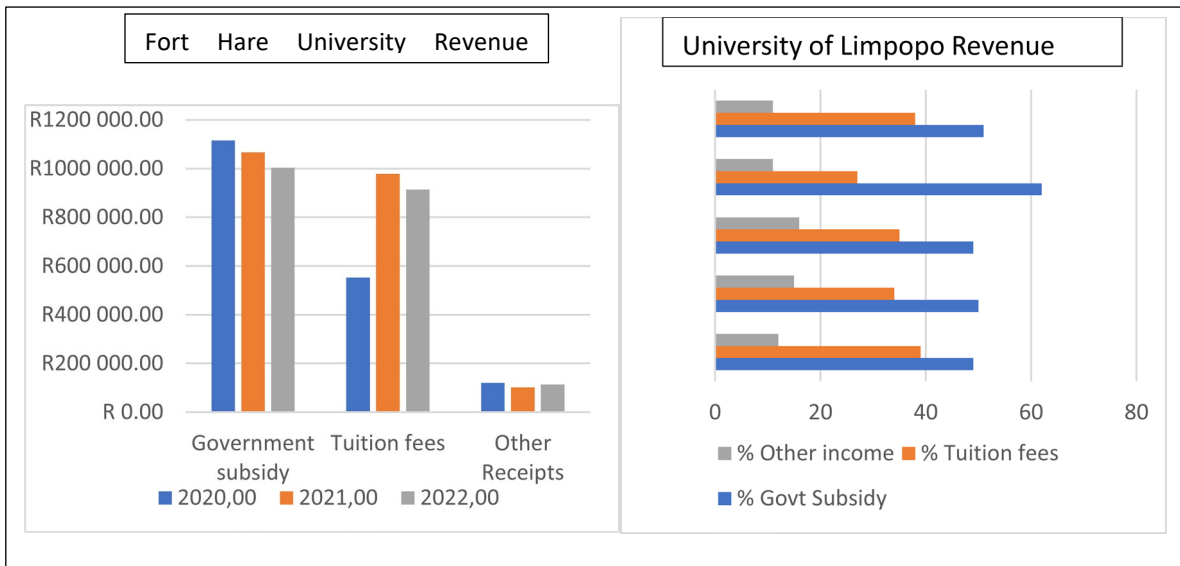


Figure 4: Revenue Structure of UL and Fort Hare

**5.1 Envisaged Outcome: Resolving Legitimacy Issues by Assigning Equal Power to all the University Stakeholders**

Students, communities they come from, employees, academic leaders and companies that sponsor students, the scientific community, media and the Higher Education Ministry would be categorized as powerful stakeholder groups that confer university legitimacy. That notwithstanding, students are at the centre stage of higher education institutions as part of input and output variables in the performance of universities. This work argues that flow of resources from universities to local communities is fluid and organic when there is no wall structurally and metaphorically that separates the university from society. Just like the Milky Way galaxy which consists of new and old stars students are categorised as first entering (new) and returning students in the university ecosystem. And just like the stars cannot be viewed outside the unknown dark matter and the gravitational fingerprints that keep the stars orbiting the Galactic centre, students cannot be viewed in isolation from society, from local communities and in isolation to institutions and organisations that sponsored their study. This interconnectedness is demonstrated in how the Mondragon university navigates its ecosystem with its governance and funding model, as explained below.

Mondragon University is a cooperative university located in a small town in the Gipuzkoa Province, Basque Country, in Spain (source). The university was established in 1997 as part of the Mondragon Corporation, one of the largest cooperatives in the world. The establishment of the Mondragon Co-op is traced back to the arrival of a young priest, Father José María Arizmendiariet, in Mondragon in 1941 who facilitated a collaboration and an alliance between the Catholic church, local businesspeople, local community and technology (Molina and Miguez, 2008). The university evolved from an apprentice school established by Jose Maria Arizmendiariet in 1943 to three educational cooperatives that merged to create Mondragon university. The university has four faculties: (1) Engineering established in 1943; (2) Business Studies established in 1960; (3) Humanities and Education established in 1976 Gastronomy established in 2011 (see Mondragon University, 2022). Each faculty is a different co-operative and an autonomous entity operating under the Mondragon Corporation.

There are two academic features that make Mondragon a unique local community anchored university. The first one is the university’s teaching and learning strategy. Mondragon university has built its reputation around the experiential learning approach which integrates cooperative work experience, real life global oriented projects, and internships into curriculum design and delivery. Not only are students integrated into the co-op world of work, but they are active co-op members who also gain industry experience and build professional network while studying at Mondragon. This approach enhances students’ employability when they complete formal education at the university.

The second academic feature that distinguishes Mondragon university is its research model which is oriented towards the business world through research transfer. As explained in the university’s annual report (Mondragon, 2022). U-Multirank qualified Mondragon university as the number one Spanish university in transfer of knowledge based on the following metrics: co-authorship with industry partners, research income

from private sources and external funding for research. (U-Multirank is a European ranking system whose basic aim is to provide transparency about the diversity of higher education institutions.) What makes the Mondragon research model highly rated is its alignment of technological capabilities of the university with the needs of the community, linking private research contracts to long-term collaborative research transfer programmes. The transfer programmes range from basic research to industrial research, experimental projects which lead to innovative products, processes and services (Mondragon, 2022).

A critical distinguishing factor to the success of the Mondragon ecosystem is how the funding model is structured. Unlike South African public universities, Mondragon’s largest source of funding as figure 5 illustrates is from tuition, followed by research and technical transfers and contracts.

Mondragon University

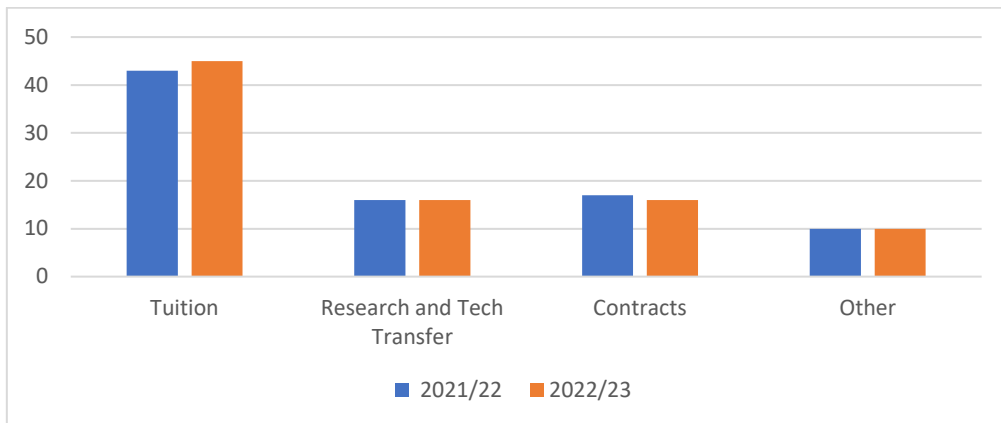


Figure 5: Mondragon University Revenue Structure

## 6. Theory Building: The Legitimacy Paradox to be Resolved to Yield the Desired Outcome

Legitimacy building is a proactive undertaking, that relies on managers’ advanced knowledge of their environment and strategies to succeed (see for example Deephouse and Suchman, 2008). Organisations that rely on public funds have a greater need for legitimacy because the funds that run universities are sourced from members of society and from the corporates and those employed via the tax system. As such public universities’ existence, continuity and growth rely largely on the continuous support of citizens (Tilling, 2004). Tilling (2004) provides a helpful approach in working with legitimacy. Tilling (2004) posits that legitimacy theory must examine how relevant stakeholders influence the flow of resources crucial to the organization’s establishment, growth and survival. In his work, Tilling (2004) identifies four important stakeholders: (1) government; (2) the public; (3) the financial community; and (4) media. According to Zhao and Yang (2013: 11), government legitimacy has been challenged on the basis that its legitimacy is the product of false consciousness (a way of thinking that prevents a person from perceiving the true nature of their social or economic situation). Weber (cited in Zhao and Yang, 2013, p. 12) identifies three types of legitimacy that are the basis of government power including “traditional legitimacy”, based on inherited power; “charismatic legitimacy” based on unique charismatic qualities of the head of government and “legal legitimacy” based on judicial principles that bind society.

While Tilling’s (2004) work identifies four important stakeholders, Reuf and Scott (1998) categorises stakeholders into two groups: external stakeholders and internal stakeholders. External stakeholders as pointed out by Reuf and Scott (1998) as accreditation bodies, funding agencies, intellectuals in society, professional bodies, business circles, public opinion and the media; while internal stakeholders include personnel, managers, specialists, and members of the board. Reuf and Scott (1998) argue that internal stakeholders influence the effect of the opinions of external stakeholders in their actions, attitudes, values and behaviours. In other words, legitimacy is co-created in a bidirectional process between internal and external stakeholders. Tilling (2004) points out that an entity may either be in a phase of establishing legitimacy, or maintaining, extending or defending it. These different phases have key stakeholders that hold sway when it comes to establishing, maintaining, or defending legitimacy. This opens up another way of working with the legitimacy construct: to explore the assumption that the resources that different stakeholder groups control will determine the degree to which each stakeholder group can heighten or diminish performance legitimacy.

The legitimacy framework adopted for this paper is provided by Suddaby, Bitektine and Haack (2017), which views legitimacy as a resource that pulls the ecosystem together. Borrowing from the Milky Way Galaxy

metaphor, legitimacy may be viewed as gravitational force that keeps the ecosystem orbiting around the galactic centre. And the galactic centre in the university space would be viewed as the collective energy, wisdom and knowledge located in individuals, academics, academic leaders, the university governance structure and in the funds that run the university.

**Table 3: Making Sense of Legitimacy utilising the Milky Galaxy Metaphor**

	Legitimacy as a Resource	Legitimacy: Milky Way Galaxy Metaphor
<b>What is legitimacy?</b>	A property  A capacity	A gravitational force at play facilitating the orbiting of the planets and the galaxy in spiral arms around the galactic centre
<b>Where does legitimacy occur?</b>	Inside and outside the university In known and unknown university spaces  Legitimacy occurs in the governance spaces such as College/Faculty Boards, Senate Council; in partnerships with local communities, industry partners and other collaborative organisations	Between and within planets/stars, halo, spiral arms, the disk; the dark matter and the known and unknown components of the Milky way galaxy  Inside and outside the Milky Way Galaxy
<b>How does legitimacy occur?</b>	Through “fit” between organisation attributes and external audience’s expectations  Through energy/ideas/solutions/resource exchange	Through energy exchanges, interactions and movements of stars, dust, spiral arms

Source: Adopted from Suddaby Bitektine and Haack (2017)

## 7. A Word on Trustworthiness

The use of metaphors in sense-making requires validity criteria of trustworthiness, credibility, and objective reflection of the research process followed which include (see Schimdt, 2005):

- Explication of one’s understanding of the metaphor used to make sense of the concept under research scrutiny. While not pretending to be an astrophysicist, I was able to illustrate how structurally the Milky way Galaxy can be likened to how and where a university may be legitimised by its principal stakeholders through different university interfaces. The metaphorical projects of the Milky Way Galaxy made in the paper to explain where and how legitimacy and connectedness with society may be achieved were comprehensively covered.
- Empirical Anchoring of concepts under scrutiny

The legitimacy concept was empirically anchored with the use of two South African universities located in rural South Africa that were juxtaposed with best practice in terms of governance and funding model in Mondragon University. The legitimacy concept was further anchored with the sense-making research technique that addressed three scenarios: (1) what is the issue and the situation related to that issue? (2) What is the envisaged outcome, if the issue is resolved; and (3) what is the gap or what are contradictions/paradoxes that need to be resolved in order to yield the desired outcome.

- Appropriately documented research methodology

Sense-making research technique, the ecocritical ontological stance and case study data related to governance and funding structure were adequately covered in the paper. As explained in the paper the methodological approach taken (sense-making using a metaphor) was done to not only to explicate the abstract legitimacy concept, but to make sense of the patterns of the legitimation emerging from the case study data.

## 8. Reflections and Conclusion

Just like the Milky Way Galaxy, the university space is a vast epistemic space that has known and unknown elements. It is a space that is ever evolving, in tandem with the evolving consciousness of the knowledge and truth seekers in the university ecosystem. In this paper, the Milky way Galactic ecosystem metaphor is fused with sense-making and the ecocritical worldview to probe into the legitimacy conferring modalities and connectedness of the university to its local economic ecosystem. Ecocriticism is positioned as an ontological approach which is depicted metaphorically as a Milky way Galaxy Ecosystem. The findings are also presented

metaphorically using the Milky way Galaxy Ecosystem to illustrate the “gravitational force” (legitimation force) at play in different university spaces where legitimacy is conferred including inside and outside the university, and in known and unknown university spaces. Legitimacy occurs in the governance spaces such as College/Faculty Boards, Senate Council; in partnerships with local communities, industry partners and other collaborative organisations.

It is against the picture painted above, that this paper views a university as part of an ecosystem made up of internal and external stakeholders including local community, the public, the socio-economic, the natural environment and students. This approach emphasises a holistic ontological connection between the university space, the students’ agency, and the socio-political local community space, just like Earth and other planets orbiting the Galactic center are part of the Milky Way Galaxy. This ontological approach as argued earlier brings to sharp focus the permeability of universities with the local economic environment they are embedded in. The data on revenue structure and the finance model of the Mondragon University provides an apt example of how and where university legitimacy occurs in order to engender permeability between internal and external stakeholders, society and local community in a university ecosystem, while simultaneously building personal and individual agency of university students to serve local communities. That permeability occurs in two areas; (1) In the collaborative, co-operative governance model; and (2) in the finance model of the university. Data presented in this paper showed that the cooperative governance model is financially resourced sustainably by fee income as well as by 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> stream income. The two South African university case studies also show a disconnect between the university and its local community when there is an intense and thick organizational field with multiple centers of power arranged in a bureaucratic fashion where authority at faculty level is limited. Further research may build on this work by testing the two propositions advanced in this paper that connect local community legitimacy and connectedness with collaborative governance and university finance model.

This paper fills a gap in knowledge on connectedness of universities to their local communities and how the connectedness can be assessed using the sense-making methodological technique and metaphor analysis.

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