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TRANSFORMING UNIVERSITIES IN THE MIDST OF GLOBAL CRISIS

A University for the Common Good

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ROUTLEDGE



Transforming Universities in the Midst of Global Crisis

This book calls into question the colonial and neoliberal university, presenting alternative models of higher education that can more effectively respond to today's intersecting social, economic, environmental and political crises. The authors argue that universities should be driven by a different set of core values – one that promotes the common good over private or commercial interests, individualism and market fundamentalism. Presenting a broad range of educational initiatives from around the world that reflect life-affirming regenerative and relational practices, Indigenous intellectual sovereignty, and principles of social and ecological justice, the authors contend that pathways towards transforming higher education already exist within and without the university. This task, say the authors, is urgent and necessary if universities and other institutions are to hold relevance in a rapidly changing global environment.

This book makes a unique contribution to critiques of the modern, neoliberal university by looking for alternatives within and beyond traditional institutions of higher education. In doing so, the authors dismantle the long-standing 'ivory tower' image of the university, instead resituating education within broader social and ecological communities.

Transforming Universities in the Midst of Global Crisis is aimed at all those who have a direct or indirect interest and stake in universities, from the general reader to futurists, ecologists as well as students, academics, administrators, managers, policy makers and politicians.

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Foreword

Universities matter. They produce a large part of the world's research-based knowledge. They teach an increasing proportion of the rising generation. They support a wide range of professions. They can be a vital base for critical thinking, imagination and experiment.

In recent decades, university and college systems have been growing rapidly, and not just in rich countries. Shortly before the COVID-19 pandemic hit, higher education institutions were teaching more than 200 million students worldwide each year. A global workforce of teachers, researchers, students, technical, professional and operations staff has been created – a very important public asset.

Yet many people have been thinking that universities are in some sort of crisis, and this was being said years before the COVID-19 pandemic shut campuses down and trashed university finances. Dissident academics wrote books with titles like *The University in Crisis* and *The Fall of the Faculty*. MOOCs suddenly appeared and voices from Silicon Valley announced a new world of higher education online. Student debt mounted; insecure work in the sector grew on a frightening scale; strikes and boycotts erupted. Governments and vice-chancellors solemnly declared the need for change. On cue, management consultancies declared the 'business model' of the traditional university dead, to be replaced by – guess what? – more corporations and more competition.

Richard Hil, Kristen Lyons and Fern Thompsett have been closely engaged in this scene as authors, teachers and activists, through the years that these issues have been coming to a head. They are prominent in Australian debates about university life. They have hands-on experience of struggles within existing universities, and of experiments in producing alternatives. In *Transforming Universities in the Midst of Global Crisis* they draw on this experience, as well as on the wider literature about higher education and social change. They propose a definite direction in which a democratic reform of universities should go.

Their argument connects the troubles of universities with larger troubles in the world that gave rise to them. They emphasise three themes. First is the worldwide story of imperial conquest, colonisation, and the continuing coloniality of relationships in the contemporary world. This history disrupted colonised peoples' relationships with the natural world, and marginalised indigenous knowledge systems.

Second, the authors emphasise the way universities have been embedded in the logic of capitalism, especially in the era of 'neoliberalism', the intensified market ideology of recent decades. Under neoliberal regimes, universities themselves have been modelled more closely on profit-seeking corporations, commodifying their research and teaching. Universities rely increasingly on a low-paid, insecure workforce, while managerial power and salaries rise.

Third, the authors locate contemporary universities in the story of environmental crisis. Despite their greenwashing attempts, universities have been deeply complicit in creating and servicing an unsustainable, predatory, carbon-burning economy. Therefore, the authors reason, if we truly want a 'university for the common good', we must re-shape universities wholesale – in curriculum, pedagogy, governance, funding, and relationships with society. Perhaps indeed the university as we know it is dying, and all that can be done with it is 'hospicing', comforting the afflicted and learning from the old system as it goes.

That's a grim story, but this is not a grim book. A major feature of *Transforming Universities in the Midst of Global Crisis* is that it explores alternatives to the mainstream university model. Many alternatives already exist. They include a long history of attempts to democratise the control of universities in Latin America, introducing systems of co-government incorporating staff and students. There are courses and units within existing universities that run on very different principles from the mainstream, including environmental education and indigenous-based programmes.

The authors also explore free-standing institutions that offer radical alternatives. These include colleges and universities based in indigenous communities, embodying indigenous knowledges and learning methods. The authors give a whole chapter to the 'free university' model of experimental higher-education projects, that has recently had a strong revival and offers exciting possibilities. And they develop the concept of 'regenerative and relational universities', such as the Earth University in Costa Rica, that attempt not only new forms of learning but new relationships between society and the planet.

Transforming Universities in the Midst of Global Crisis is a bold book, vigorously argued, on important questions. The authors draw particularly on experience in Australia, but also draw widely on struggles, experiments and theorising from around the world, and its arguments are relevant everywhere. I hope this book will encourage many readers to join the discussion, and join the work of building democratic and transformative universities for our future.

Raewyn Connell
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Preface

Like all rich and rewarding endeavours, this book has been many years in the making, and is the outcome of a collective effort that weaves together countless connections between friends, family and colleagues from across much of this remarkable planet.

It is difficult to neatly delineate the origin story for how this book actually began. In some ways, it started with each of our separate, and quite personal, entanglements with the university over many decades. Through these various relationships and positionalities – as undergraduates, postgraduates, educators, unionists, strikers, organisers and more – we have fallen in and out of love with the university and its promises more times than each of us can remember. Over the years, and along with many other people, we have organised conferences, workshops, reading groups, flash mobs, started think tanks, free university clusters and more, to critically explore ideas, and to experiment in making and remaking the university. These were often messy and chaotic, and honestly, mostly with unclear ideas about where they might take us and others in our thinking, being and doing as part of our relating to the university. Through these experiments and encounters we have built friendships and caring communities that have held spaces for us to talk about our experiences of the colonial and neoliberal university, and importantly, to imagine a university otherwise.

Somewhere in there, the idea for this book came into being.

Raewyn Connell was central in the early conversations about *Transforming Universities in the Midst of Global Crisis*. Her ideas and support breathed life into its very inception, and for that, we are eternally grateful. Anna Carlson and Briohny Walker have also walked closely alongside us in this project and are co-conspirators in its making. Through regular conversations with these lucid, politically astute and all-round brilliant thinkers, our undertaking really started to take shape. Both Anna and Briohny gave generously in ways that have been vital in the crafting of this book.

At its core, we wanted to write a book to push universities – including their managers, senior administrators, all staff and students, as well as politicians, policy makers and others – to critically reflect on their relevance in the face of twenty-first-century challenges. We wanted to expose universities as being implicated in many of the contemporary crises we face, and to explore

pathways that might create transgressive alternatives that enable universities to better respond to these challenges. How, we asked ourselves, might universities be transformed for the common good?

We thought, first and foremost, that this book would ask questions about universities' responsibilities in the context of the climate crisis, including their obligations to prepare young people to face a world that is changing in devastating ways before their eyes. And then the COVID-19 global health pandemic hit, with its aftershocks – including myriad forms of social and economic injustice – continuing to reverberate across Australia and around the world. As we lived through these crises, we started to turn our gaze towards the ways in which they are interconnected. This process forged the architecture of our book; with coloniality and its attendant logics taking a central place within our understandings of how the myth of endless, unfettered growth persists with such tenacity, even in the face of its devastating consequences for ecological and human well-being.

Where are universities amid these landscapes of loss and precarity, we kept asking ourselves? How might they respond so as to play a part in reimagining, and bringing into being, a future liveable world? And how might they do so, given – as we argue in this book – that universities are not simply *in*, but also *of*, the multiple crises we are currently grappling with?

There are no easy answers to these questions, but asking them together has led us to explore paths that are critical, profound, inspiring and transformative. By sharing them here, we want to invite others to join in this conversation, to walk these paths together, and to find ways to transform universities into the kinds of places with which we can once again fall in love.

This book has come about through a shared and collective effort. The authorship order is alphabetical only; each of the three of us has contributed equally, if differently, to bringing this book to life. Like any project of writing or learning, this book has drawn from human and non-human involvement alike. Our thoughts have been nourished by the lands, waters, and non-human companions who have been with us on these paths. Writing this book through a time of such palpable social and ecological precarity has only heightened our awareness of, and gratitude for, these diverse presences.

It is through this collaboration, in the broadest sense of the word, that this book has not only taken form but found the wings to fly. Our hope is that its flightpath will take us a little closer to the horizon of a better world.

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