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A Transformative Agenda

Bearing Witness

We have overrun the world …
The real threat is not to the survival of the planet, but to the survival of humanity.[1]

These are the raw statements by ninety-four-year-old British filmmaker and historian David Attenborough in *A Life on our Planet*. For much of the film he stares directly into the camera as he describes the world's devastating biodiversity loss at the hands of humanity, the furious pace of human progress, unconstrained consumption of finite natural resources and the cumulative impacts of the climate emergency. This is his witness statement: 'a stark warning of how—as a society—we have squandered this gift'.[2] He remains hopeful however that a different, more sustainable future is possible.

That other sustainable worlds are still possible is similarly the central message in the decolonial manifestos of *Buen vivir* (South America), *Ubuntu* (South Africa) and *Swaraj* (India). These visions of social and ecological commons focus on futures that are community-centric,

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ecologically balanced and culturally sensitive. 'It's a vision and a platform for thinking and practising alternative futures focused on lived practice, that is aware of—and connected to—global movements of local solidarities that promote collaborative consumption and economies of sharing and care'.[3] The aim is to fundamentally *repoliticise* sustainability and its links to development trajectories. As the *Uluru Statement of the Heart* in Australia eloquently states:

> sovereignty is a spiritual notion: the ancestral tie between the land, or 'mother nature', and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who were born therefrom, remain attached thereto, and must one day return thither to be united with our ancestors. This link is the basis of the ownership of the soil, or better, of sovereignty. It has never been ceded or extinguished and co-exists with the sovereignty of the Crown. How could it be otherwise? That peoples possessed a land for sixty millennia and this sacred link disappears from world history in merely the last two hundred years?[4]

At the heart of the idea of sustainable development are the prospects for future *sustainability* historically linked to the trajectory and legacy of modern capitalist *development*. In this sense sustainability and development sit 'against' each other. As Laura Kipnis describes, 'to be against' has multiple meanings[5]: it can be to stand opposed, but also to lean together or towards, foster and bolster.[6] It is within this relational context that we explore the role and contribution of the *Sustainable Development Goals* (SDGs) as a transformative framework within the context of higher education.

The key premise of this book is that new progressive directions and possibilities for deeply engaging with the SDGs are opening up for universities—and yet remain under threat. As a United Nations-led and goal-driven initiative, the SDG agenda is not without risks and, like universities, is rightly subjected to criticism about the inadequacy of 'the master's tools for dismantling the master's house'.[7] However as civil rights and feminist activist Audre Lorde goes on to say, 'in our world, divide and conquer must become define and empower'.

Our approach to the book is not to polarise the SDGs as 'sinner or saint', but instead to critically position them as an imperfect but

crucial and collective witness statement to the unsustainability of our age. By focusing on the critical role of education *about, for* and *through* the SDGs, we seek to advance constructive engagement with higher education that is both progressive and meaningful.[8] We are all responsible for bearing witness to the ecocide and genocide being driven by unsustainable modern development (including in higher education) with its aggressive economic growth and an ongoing colonial legacy. In higher education and elsewhere, a transformative agenda is needed that addresses this unsustainability in ways that are genuine and regenerative. The SDGs offer a starting point for such work, if we shift the emphasis from 'cockpitism' to critical co-production in place and practice.[9]

To 'bear witness' is not a passive position, but instead offers a powerful way of working through difficulties or trauma by being both present and committed to critical, regenerative action. This involves the humility and empathy that 'moves individuals from the personal act of 'seeing' to the adoption of a public stance by which they become part of a collective, working through trauma together'.[10] Bearing witness means recognising collective responsibility for unsustainable development trajectories and impacts ('developmentalities') and using it to help move towards recovery— rather than just turning away from a painful past, or even towards a disconnected utopian future. This is 'not merely to narrate, but to commit oneself and the narrative to others: to take responsibility for history or for the truth of the occurrence'.[11] This is the starting point for collective action and healing.

In the current climate of environmental change and societal crisis, higher education needs to both engender and embrace this responsibility, humility and regenerative praxis. As the SDG agenda makes clear, universities are a key tool for implementing the SDGs. They are also far more than this. They are the products and perpetrators of the same growth developmentalities that continue to generate the Anthropocene, as well as expressions of the same progressive ambitions and traditions that animate the SDG agenda. These resonances between universities and the SDGs mean that higher education—complete with its ambiguities, tensions and potential—is ideally placed to proactively engage.

Universities have a unique capability to find, explore and translate progressive ideas; to seek and adapt new critical lenses; and develop creative

ways of unsettling the world—including disrupting or re-formulating areas where ideas and action around the SDGs have and will become stuck. At least that is the theory. In practice, universities' capabilities are often severely constrained by the very sorts of issues that the SDGs draw attention to—issues such as inequalities, a lack of decent work, poor governance and vulnerability to disruptions. Combined with their far-reaching impact on the planet, this means that universities need the SDG agenda as much as the SDG agenda needs universities.

Although most discussion about the two is framed as 'how can universities contribute to the SDGs?', the contribution is two way. The idea that universities' role is to help others' address the SDGs reflects a deeply unhelpful presumption that universities are separate to the world the SDGs are addressing. From such a presumption flows the self-serving misconceptions that universities are mere observers of, not drivers of, the unsustainable condition of the world, and that they are free to choose *whether* or not they contribute to the SDG agenda rather than address how they already are (for better or worse) affecting the agenda and its prospects. The SDG-university relationship is one of co-production and the question is what role universities play. When rooted in honesty and humility, this role can involve forging 'new concepts and new productive ethical relations'.[12] It also needs to be about what Rosi Braidotti describes as:

> coming to terms with the unprecedented changes and transformations as the basic unit of reference of what counts to be human.[13]

Critical engagement with the SDGs in the sense we envision involves facing—not running from or brushing over—flaws in the SDG agenda and recognising that these flaws and their roots are shared by universities. It involves understanding the reciprocal role of universities within the contemporary sustainable development challenges presented by the Anthropocene, and heeding the SDG agenda's call to face unsustainability; boost resilience, adaptation and experimentation; and invest in maintenance, repair and regeneration. Such critical engagement helps address the inevitable question of 'what should we do?'. To this end, our key arguments that drive the book can be summarised as two-fold.

- *First*, that as an integrative, transformational agenda, the SDGs demand approaches that work across boundaries, and that connect efforts across different issues to identify synergies and tensions. For this reason, the SDG agenda is not just one among many topics or areas of work within a university, it is a framework and context that demands a new way of working in all aspects of universities. When it comes to the SDGs, universities are not just enablers of change but also *targets* of change.
- *Second*, that individually and collectively we are already engaging with the SDGs by virtue of being part of the world it represents. For all of us—including universities—the question is *not if, but how and in what ways* do we want to engage with the challenges and opportunities of sustainability in a climate of change? While maladaptive business as usual is possible, so too is a transformative approach involving deep institutional commitment and a bold, innovation culture as the pathways to sustainability-led change.

The SDGs as a transformative agenda can serve to bring universities 'back to e/Earth' by underlining that all of us and all institutions need to comprehensively change in order to get society onto a more sustainable and just pathway. This is about more than getting universities to more actively help others. It is about improving the consistency between what universities say and what they do, and closing the enormous gap between occasional references to 'sustainable development' in strategic plans or curricula, and the actual impact universities are currently having in the world.

Within both the University and society more broadly, the SDGs demand approaches that work better to scale up, out and deep[14] the local and international efforts that are needed to sustain *all* types of life on an increasingly warming and unequal planet. This includes working at the nexus of issues such as water, food, carbon, climate and health as a cross-cutting interdisciplinary and multi-stakeholder agenda that links academia with the rest of the society. It involves not only new content and projects, but new structures, processes, cultural norms and ethos that enable universities to critically evaluate their role in (un)sustainable development and address their own ambiguities and paradoxes (see Fig. 1.1 below).

Fig. 1.1 Universities and the SDGs: a transformative agenda. (Source: Authors)

To be a transformative agenda, the SDGs must become embedded in everything universities do, including leadership, strategies, research, learning and teaching, partnerships, operations, advocacy and activism. The SDGs are not just one among many topic areas within a university, they are a strategic focus and context that demand a new way of working and offer political opportunities for addressing deep structural inequities. As Isaac Kamola highlights within the South African anti-apartheid context, while:

> universities imagine themselves as "global", settler colonialism and racial apartheid—and acts of resistance to them—continue to shape higher education. Efforts to engage this historical legacy can serve as a point of inspiration for those critical of the current state of higher education around the world … activists—both past and present—know that universities contain vast political possibilities and that part of reclaiming these possibilities requires demanding that the university be otherwise.[15]

In the following sections of this introductory chapter, we emphasise that transformative change is a reciprocal agenda that addresses both the monsters 'out there' as well as 'in here'. We outline the paradoxical role of

both the SDGs and universities before turning to articulate our critical, social science approach inspired by feminist scholarship. To this end our focus is on the need for regenerative responses, ones that aim not only for the neutralisation of negatives but for the cultivation of new, positive possibilities. This is what we believe—in their best light—both SDGs and the universities offer as a transformative agenda. The SDGs prompt us to ask: what do we want to grow within universities, and what do we want to weed out in order to translate the agenda into a regenerative tool on the ground?

Facing Monsters

Transformative change is a *reciprocal* agenda which requires critically reflexive action and change both 'in here' (i.e. within the academy, Universities, higher education) and 'out there' where universities are entwined with and part of society more broadly. A global pandemic such as COVID-19, the more localised disasters of bushfires, droughts or floods, or global corporate and bureaucratic systems for example, can take on monstrous lives of their own, full of unimaginable horror.

The monsters we fear say a lot about ourselves and our society, our fetishes and our anxieties.[16] The monster metaphor has been used to describe multinational corporations and more broadly the growth of capitalism and economic ideologies which underpins them, from the fearsome Scandinavian sea monster 'The Kraken', to the blood-sucking Vampire, to Frankenstein and the Zombie walking, the living un-dead.[17] The 'Corporate Frankenstein Monster' is a descriptor of 'plundering, pillaging, and polluting the planet for profit'.[18] As anthropologist Hariz Halilovich observes from his research into forced displacement and diaspora in post-war Bosnia, what is really frightening is that the monstrosity apparent in many human activities is real.[19]

Some critical thinkers reject the SDGs as not radical enough, as yet another example of 'the masters' tools' that have generated our contemporary crises. The goals are read as just another 'developmentality'—or monster—in our midst: top-down, hierarchical, imperial by design and nature, driven by instrumental goals and indicators that are neglectful of

people and place and in particular Indigenous cultures and localised places. The SDGs, it has been argued, threaten to further legitimise or reinforce the systems of injustice and lack of sustainability that define the neoliberalised development *status quo*.

Political ecologist Maria Kaika, for example, argues that despite the rhetoric of a 'paradigm shift' for pursuing the SDGs, the emphasis remains dependent on 'old methodological tools (e.g. indicators), techno-managerial solutions (e.g. smart cities), and institutional frameworks of an ecological modernization paradigm that did not work'.[20] She calls instead for agendas, frameworks and practices that serve to disrupt path dependency in order to establish alternative methods for achieving social equity and environmental sustainability that sit outside the current *status quo*. In particular she is concerned that the SDGs' emphasis focuses on 'what' needs to change, rather than 'how' this change can be achieved through different practices.

Another serious and legitimate critique of the SDG agenda is its lack of explicit recognition or engagement with Indigenous rights and sovereignty, especially given the agenda's stated commitment to ensuring that 'no one is left behind'. This omission is further highlighted by critics who argue that the application of the SDGs in universities: (1) serves to further an econo-centric approach to ecological and sustainability education that risks ameliorating other ways of knowing and learning, such as Indigenous ontologies and nature-based pedagogies[21]; and (2) that the focus on the SDGs in pedagogy and research can further entrench the neoliberalisation of the University and the ways in which sustainability pedagogy and research develop in higher education to 2030 and beyond.[22] There is a risk that capacities for systemic transformation are muted through homogenous development discourses that do not reflect local contexts, imposing knowledge from elsewhere in ways that erase local ways of knowing and doing.[23] This is 'the monster that constantly reshapes itself to haunt the culture that is using it—not just the culture that created it'.[24]

These warnings about and weaknesses in the SDG agenda need to be taken seriously and used as a constant reminder not to think of the agenda as some kind of magic formula. Some aspects of the SDG agenda are far too accepting of the existing context it has emerged out of. The whole

agenda needs to be handled in a way that is fully cognisant of the risk that unthinkingly applying it may reproduce, not dismantle, structural problems and injustices. Empirical research has already documented, for instance, the ways in which the SDG agenda is being co-opted in some situations to reinforce not disassemble extractivist fossil fuel logics. How the SDG agenda plays out in practice is far from guaranteed.[25]

But these risks and monstrous aspects of the SDG agenda are exactly why academic engagement is needed. Furthermore, such engagement is needed because the academic context is characterised by the same challenges. Neither the SDG agenda, local initiatives in its name, nor universities are context- or problem-free. In our opinion, the resultant challenge is not to wait for a future perfect agenda, free of the taint of the current world and enacted without tension in diverse contexts, but to get started, knowing that scrutiny and difficult intellectual and political work are needed along the way. We say this as academics in Australia, where it has long been clear that we cannot wait for perfect plans from our political leaders, and instead need to be clever in subversively utilising what is available.

Critical, serious and mischievous engagement of the sort that academics are especially well positioned to foster is needed to help drive the SDG agenda *while* improving it and keeping it on track. As enablers *and* targets of change, universities are vital to the overall success of the SDG agenda as a 'living' transformative agenda and proliferating collection of positive initiatives. Academics and academic institutions can be powerful change agents on all levels of the agenda. They have the capacity to draw on in-depth analysis to highlight lessons from the past, interrogate the present, discern genuine opportunities and identify how—despite the risks—the SDG agenda could be truly transformative moving into the future.

The seriousness of the global challenges covered by the SDGs makes it imperative that higher education does not turn away from the SDG agenda. Rather, there is a need to help shape what the agenda means in practice and make it the transformative catalyst it needs to be. The 'regions of human practice with old or established boundaries are being challenged by new ensembles and configurations … and can reveal the origin, identity, purposes and powers of the monster, and in doing so, ourselves'.[26]

For us personally, the SDG agenda reminds us of the dangers not just of co-optation but of cynicism and perfectionism. While critique of ill-considered change agendas is essential, the monster we are most afraid of in the context of the horrors of the Anthropocene is the one that traps us in its web of criticisms, caveats and academic posturing. We need to act, and the SDG agenda helps us do so. That alone is reason to engage with it.

We appreciate the tensions and ironies in taking this stance. But irony is itself a tool for dealing with the challenges of the Anthropocene;[27] not in the sense of a postmodern 'dispositional irony' that 'freezes irony into an aesthetic pose'[28] and breeds cynicism, but in the sense of irony as 'among our best methods for immediately and unconsciously adjusting to complex circumstances' and coping with the disparities and 'inchoateness of the human condition'.[29] This is about an ironic relation to the world, one that appreciates that the world's inherent relationality means it always exceeds our understanding but also means we cannot help but act, even if (or perhaps especially if) we do nothing. Bronislaw Szerszynski argues that an 'ironic world relation' offers a way to both recognise 'failure and error' and push us 'to act, with due care, in the very face of that recognition'.[30]

In this way, embracing irony and imperfection helps us address 'the ecological paradox' of informed inaction[31] and the 'politics of actually existing unsustainability'[32] that characterises the role of universities in current (un)sustainable development. As we outline in this book, it calls on us to consider more deeply the implications of the SDG agenda for the university sector, and the implications of not waking up.

Who's Afraid of the SDGs?

The critiques being raised of the SDGs are vitally important to attend to as both the means and ends of our current planetary-scale crisis are deeply and inextricably linked to the prospects and possibilities for transformative change. These criticisms are also reflected in the critiques of the modern university: from its colonial origins through to neoliberal reform and

many universities' prioritisation of profit over public service, financial return over investment, and performance indicators and net promoter scores over real 'impact'.

Just like the SDGs, 'the university' is characterised by complexity, tensions and inconsistencies that can serve to inspire or inhibit, impoverish or empower, hurt or heal. In particular, the university is a place of paradox that holds both conservative and transformational tendencies. There are at least three common manifestations of this paradox we would like to draw attention to.

1. *Tradition and radical change*—As institutions, universities and associated groups such as academic disciplines can be deeply resistant to change, which is one reason they have been both relatively immune to disruption over the centuries and repeatedly targeted for 'makeovers' by private sector interests. At the same time, the Academy and higher education is founded on a commitment to intellectual freedom and critique, a generator of novelty and innovation, and an enabler (if not always site) of profound social change.
2. *Wealth and financial precarity*—Universities have the ability to generate and concentrate both great wealth and great financial precarity. As COVID-19 and the related economic crisis have exposed starkly, some institutions, disciplinary areas and staff are disproportionately wealthy and secure, while financial and career precarity have become ever more thoroughly entrenched for others (notably casualised staff, many students, and universities outside the global elite).[33]
3. *Inclusion and exclusion*—As institutions committed to the value of ideas and knowledge as a common good, universities espouse and facilitate democracy and openness. Their relative independence means many universities can actively embed inclusive and democratic practices and try to promote and enable them in wider society, including by providing citizens with important insights and information. Yet universities also have the capacity to exclude, exploit and entrench concentrations of power and privilege. Whether manifest in who has access or whose voices are prioritised in curricula, partnerships and university decision-making, universities can be welcoming and open-minded, or hostile and oligarchic.

To address these contradictions and tensions, we must do more than just critique the SDG agenda as the new monster in our midst. Critique allows us to 'unveil, uncover and critically re-examine the convincing logics and operations' of truth claims. While useful in finding fault—and certainly a technique we use in this book—critique retains 'a certain external knowingness, a certain ability to look in from the outside and unravel and examine and expose that which had seemingly lay hidden'. It is thus insufficient in helping us address the world of global sustainable development and universities that we are part of, especially given that the current unsustainable state of the world points in myriad ways to the collapse of the dichotomies of 'inside' and 'outside'.[34] Critique is also liable to paranoia of the sort that sees only negatives.[35] To negotiate these challenges, we need not only irony but what Irit Rogoff calls 'criticality': 'a double occupation in which we are both fully armed with the knowledges of critique, able to analyse and unveil, while at the same time sharing and living out the very conditions which we are able to see through'.[36]

Both the SDGs and universities are complex, diverse assemblages of people, practices, materials, spaces, conversations, initiatives and ideas that have long historical roots and are continually shifting and remade every day. Their outcomes are necessarily experimental and intersecting. As William Mosely notes, the SDG agenda is one part of 'myriad […] development experiments (or natural experiments) to try to improve the human experience' underway in the world. Universities have long been central to these experiments and remain so in the era of the SDGs, regardless of whether they acknowledge it.[37]

In the play *Who's Afraid of Virginia Wolf?* Edward Albee implicitly examines the relationship between universities and society. Ablee paints a portrait of a ruined Western civilisation balanced between history and science on the one hand, and the brutal relationship of university professor George and his partner Martha on the other. Set at an after party of university colleagues that descends into a 'boozy marital slug-fest', the play presents George and Martha tearing each other apart with word games that continually confound the difference between truth and illusion. George 'vacillates between detachment and involvement' in the nastiness he helps precipitate, including adopting the classic academic stance of detachment—that of a commentator on the chaos unfolding around

and through him.[38] Written in the early 1960s when the US was emerging from the 'narcoleptic Eisenhower years when a fragile cold war peace that depended on the balance of terror',[39] the play presents the dysfunctional politics and monstrosity of middle-class American marriage, values and universities as a devastating microcosm of, and parable about, the dangers of self-delusion/destruction amidst the violence, complacency and excess of Western modernity.

Universities remain microcosms of wider society and its monstrous politics. Similarly, academics frequently 'vacillate between detachment and involvement' in how they attempt to relate to this broader context as well as their own more local ones. Thanks in part to the culture of heightened competition that now pervades universities, many academics ignore much of the world but invest large amounts of emotional and physical energy into brutal scholarly encounters in the Academy, striving to distinguish themselves by contesting others. This points us to a further danger of critique: that criticisms are driven by a habitual contrariness and desire for point scoring rather than a deep conviction that critique is actually productive in a given situation.

Critique clearly can be productive in terms of the SDGs, but it needs to stem from a commitment to engaging not merely with arguments but with consequences and outcomes. Geographer Diana Liverman, for instance, calls on geographers to engage more deeply and systematically with the SDGs in creative and constructive ways. Highly alert to the paradoxes and perversities of the SDGs, she calls out the paradoxes and perversities of academics refusing to engage with such a global agenda, particularly given the privileged capacity many of us have to 'work within the system'. She asks:

> Can we constructively engage with the post-2015 development agenda and the SDGs in ways that are progressive and meaningful? And what does constructive engagement imply for our everyday scholarship, service, and outreach?

Taking up Liverman's provocation, Farhana Sultana concurs:

> If we want emancipatory politics and transformations in development, we need to challenge and improve what is done in the name of SDGs, keeping central the issues of social justice and ethical engagement. … We need to reassess what it means for us to be 'engaged' scholars, and what kind of impact we hope for (whether achievable or not). […] We need to engage critically and constructively, however we can. Too much is at stake to not do so. If the SDGs are truly to be useful and have transformative potential, then we must be part of that conversation too, and develop new tools to dismantle the master's house.[40]

When we use the term 'universities' or 'the university' in this book we do so merely as a shorthand for what we know is a highly heterogeneous and dynamic institution and sector. Indeed, it is the existence of diversity and change within the sector that fuels our argument that today's 'typical' university could be otherwise. We also use the term SDGs knowing what a messy array of ideas and voices they contain, and what varied interpretations and implementation efforts they are stimulating. Again, it is the internal heterogeneity and capacity for manoeuvre and co-production that we find one of the most interesting and motivating things about them.

It is because the SDG agenda and universities are not fixed or given that we believe the SDG-university relation should not be superficially decreed, nor rejected out of hand. Even within the constraints of heavily neoliberalised universities, there are innumerable opportunities for university staff and students to work in creative and critical ways with the SDGs. Even just beginning with a few of the SDGs—for example, decent work, reduced inequality, good governance and climate action—points to the mammoth task ahead, as well as the possibilities for driving internal and external improvements.

A growing number of universities are now working to embed the SDGs into their strategic plans, research activities, curriculum, pedagogy, student experiences, graduate attributes and institutional reporting. Some universities are focusing on a small subset of the SDGs, whilst others are taking them as a whole and considering their higher-order objectives. Here, we take the latter approach because no SDG can be ignored. The university sector's internal diversity is a unique match for the array of issues covered by the SDGs, and the agenda is designed to be integrative

precisely because more reductionist approaches have helped generate the trouble we are in today.

Focused broadly on the agenda's two pillars—social justice and environmental sustainability—we explore how they intersect with the three paradoxes outlined earlier. Although a work in progress, our analysis to date has convinced us that universities have an important role to play in helping drive progressive and meaningful change, beginning with internalising them and applying them to their own operations and then reaching out to as many different groups as possible. There are many pathways and forms this could take.

Despite universities' many flaws and the deep legacy of development, including contemporary neoliberal notions of status and progress, we do not want to just jettison the idea and possibilities of the university for bringing about transformative change. Nor do we dismiss the potential of the SDGs, whose potentially transformative lines of flight are yet to be explored. However, to engage with the SDGs means bearing witness to the unsustainability of our current global conditions, the role of universities within this, and the discomfort, contradictions, tensions, fear, sadness, silences—as well as the creative spaces and transformative possibilities—that this can provoke.

Staying with the Trouble

The vision we outline in this book is of universities at the forefront of reflexive and critical thinking and action around the SDGs to both identify synergies and tensions and co-develop advice, activism and advocacy with a wide range of cross-sector stakeholders. We dare imagine this as the beginning of a progressive turn in higher education, one that uses the SDG agenda as a vehicle for transformative change. Underpinning this vision is an intellectual framework that approaches what universities and SDGs are and how they relate to each other and wider phenomenon as an open question, not an analytical starting point.

Our basic starting point is feminist and critical social science scholarship that not only identifies and tackles how to reframe and reshape fundamental problems in the world but also attends closely to the question

of why, and in what ways, we should do so. Core to this is reflecting on the particular social configuration known as academia that we are part of and considering how it is interacting with—and could interact with—other aspects of the world. The goal here is to shift attention from a focus on the 'the what' to 'the how' of the SDGs as a university priority and agenda. We then go further to focus on the equally critical questions of 'why' engage with the SDGs and 'to what ends' does/will this serve progressive ends for the university and society.

Informed by pragmatic philosophy, this is about what Henrik Wagenaar calls attending to meaning-in-action.[41] It is about using a critical and dialogical lens that serves the common good. In other words, our focus is less on the universities and SDGs as abstract categories and more on what they are doing, or could do, in practice. Urban planning activist Leonie Sandercock describes this as a commitment to 'practising utopia' by taking a position on issues of democracy, power, social justice and sustainability within 'actually existing practices'. This in turn involves the development of a new dialectical imagination and the concomitant possibilities for both 'mobilizing hope' and 'negotiating fears' around a sustainable future.[42]

Many of the contemporary systems underpinning current unsustainability are robust, resilient assemblages (what Michel Foucault might call a dispositif),[43] held together in any one site or scale by a wide array of interlocking factors. From assumptions, norms and KPIs, to software programs, practices and rhythms, together these can make even the most critical and creative individuals feel like a cog in a machine. The challenge, therefore, should not be underestimated. At all levels, from individuals to universities to the planet, what is needed is better ways of surviving or coping. This goes far beyond how universities or people within them can 'be more resilient'—whatever that actually means.

Our collective ways of 'surviving' or 'coping' on this planet are far from sufficient in this climate of change. Stressors need to be neutralised, not normalised, and systems repaired and nurtured, not written off. Within universities such stressors extend far beyond the realm of the neoliberalism/s that many of us try to resist. Older conservative aspects of universities and global development agendas—including their classed, gendered and raced elements, close ties with the military and purported

apoliticism—also need to be dismantled and replaced with inclusivity, reflexivity and transparency. Universities are also far from immune to other, more-than-economic global stressors, including the far-reaching effects of climate change, ocean acidification, biodiversity loss and pandemics.[44] Along with every other group of people, collection of places or set of practices, universities cannot function on a dysfunctional planet.

As Tristan McCowan notes, the university-society relationship is a complex one, 'involving the impact of the university on society (through the work and lives of its graduates, through the production of knowledge and through direct interaction with communities), but also the influence of society on the university, in a cyclical dynamic'.[45] When feedbacks onto and from the planet are added in, the relationship is especially complex. To address this reality, universities, along with every other organisation, need to not only 'do less harm' but 'do more good too'.[46] As well as neutralising stressors, all of us need to (re)generate positive futures.

Feminist scholar Donna Haraway cautions against turning away from the big challenges and argues we should instead 'stay with the trouble of living and dying in response-ability on a damaged earth'. This means bearing witness to the trouble of our times, rather than pinning our hopes on an imagined future that is decoupled from the monstrosity of the past and present.[47] To this end, her mobilisation and meaning of 'to trouble' is three-fold:

- Firstly, to recognise and accept that we live in troubling times, 'turbid, mixed up and disturbing';
- Secondly, that to change this we need to make trouble and 'stir up potent responses to devastating events'; and
- Finally, we need to then settle the troubled waters through the rebuilding of people, planet and place.[48]

As we have argued, the SDGs are not inherently static or repressive—unless we make them so—and nor are universities. There is scope to carve out the regenerative and transformative change we seek and need. Conceiving of universities and the SDGs as assemblages rather than stable, self-evident entities exposes the many aspects of each that remain beyond the reach of neoliberal efforts, or resilient to its impositions.

A similar stance is needed on neoliberalism and capitalism themselves, as scholars such as Sally Weller, J.K. Gibson-Graham and Brian Massumi have argued.[49] In contrast to disempowering images of either The Economy or The Market as all-encompassing and centrally controlled totalities, they are understood instead as messy assemblages that rely on being continually remade. Crucially, this means they are open to resistance, evolution and transformation, as efforts to recover from the COVID-19 disruption may demonstrate.

Universities are also diverse and messy, characterised by 'varieties of academic capitalism' among other things.[50] Similarly, universities could help change, contest and succeed neoliberalism and capitalism. Crucially, the SDG agenda offers a valuable tool in doing so. For example, the commitment to economic growth featured in SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) is an opportunity to foreground and address the perverse effects of economic fundamentalism on other goals, the SDG agenda as a whole and the worlds we share.[51]

Universities need to engage much more deliberately with the real world they are part of, but real-world relevance is not about a hard-nosed, unthinking push to contribute more directly to economic growth. It is about acknowledging the complex material realities that universities have never left, and starting to reverse some of the damage universities and all of us within them have been complicit in generating. Following Simone de Beauvoir, 'It is in the knowledge of the genuine conditions of our lives that we must draw our strength to live and our reasons for acting'.[52]

Reworking the Matrix

The question then is how universities and the SDGs might be brought together to work in concert for positive transformational change. It is a question we begin to address in this book, acknowledging that wide and ongoing dialogue and experimentation is needed. We argue that the two crucial factors are: the depth and breadth of a university's and the sector's institutional commitment; and the ethics and boldness of their innovation culture, where innovation is understood as doing something differently and universities are understood as targets as well as sources of

change. As outlined in Fig. 1.2, each can be mapped as an axis or continuum that yields four plausible scenarios that provide the basis for informed discussion about the strategic direction of university engagement with the SDGs: disengaged, paternalistic, tolerant or transformative.

The two axes of commitment and innovation represent two key uncertainties or questions: How deeply will a university commit to the SDGs? How bold and ethical will its innovation culture be? Where a university positions itself with regards to these two questions will determine its approach and potential for transformative change. Our aim is to provide some provocations to contribute to this dialogue, informed by our experiences of discussing and working with many others within universities about the SDGs, what they mean and how they might be used.

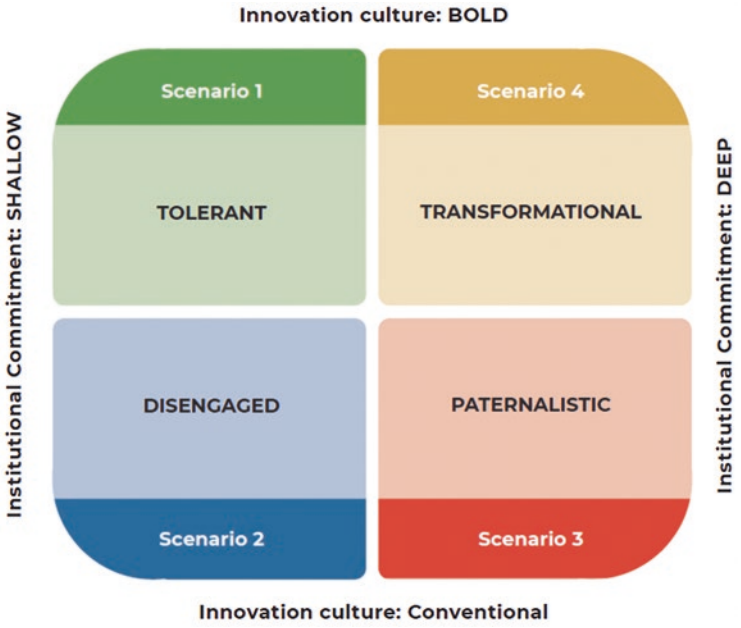

Fig. 1.2 Four possible scenarios for university engagement with the SDGs. (Source: Authors)

Axis 1: Institutional Commitment (Shallow to Deep)

At one end of the institutional commitment spectrum is Shallow Commitment which takes the form of tolerance for or occasional endorsement of SDG-related initiatives. Efforts around the SDGs may or may not exist in this scenario, but if they do, they are largely the work of isolated individuals or groups and are generally ad hoc, disconnected, invisible to most people, and quickly forgotten. They include one-off events, single assessment tasks or courses, occasional publications and short-lived research, operational projects or static webpages. The SDGs are treated (if at all) as a specialist topic and matter of personal interest, with limited relevance to the functioning of the institution's core business. More specifically, the SDGs are misunderstood by many people as simply a traditional international development issue and thus salient only to low-income countries and development specialists.

At the other end of the spectrum is Deep Commitment. Here, SDG engagement is characterised by strong institutional leadership, strategic prioritisation, cultural commitment and a critical pedagogy around progressive transformation. The SDGs are recognised and represented as part of a new global agenda for universities, communities and all professions. They are used as an integrative, long-term, systematic framework of engagement that encompasses—with a view to transforming where needed—all university functions, components and stakeholders. From the university's strategic plan to professional development and promotion of staff, from its resourcing of research to selection of industry partners, the SDGs are used as a cohering, focusing framework. The university commitment to the SDGs is visible internally and externally, with far-reaching institutional impacts.

Axis 2: Innovation Culture (Conventional to Ethical/Bold)

Universities may be deeply committed to SDG engagement across the institution, but still not do much differently, other than reshape their existing processes and practices. Cutting across the question of

commitment is the question of an organisation's innovation culture, which can be characterised by how routine or imaginative it is. Routine innovation often involves the prolific production of innovation outputs developed in a conventional, competitive way, typically focused on technologies and business. One of the ironies of innovation is that as a concept it is far from novel. Indeed, it is now mainstream, often forced, and largely habitual, driven by an unthinking and seemingly inexorable need to produce new products (including academic papers) for the market. A conventional innovation culture perpetuates this robotic approach.

Situated at the other end of the innovation culture spectrum is a bolder, more radical approach to innovation that nurtures creative shifts and scales them out to generate uptake and to progressively alter, not reinforce, the existing institutional environment. Avoiding critique and change for their own sake, this approach involves innovating not just with products, but with ways of doing things, including innovation itself. The aim is to more explicitly, directly and effectively connect a university's work to meet society's needs.

Responsive to calls over the last two decades for a 'new social contract' for academia,[53] this attempted repositioning of universities involves a shift from top-down, linear, knowledge-centric models of innovation to more systemic, inclusive, action-oriented ways of doing innovation. It also responds to the growing realisation that the conventional approach to innovation is a source of problems as much as solutions, underlying many environmental harms and social injustices, as well as the unhelpful attitude in academia (mentioned above) of constant, competition-driven criticism of others.

An ethics-based approach to innovation is courageous, imaginative, generous and intelligent enough to not just change product specifications but also systems, goals and paradigms—including the innovation culture itself—so that societal needs and goals are more effectively met and people are nurtured along the way. Universities are being called upon to confront the effectiveness and ethics of their innovation strategies and practices. The challenge is to bring to the fore this ethical dimension and to confront it head on in order to better align activities with a desired ethical framework, such as the SDGs. The ethical innovation we propose can be summed up as *responsible, attentive, disruptive, authentic and regenerative.* We discuss ethical innovation in more detail in Chap. 4.

Future Scenarios

Though the future is unknown, it is highly likely that universities will be expected to more directly address the SDGs as issues such as climate change escalate. How, though, will any one institution respond? The two axes of commitment and innovation outlined above represent four possible scenarios, as shown above in Fig. 1.2. While these are clearly simplifications, each scenario provides a heuristic tool for thinking through options for a university and the implications of these choices.

Tolerant

The first scenario combines a shallow institutional commitment with a bold innovation culture. The tolerance pathway frames the SDGs as a specialist topic that some staff, students and partners are interested in, and are in fact doing creative and important things with. At the institutional level, the SDGs are resourced in a minor way, but are not recognised as a major societal challenge or guiding parameter, or as relevant to the institution as a whole. Instead, the university abides with some staff and students working in the area, reports diligently on the SDGs and cherry picks opportunities from the SDG agenda in keeping with its largely agnostic, opportunistic attitude to topic areas. Those actively working on the SDGs are largely left to their own devices, perhaps developing niches of radical innovation (e.g. bold experiments with partners in government, business and community), but in a generally isolated manner that is despite, not because of, what the rest of the university or academic sector is doing.

Disengaged

The second scenario represents a step backwards. It consists of a shallow institutional commitment and conventional innovation culture. Here, a university may commence work on the SDGs but it stagnates and fades over time, withering away to become just one of a number of reporting

requirements and past enthusiasms. Some SDG work continues in the university, but it is largely ad hoc and driven by external requirements such as demands from funding bodies, industry partners and university ranking processes. Meanwhile, the university innovation culture is focused ever more narrowly on accelerating and refining existing product development processes and serving certain market players, while remaining disengaged from most of the society and the processes' wider ramifications. Individuals striving to do things differently are implicitly discouraged and will likely move on to other more open-minded institutions or sectors.

Paternalism

In the third scenario, a deeper institutional commitment is combined with a conventional innovation culture. The university works to embed the SDG agenda as a strategic priority from the top down across its four core functions of research, education, governance and operations, and external leadership. It takes the SDGs seriously as a moral obligation and/or as a pressure that the institution is compelled to adapt to, even if it is not convinced of the importance of revitalising sustainable development per se. As with the associated impact agenda, the university directs staff and students to engage with the SDGs in their work through a variety of compulsory and voluntary mechanisms including, for example, awareness raising, the inclusion of the SDGs as criteria in staff promotion processes, the resourcing of some SDG research initiatives and the incorporation of the SDG agenda into the institution's strategic plan. While some of these initiatives succeed in generating enthusiasm among some staff and students, others resist it as a bureaucratic imposition or adopt a minimal compliance mindset.

Transformational

The final scenario—the one we want to help generate through this book and other efforts—is focused on the need for transformation. It combines a deep institutional commitment and a bold, ethical innovation culture.

The transformational scenario involves a critical, ethical commitment to rapidly transitioning the university into a better position in order to help transition the world onto a more sustainable, socially just pathway. It commits to the principles and ethos of ethical innovation and works determinedly to scale bold, ethical innovations for sustainable development up and out, both across the University—from domain to domain, project to project, process to process, course to course—and across its stakeholder places, organisations and sectors. This institutional commitment is deep, bold and pioneering, showcasing and sharing different epistemological understandings and pedagogical practices, underpinned by visionary leadership, resources and support. If not now, then when?

Pathways and Provocations

The chapters of this book call for transformational change for universities in a world in crisis. The pathways and provocations of the book position the SDGs as a critical, regenerative lens for universities and higher education: an orientation and orienting device—outwards and inwards—to the past, and to a more positive future. The emphasis is not only about what universities can do for SDGs (although this is clearly important) but also about what SDGs can do for universities given their shared 'developmentality', neoliberal legacies and boundary-crossing character.

The first half of the book lays out the intellectual framework and practical agenda driving the book. This chapter outlines our critical approach to the SDGs as a witness statement to the unsustainability of modern development (including in higher education). Our starting point is feminist and critical social science scholarship that seeks to reframe and reshape the dominant developmentalities but also attends closely to the question of why and in what ways we should do so. The goal here is to shift attention from a focus on the 'the what' to 'the how' of the SDGs as a university priority and agenda. We then go further to focus on the equally critical questions of 'why' engage with the SDGs and 'to what ends' does/will this serve progressive ends for the university and society.

Core to this is reflecting on the particular social configuration known as academia that we are part of and considering how it is interacting

with—and could interact with—other aspects of the world. We make the case for universities to embrace a deep commitment to the SDGs combined with a bold, ethical innovation culture. This would lead to transformational change in and through organisations and the academic sector if operationalised effectively. It represents the scaling up of an idea—such as the SDGs—from a niche concept into the workings of institutions, up through the levels of governance that scales deep and wide. The SDGs become embedded in everything universities do—as critical co-production and regenerative assemblages.

In Chap. 2 we turn more explicitly to the evolving role of the SDGs within the context of the Anthropocene. The story of the SDG agenda is a story about development and the relationship between the present and the future. Not only does the SDG agenda aim to shift existing development trajectories but the way it is itself narrated by groups such as the UNDP above (the United Nations Development Program) casts it as a positive development in and of itself, as a kind of awakening and new age. What the SDGs do in practice, however, is far from certain or predetermined. Shaping its actual outcomes are legacies from the past, competing worldviews and different readings of the sustainable development challenge.

Within the context of the Anthropocene, the 2030 SDG agenda represents the goal posts we jointly need to orient towards and to find ways of working differently. These goal posts are wide and diverse but represent a significant shift from the *status quo* within both universities and society. Encompassing action on climate change, transformational innovation, resilient infrastructure, economic progress, gender equity, good governance and environmental sustainability, the SDGs represent a new standard by which good practice and success are now being understood and measured. They are stimulating interest in alternatives to dominant modes of development (including those within the university). The Indigenous Latin American worldview *Buen vivir* (living well) for example resonates with aspects of the SDGs[54] and invites ways to re-imagine higher education that pushes beyond the limitations of the neoliberal ideology committed to economic growth at the expense of the environment.

Chapter 3 directs and develops the focus on the reciprocal role of the universities and the SDGs as both process and outcome (i.e. means *and* ends) in the age of disruption, crisis and change. Moving beyond the nationalistic and individualistic competitor mindset, the SDGs encourage universities to heed the global call to action. Universities are vital to progressing the SDG agenda—both as large organisations in their own right and as enablers of others. They have a fundamental role to play across all four of their functions: learning and teaching, research impact, external leadership and internal operations. In the twenty-first century, universities have the opportunity and capacity to move into a leading position in supporting and promoting sustainability through research, education, external leadership and governance. This goes beyond mapping existing SDG capabilities, to embedding sustainability vertically and horizontally across diverse communities of practice, sectors and scales.

The main argument of Chap. 3 is that universities are not isolated ivory towers, floating free from the rest of the world. As their remaking as corporations over the last fifty years illustrates, they are 'of the world'. For better or worse, they are being constantly reshaped by the world and, for better or worse, they are continually shaping the world—in ways that far exceed laborious efforts at 'engagement'. Universities are not just enablers of change in the SDG agenda but also important targets of change. Whether conceived as primarily members of the public or private sector, universities are large organisations/institutions with a wide range of internal functions and responsibilities with far-reaching implications for the SDG agenda. For universities to perform their unique function as enablers of change, they need to simultaneously embrace their role as targets for change and ensure they are role modelling the sort of approaches and impacts they want to engender.

Chapter 4 outlines and articulates the principles underpinning 'Ethical Innovation' as a normative frame for higher education, that is, Responsible, Authentic, Disruptive, Adaptive, Regenerative (RADAR). The urgency and complexity of sustainable development means universities need to be more energetic *and* careful in generating change. There is a growing realisation that universities need to start taking questions about their purpose and approach more seriously. In this chapter we build on this by looking

in more detail at the question of how universities might work in a way that is resonant with the transformative aspirations of the SDGs. The aim is not to provide a blueprint for how universities can engage with the SDG agenda specifically but to move to the next question of how universities and those within them can *create the enabling conditions* needed to orient towards the SDGs.

To do so we look at complementary strategies for generating these enabling conditions with a focus on cultivating ethical innovation encompassing all areas of university activity. Ideas and practices around innovation and impact are intimately related to the base concept of development, and both point to the need to reclaim the concept, calling out contemporary conventional development as capitalist development and introducing the sort of *regenerative* development that the world badly needs, including universities. By inventing or legitimating some realities and not others, and being shaped in turn by those, knowledge production helps co-produce the world. With the world now in an increasingly de-generate state, there is an overdue need to critically evaluate this power and responsibility. In particular there is a need to examine how knowledge production and dissemination within universities has helped generate and is continuing to generate the current world from micro to macro scales, and to explore how it could re-generate more habitable and humane ones.

The second half of the book focuses on how the SDGs and higher education are co-produced in practice and the prospects for transformative change. Chapter 5 emphasises the role of research as an evolving development ethos and double-edged sword. Existing dominant approaches to university research are not adequately meeting societal and planetary needs as outlined in the SDGs. Nor are they meeting societal expectations or building public trust. Wider community expectations of what higher education can and should be within society are shifting. This includes growing calls to re-imagine what success looks like for higher education in the quest for the 'good university' driven by social good rather than profit to build sustainable societies.

Research is development-like, but—by positioning itself as a purported distant observer or disguising itself as a mere processor of others' values and wishes—it has not been subject to the sort of fierce reflexivity and renovations that social and economic development have. As a

development process, research now urgently needs to become more *like* sustainable development if it is to contribute usefully to sustainable development. Regardless of the topic area, discipline or institution, research needs to become more aware of complexity, uncertainty and the deeply political and ethical nature of all research endeavours (including those endeavours that are conspicuous in their absence), as well as its concomitant role in a sustainable future.

In Chap. 6 the significance and importance of learning and teaching (L&T) as critical pedagogy *about, for* and *through* the SDGs is explored. Understandings and practices around L&T are evolving to better address the need for meaningful real-world change. As educators this is an opportunity to attune to what is most important and to do what we do best. It is about pausing to ask hard questions about what the world needs and not simply what the market wants now. It is about celebrating what educators in universities are able to contribute by leveraging the power of our deep knowledge, academic networks and independence to not only do practical applied research of the sort many research actors can do but identify neglected issues and voices, articulate lessons from the past, critique existing approaches and anticipate possible futures including the shift to on-line modes of engagement.

There is a need to critically engage with what 'transformational' education means in the context of universities and their reciprocal engagement with the SDGs. Embedded with a critical praxis and building on the work of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), these transformational approaches are likely to be those that are student-driven, interdisciplinary and boundary crossing, with a strong emphasis on participatory approaches to knowledge, co-creation, generation and acquisition. L&T within the context of the SDGs is not value free, but a critical, ethical agenda focused on the changes required for a more sustainable future. The emphasis following the critical pedagogy of Paulo Freire is not just on 'what' is the L&T content, but 'how' and 'why' L&T in higher education matters, in what ways and for whom within the context of a rapidly heating and increasingly inequitable planet.

Chapter 7 is based around two questions that are often raised within the context of university engagement with the SDGs: What does success look like? How would we know? To respond to this the chapter takes up

the provocation of 'The Good University' and revisits the matrix and scenarios for transformative change around the SDGs in higher education. The idea of the modern university is a contested vision in a climate of growth-led change. The impacts of marketisation, globalisation and massification have created unprecedented shifts in both the real and perceived contributions of the university including the increasingly contested role of metrics data and indicators as measures of success.

Wider community expectations of what higher education can and should be within society are shifting. This includes growing calls to reimagine what success looks like in the quest for the 'good university' driven by social good rather than profit, to build sustainable and just societies that are able to co-exist within a healthy planet. What constitutes success and impact is constantly evolving—and will continue to do so—as a result of the shifting relationships between universities and society. Partnerships and processes are complex and relational and premised on the need for ethical innovation and commitment to achieve the transformative ambitions of the SDGs. Critical understandings and practices of what success looks like as a reciprocal agenda for universities in relation to advancing the SDGs must be articulated and are necessarily contested and mutually shaping. 'Becoming sustainable' must evolve in ways that better address meaningful real-world change.

The final Chap. 8 summarises ways to build capacity and momentum around the SDGs across the university—intellectually, practically and culturally. There is a substantial gap between academic-based, real-world-engaged approaches that catalyse positive action across sectors and business as usual. Addressing this involves strategies to harness the vital work already underway in higher education institutions, as well as frameworks for fostering new initiatives to trigger and scale up ethical innovation across the university. Whatever their size, shape, scale or funding model, or their capacity to cultivate and share ideas, methods and frameworks for the betterment of society—universities matter as formalised 'critical space' and agents of change.

Universities are committed to a public mission that underpins their purpose and function in society: as centres of new knowledge, understanding, skills and experience, through research, learning and teaching, leadership, outreach and service to society. As proponents of progress,

choice, debate and engagement, universities can set the pace for the SDGs in the key areas of society, culture, economics and the environment. They are strategic incubators for policy, research and advocacy, education and training, and professional and community engagement. In building a transformative agenda around the SDGs, higher education works to nurture niche initiatives that build on, link and extend existing work and build individuals' agency, as part of the critical changes needed to embed the transformative ethos of sustainability into the university structures and development processes.

Addressing s*ustainable* development in the Anthropocene is not about tinkering around the edges. Just as development cannot be fixed with international development add-ons, sustainability cannot be addressed with green add-ons. Shallow or tokenistic engagement with the SDGs risks distracting from and legitimating business as usual, thereby perpetuating the unsustainabilities that are pushing us towards deeper injustice and planetary collapse. Universities are as guilty of cynical, inauthentic engagement with the SDGs as any other institution. But they are also animated by an inherent future-focus, one that is core to their developmentality. The radical uncertainties of the Anthropocene do nothing to dim this focus, but they do blur our vision and demand we also look backwards, all around and into our institutions and selves to understand the situation we are in—and question what it is we are trying to develop. This is the transformative SDG agenda we imagine: a critical, ethical regenerative politics and praxis that seeks to reshape dominant development trajectories including those within higher education. A witness statement that constantly reminds us that other more sustainable futures are still possible.

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