7

What Does Success Look Like?

The Black Box of Transformative Change

Central to the SDGs as a critical framework and agenda for universities is the concept of transformation—deep change that can be forced or chosen, or somewhere in between.[1] To be 'for' transformational change is not to be undiscerning or naïve. Like the concept of resilience discussed in Chap. 3, transformation is far from 'apolitical, inevitable, or universally beneficial'.[2] By virtue of the fact that it can involve painful transitions and has 'the potential to produce significant material and discursive consequences',[3] including involuntary ones, transformation can have a dark side. Yet, when the *status quo* is untenable or under threat, transformation can be the best option. And when the *status quo* is tolerable but far from as good as it could be, transformation can also be the best option.

Both of these situations describe the transformational change called for by the SDGs. The SDG agenda makes clear that transformation is needed to not only redress intolerable inequities and reduce catastrophic risks (risks that threaten to impose swift and deadly transformations if unheeded) but also lift ambitions and enhance the presence of positives such as quality education. The centrality of education to the SDG agenda, as outlined

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in Chap. 6, is one of the many reasons why the SDG agenda holds such far-reaching implications for higher education. Others include the crucial role of research in SDG problems and action; the ability of universities to facilitate connections between sectors, to work internationally and to influence public discourse; the impact of universities as large investors and real estate managers; and the diversity and size of the groups and perspectives they encompass. All aspects and parts of higher education are implicated in the SDG agenda as both enabler and target of change.

The SDGs have swiftly amplified the importance of universities—and many other institutions and organisations—by underlining the need for the sort of positive social and environmental outcomes they are often uncritically presumed to produce, and by shifting the narrative around sustainable futures from being 'over there' to something everybody needs to create *here/now*. At the same time, the SDGs call universities and its individuals to account. More than just continuing our existing good work, those of us in universities are called upon to acknowledge our role in perpetuating problems and slowing progress, whether by sustaining barriers to integration and inclusion or remaining invested in aggressively unsustainable development. To contribute to transformational change in society we need to provoke the same kinds of changes in higher education.[4]

The case of universities makes clear that it is not only which organisations or sectors are involved in implementing the SDG agenda, it is how—in what ways and to what effect—are they are involved. Universities are already active on the SDGs but in many cases not to the extent or in the ways that are most needed. In a sense, it has been too easy for them. Universities are a natural fit with the SDG agenda thanks to their established expert role, contemporary interest in research impact, and long-standing commitment to the public nature, role and contribution of higher education. While this deeply reciprocal relationship between universities and the SDGs can lead to complacency, it also radically heightens the implications of the SDGs for universities. It opens up numerous 'lines of flight' for linking academic service/scholarship/advocacy/activism to broader societal and political futures and imaginaries to help shape here-to-fore unknown possibilities.

Fournier describes these lines of flight as the elusive moments when change happens when cracks in the often tightly controlled and circumscribed status quo open new spaces of critique and opportunity.[5] The future outcomes of such change are often unclear because 'lines of flight

are not headed on any particular trajectory'.[6] They are instead beginnings and possibilities, future-oriented but not reductively so, constantly circling back to reappraise the past and ever-changing present.

One of the cracks that are now opening up as a result of the SDG agenda are hard questions about the role of universities in sustainable development—past, present and future. As Boaventura de Sousa Santos argues, universities are 'undergoing—as much as the rest of contemporary societies—a period of paradigmatic transition … and it's as important to look back as to look forward'.[7] This refers to the need to look: (1) backwards to understand how growth and development have brought largely unrecognised costs as well as opportunities; (2) at the present to see how collective action is beginning to, or could navigate and mitigate the effects of unsustainable growth; and (3) envisage a future in which sustainable development permeates all elements of the university including its leadership, daily practices, culture and overall impact (see Fig. 7.1).[8] Attention to these three interrelated time frames enables universities—and by extension, wider society—to address the crucial challenge of how to acknowledge, repair and avoid repeating the mistakes of the past. That is—it allows them to learn and transform.

In this chapter we explore how universities can face this challenge by revisiting the matrix framework for transformative change in higher education we introduced in Chap. 1. In particular, we juxtapose the dominant model of university SDG success based on metrics and indicators

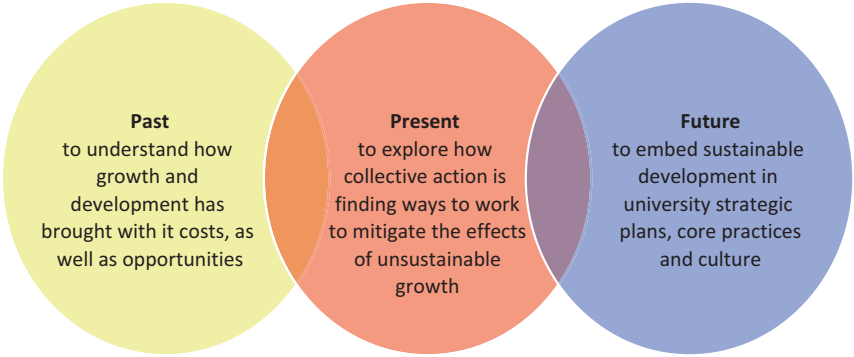

Fig. 7.1 Universities and the SDGs—past, present and future

with growing calls within and beyond universities to re-imagine what success looks like, including success linked to SDG action. We argue that beyond adding a list of new metrics, the SDG agenda in higher education needs to be framed as part of a broader quest for 'the good university' that seeks to build sustainable and just societies that are able to co-exist within a flourishing, healthy planet. We conclude by highlighting the need for intentionality in relation to transformative change as critical to what notions of success might look like—not as a blueprint plan, but as a deep-learning process for universities around 'becoming sustainable'.

Shifting from Disengagement

All institutions and groups are inevitably helping shape the implementation of the global SDG agenda, even if they choose to do nothing (i.e. remain disengaged). The question is not so much whether or not they actively engage, but *how* they do so and whether they can do more to help cultivate the SDGs transformative potential. Empty, self-serving engagement with the SDG agenda is one reason the agenda is dismissed by some groups as merely rhetorical, or what Ruth Levitas would call a 'compensatory utopia'—an image of the future designed to 'educate desire' and guide critiques of the present, but not actually generate change. In contrast, we argue, the SDG agenda offers a practical utopia, one 'intended as goals, as real projects'.[9] Such utopias in action rely on three prerequisites: awareness that society *can* be changed by human agency (a transformative insight itself, as discussed above); a belief that progress or better worlds are possible; and an absence of fatalism.[10]

A fatalistic worldview is one in which people feel society is rigidly controlled, fixed and selfish. It can be a natural outcome of profoundly disempowering experiences, of the sort common to many groups in the world. Yet, as Levitas argues, the widespread, arguably growing, prevalence of fatalism in society is a barrier to practical utopian action. While a contemporary sense of the world being in decline (environmentally, socially) challenges utopian projects, it 'is not in itself an obstacle to utopianism'. Rather, 'it is fatalism that is the key issue' because in denying that society can be profoundly altered, 'much of the motive for the construction of utopias as goals is lost' and so too is their 'transformative

element'.[11] The key, Levitas concludes, is cultivating a hope and belief in our own individual and collective agency so that the transition appears practically possible. This is not the job of the utopian vision itself but of the fields of action where change is needed. Hope needs to be 'invested in an agency capable of transformation'.[12]

The uneven distribution of agency across society is not merely a matter of mental outlook or 'attitude', it is itself a reflection of the deeply inequitable structures and systems that the SDGs are trying to improve. While individuals' sense of agency and actual power is far from determined by their social position, some groups are privileged with more influence over our social systems than others. Mediating individuals' agency for better or worse are institutions. While unfashionable, institutions enable as well as constrain our agency, they 'hold us in time and they connect us to each other … they are part of explaining what has gone wrong, and central to working out what we might do to make it right'.[13]

Universities can be agency-generating institutions thanks to the platform, gateway and resources they offer. Moreover, universities believe in and symbolise human agency and social improvement—this is their core developmental nature. Although this aspirational element has been perverted by capitalism, as Tamson Pietsch notes: 'Universities still work with an understanding of time and human capacity that stretches beyond the frames of annual reports, funding cycles, government elections or even of individual careers'.[14] For this reason, universities are a vital field of action for working on utopian projects such as the SDGs.

Although many of us within universities frequently feel despair and perhaps fatalistic about our own agency, as institutions based on a developmental vision of a better future, universities do have a special capacity to demonstrate that desired futures can be generated through practical action. In doing so, they can help cultivate a wider belief that such change is possible, helping enable the SDG project in a profound, indirect way. To play this wider catalytic role, however, they need to ensure that they help expand and diversify the field of action for SDG engagement. They need to work with a wide range of groups within and beyond their walls in an equitable and encouraging way, ensuring that their conservative and elitist tendencies do not perpetuate the sort of heavy bureaucratic feel

that threatens to lock the utopian vision of the SDGs into the realm of empty rhetoric and cynicism.

In Chap. 1 we outlined four possible scenarios for how universities might engage with the SDGs and our arguments for why universities should take the option of transformative change (i.e. Deep, Ethical and Bold Engagement) seriously (see Fig. 7.2). The scenarios are structured around the two axes of *commitment* (from shallow to deep) and *ethical innovation* (from conventional to bold). Together they provide a useful heuristic tool for thinking through options for the university and their implications. In particular, they prompt reflection around two key questions: How deeply will the university commit to the SDGs—now and into the future? How bold and ethical will the innovation culture be—in what areas, why, when and by whom? We return to consider these scenarios in the following sections of the chapter.

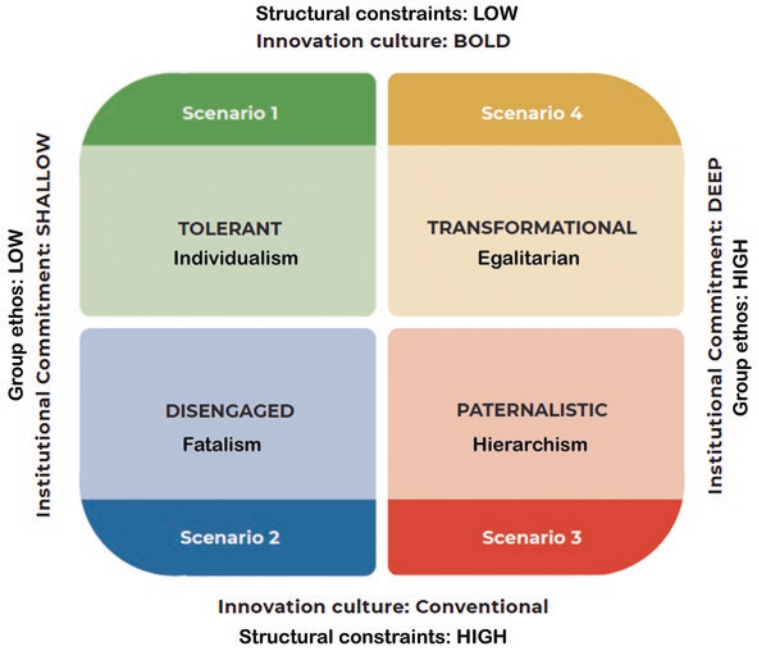

Fig. 7.2 Four possible scenarios for university engagement with the SDGs, overlaid with the four worldviews of Cultural Theory

There is an important alignment here between these scenarios of SDG engagement and the Cultural Theory framework that distinguishes four worldviews on the basis of two similar axes: group ethos and degree of structural order (referred to in the theory as how 'grid-like' society is) as outlined in Fig. 7.2. A strong group ethos and sense of moral commitment to others encourage in institutions a strong commitment to a collective goal, particularly one oriented at assisting others. Conversely, a weak group ethos encourages only shallow institutional commitment. A belief in or sense of strongly structured social order encourages standardisation and compliance and thus a conventional innovation culture, while a sense of low structural constraints encourages a culture of bold innovation. What this means is that which scenario a given university gravitates towards in its engagement with the SDGs likely reflects which underlying worldview is dominant within it. Critically reflecting on such worldviews and becoming conscious and adept at shifting between them is a powerful way of understanding and positively shifting systems.

To recap from Chap. 1 and explain the link to worldviews, the details of these four scenarios are outlined below:

- *Disengaged:* The first scenario represents a shallow institutional commitment and conventional innovation culture. In this situation, a university may initiate 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. Individuals striving to do things differently are implicitly discouraged and will likely move on to other more open-minded institutions or develop a sense of fatalism about their institution's and the university sector's contribution to the SDGs. If many universities adopt a Disengaged stance, their inherent potential to counter fatalism by building not just human capabilities but faith in them will be quickly eroded, allowing the SDG agenda overall to be more easily dismissed as merely wishful thinking.
- *Tolerant*: The second 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 may be doing creative and important things with. But those actively working on the SDGs are largely left to their own

devices in keeping with an institutional culture of competitive individualism. To the extent they succeed, it is despite not because of the institution, likely nurtured by niches of radical innovation that at least partially exceed the university (e.g. bold experiments with like-minded partners in government, business and community). The tolerance afforded SDG work stems not from a belief in or even understanding of the SDGs but rather from a blanket belief in any and all innovation, as well as an institutional structure underpinned by an individualistic worldview.

- *Paternalism:* In the third scenario a deeper institutional commitment is combined with a conventional innovation culture. In this scenario 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 SDG agenda seriously as a moral obligation, reflecting an inherent group ethos both in terms of a sense of the institution as a single and special entity that ought to have a coordinated approach, and in terms of performing the university's role as a benevolent, elite institution within society. However, this engagement with the SDG agenda may be driven by a desire to (be seen to) be doing the right thing as a responsible institution more than a deep belief in the need to, or possibility of, revitalising sustainable development as a transformative agenda per se. A paternalistic approach to the SDGs reflects an underlying Hierarchical worldview of the sort both universities and SDGs are renown for in some quarters.
- *Transformational:* The final scenario—and the one we support in this book—combines a deep institutional commitment to SDG action with a bold, ethical innovation culture willing and able to drive transformational change. It aims to rapidly transition the university and wider world onto a more sustainable, socially just pathway. This institutional commitment is deep, bold and pioneering, showcasing and sharing different epistemological understandings and pedagogical practices, underpinned by visionary leadership, resources and support. The Transformational approach reflects and cultivates an underlying Egalitarian worldview that appreciates the multiple, dynamic, far-reaching relationships that make up the world and universities' multi-

dimensional role within it. It is a scenario that exposes and calls out the stifling effects of more fatalistic, individualistic and hierarchical outlooks, underlining the importance of worldviews to the sort of systems change and 'attentive innovation' that the SDGs require.

These scenarios are not prescriptive and within each of the four scenarios there are multiple opportunities for taking pathways towards embedding a transformative SDGs agenda. As an internal agenda, the identification and calling out of *institutional disengagement, tolerance or paternalism*, for example, may be an important impetus for *shifting the status quo* from apathy and stagnation, ad hoc activities or tokenistic SDG-flavoured activities. Given the deadening effect of fatalism on implementation of utopian visions such as the SDGs, we especially want to underline the dangers of a Disengaged stance to the SDGs. For institutions (and individuals) in the Disengaged scenario, evolution towards a Paternalistic or Tolerant approach can be an important step forward. Both of the latter encourage positive actions of the sort we describe and can therefore help transition an institution towards a more Transformational style of engagement—one that engages with the SDGs deeply, ethically and boldly as the institution works with its wider community to tackle the 'big' issues, cultivating internal transformations as a catalyst for greater external impact, engagement and change.

For universities to build a transformative agenda around the SDGs, they need to nurture niche initiatives while fostering wider change, working with key decision makers to embed the SDGs in structures and processes, and create synergies across these. Guiding the sort of reflective approach needed are, we suggest, three broad principles for addressing the SDGs:

- *Reframe the agenda*—critically engaging with the transformative agenda of the SDGs, working towards positive impact and engagement that shifts the status quo;
- *Remake the matrix*—looking past obvious isolated cases of positive pro-SDG initiatives to considering the rest (main body) of what the University does and asking difficult but vital questions about how it is contributing to unsustainable development;

- *Nurture niches*—encouraging, enabling and protecting the incubation of new ideas, approaches and publics.

How successful a university is in these endeavours is, then, a key question. So too is the related question of how a university measures and evaluates its success. There are a number of ways in which universities might assess their success with the SDGs—formally or informally; quantitatively or qualitatively; across the institution or specific to a particular course, project or programme. The list is endless and reflects the way success is defined and negotiated within specific institutional settings and communities. This reflects, in turn, what sort of worldview is dominant. Different scenarios of university SDG engagement (e.g. Paternalism, Tolerance) are likely to define and measure success very differently. In the subsequent sections we illustrate this through cases of existing and possible techniques, such as Voluntary University Reviews (VURs).

Towards Paternalism

To move beyond Disengagement, one of the most common approaches is to begin to engage with the SDGs 'formally'. Besides officially signing on to the SDG agenda via UN processes, this includes engagement with the particular goals, targets and indicators the agenda lays out. In accordance with the good governance approach encouraged by SDG 17 on partnerships and implementation, this involves monitoring and evaluating progress. A wide range of data has become a proxy for success in progressing towards the goals and a consequent guide for decision-making about the ongoing allocation of resources and investments.

In situations such as the SDGs where there is a plethora of data that could be collected, it can be useful to use an indicator framework—a 'set of rules for gathering and organising data so they can be assigned meaning'.[15] Unsurprisingly, the formal SDG agenda proposes a specific set of indicators (231 of them) to guide data collection about progress towards its goals and targets. It is important to note two things about this turn to data and indicators. First of all, it predates the SDGs by a long way. Notably, modern universities are *already* strongly governed by metrics and saturated with indicators, reflecting the roll out of a neoliberal New Public Management

governance style since the 1970s to make institutions of all sorts more business-like. Combined with the plethora of metrics associated with the research excellence agenda, this means that universities now use an array of indicator frameworks to establish empirically based assessments and guide decision-making, notably investment decisions.

Metric-based approaches to governance can be valuable. For instance, advantages of using indicators include compiling baseline data around a particular topic; improving decision-making processes and current practices; and enabling changes within communities to be tracked over time.[16] However, technical or administrative methods such as indicators are never 'innocent or purely technical'.[17] They are infused with values, assumptions and biases and can create powerful unintended and/or unjust outcomes. In universities, the rise of an 'audit culture' has been met with fierce criticism from many academics who have pointed out that the 'mania for constant assessment'[18] has created perverse effects and the entrenchment of managerial power at the expense of academic freedom, trust and collegiality. Russell Craig and colleagues assert that 'audit-based university performance management systems' have a 'psychotic potential', perversely rendering 'much academic effort less effective'.[19] Critical reflection and care is thus needed in using indicators, even or especially when they seem highly mundane, standard and commonsensical.

Indicators vary in nature and type and there is no universal model of what constitutes a 'good' indicator. They evolve from different disciplines that tend to 'approach the problems of measurement and tracking from different perspectives'.[20] For example, indicators could be strictly quantitative and based on measurable data sources. In the case of learning and teaching, indicators could be developed by studying the number of programmes and courses that specifically mention or address a topic through course curriculum records. They can also be qualitative and based on student and staff perceptions of an issue. For example, a curriculum mapping exercise could be complemented with insights about people's perceptions of content and its applicability to real-world contexts.

Developing indicators that are meaningful and useful is not easy. Research and guidance on the rigorous development, practical application and monitoring of indicator frameworks is still evolving.[21] A mixed methods approach to indicators that combines social observation and

multiple sources of secondary data is often encouraged. Coulton and Korbin argue that irrespective of the type of indicator used, they must be able to be calculated or assessed with reasonable accuracy, and the data must be easily available and cost-effective. Importantly, they suggest that indicators 'have to be practical and should have implications for action—whether it is to drive change or preserve the status quo'.[22]

Traditionally indicators have been divided into three quite different types: economic, environmental and social. Economic indicators have been the most dominant and have typically addressed national elements such as employment, production, growth and inflation.[23] Environmental indicators refer predominantly to elements that relate to ecosystem processes and functions such as water, energy and the assessment of environmental impacts.[24] Social indicators have emerged more recently to assess social conditions and changes as well as shifts in urban conditions. Social indicators are often tied to notions of wellbeing for both individuals and society and these indicators have proven to be more difficult to develop and measure wellbeing directly, given how tricky it is to 'translate or operationalise abstract concepts (e.g. health, safety) into measurable terms'.[25]

Integrated indicators are those that do not fall neatly into the conventional economic, social or environmental categories. 'Sustainability', 'healthy cities' and 'quality of life' have evolved as integrated indicators. These indicators attempt to address the complex nature of their subject matter. Due to their very nature, these socially orientated indicators raise ideological and ethical issues around their role and usage, as well as their relationship to the real world. Their development thus requires a transparent understanding of the conceptual models and underlying theories that have guided the translation of the abstract into something more concrete.

International development has been far from immune to the 'new world order' of audit culture.[26] Monitoring and evaluation of development projects is now a professional field in its own right. Ironically, however, it is in this world of randomised controlled trials and globalised indicators that the politics and partiality of indicators have become especially apparent, reflecting and intensifying the wider politicisation of development.

A critical review of targets for the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) outlined how indicators act 'as a technology of governance' and able to exert powerful influence by: (1) setting performance standards against which progress can be monitored, rewarded or penalised, and (2) creating a 'knowledge effect' where the indicators intended to reflect a concept effectively act to redefine it.[27] The review concluded that there have been 'many unfortunate, largely unintended, consequences of *simplification* which framed development as a process of delivering concrete and measurable outcomes'.[28] These included:

- Diverting attention from important objectives and challenges
- Creating a silo effect
- Providing unintended incentives by setting the bar too low
- Designing indicators that were conceptually narrow, vertically structured and heavily reliant on technological solutions, neglecting the need for social change
- Framing the concept of development as a set of basic need outcomes, rather than as a process of transformative change in economic, social and political structures.[29]

More broadly, as Diana Liverman points out, the normalisation of indicators in international development work is argued to legitimate neoliberal processes and calculative practices, and bias development investments towards those targets thought to be the most amenable to measurement.[30]

The strong emphasis on indicators in the SDGs framework supports a culture of 'governance by indicators', accelerating trends in quantification and the use of 'governing by goals' to steer the production of evidence and knowledge for policy. This includes the use of SDG-based indicators among universities that are arguably predisposed towards governance by data. The related indicator-based approach to the SDGs resonates with the Paternalistic engagement scenario we outlined above. While it does offer subversive potential (as we discuss below), it is also one that demands ongoing care and vigilance within the context of higher education.

Reorienting Indicators of University Performance Towards the SDGs

The use of indicators to embed the SDGs into higher education is a newly emerging agenda that has been gaining momentum as universities around the world formally commit to advancing the SDGs (see SDSN Australia/Pacific 2017; GUNI 2018; HESI 2019). An example is the *Proposal of indicators to embed the SDGs into Institutional Quality Assessment* by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education of Andorra (AQUA) in collaboration with the Aragon Agency for Quality Assurance and Strategic Foresight in Higher Education (ACPUA), undertaken as part of the project 'Making connections between the institutional evaluation and the sustainable development goals'.[31] The aim of the proposal is to develop a whole-of-institution dialogue and strategic approach to connect an institution's quality assurance framework with the SDGs across all aspects of higher education. The framework builds on lessons learnt from quality assessment around Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) initiatives and is designed to assist universities with:

- *Interpreting* the SDGs in their higher education context;
- *Identifying* quality concerns that are relational to embedding the SDGs in higher education; and
- *Developing* indicators that could be used to improve, as well as assess, an institution's quality performance.

The framework is not confined specifically to the SDGs but focuses more broadly on sustainability and sustainable development and how this relates to the SDGs transformative agenda. The process is intended to be *collaborative,* focused on leadership and management, learning and teaching, research and knowledge exchange, staff and student experience, campus management, partnerships and outreach. A selected summary of one component of the indicator framework—Governance and Strategy—provides a guide for the focus and is outlined in Table 7.1.

In seeking to embed the SDGs into the institutional quality assessment of universities, the AQUA_ACPUA proposal seeks to move beyond

Table 7.1 Embedding the SDGs in higher education through an indicator framework—example of AQUA and ACPUA's governance and strategy framework

Components	Indicators	Assessment criteria
Governance and strategy	1.1 The SDGs form part of the institution's governance framework and implementation is reported in a transparent manner.	Evidence is submitted to confirm that: (a) The University Council or Senate has explicitly committed to sustainability and the SDGs (b) The Executive has explicitly committed to Sustainability and the SDGs
	1.2 The SDGs are included in university strategic documents as well as the University's planning cycle.	Evidence is submitted to confirm that: (a) The strategic framework or plan of the university recognises the SDGs (b) SDGs are embedded in the planning cycle (c) SDGs are embedded in the targets of the strategic framework or plan
	1.3 The implementation of SDGs is monitored and evaluated in line with targets and outcomes identified in the strategic documents.	Evidence is submitted to confirm that: (a) There is monitoring and evaluation in place (b) The outcomes of the evaluation inform the strategic work of the University
	1.4 Leading practice in implementing SDGs is recognised through internal and external awards.	Evidence is submitted to confirm that: (a) Staff have been recognised internally with a certificate/prize/seed funding, promotion (b) Leading practice examples have been recognised by an external award scheme or similar

compliance to include stakeholder participation in the development and implementation of initiatives. The intention is to recognise that an SDGs indicator framework is not a linear but a reflexive and circular process: one that fosters learning and innovation rather than compliance. A review of the initiative concludes:

> Those leading the project were concerned that the SDGs could result in compartmentalization of sustainability and superficial exploration, as many would be tempted to limit their engagement to an audit or tick-box exercise. However, the project experience has shown how the SDGs have acted as doorways eliciting interest in sustainability, originally via thematic pathways that look familiar and interesting to participants, giving value and recognition to existing efforts, but which then join up with other thematic concerns (or objectives) to construct an integrated or holistic framework for sustainability. In the stakeholders' own words, the project had 'shone a light on new pathways' and ignited 'a flame of interest' amongst stakeholders.[32]

Despite the increasing uptake of indicators and goals as success measures for the SDGs, their definition, measurability and outcomes remain highly contentious and tricky. Maria Kaika powerfully argues that, if approached as techno-managerialism, indicators can act as a form of societal immunology, neutralising the potential for real change and discouraging the sort of 'dissensus practices that act as living indicators of what urgently needs to be addressed'.[33]

We agree that indicators can be dangerous and vastly insufficient on their own. However, it is important not to mistake the question of whether to govern university action on the SDGs using indicators with the question of whether universities should be governed by indicators. The latter is already the case and ultimately we may wish to overcome this completely. In the meantime, SDG-based indicators offer a way of decentring *existing* indicators—such as those that make visible only research publications, journal rankings, research income and the number of students. SDG-based indicators can push universities to look past such artefacts to the better world envisaged by the SDG agenda.

In other words, while the question of *whether* universities should be so heavily governed by data remains an important one—given that they are, then using new more progressive indicators can in certain circumstances be a step in the right direction, especially if it helps shift an institution from the Disengaged space or helps generate support for the otherwise neglected hard work on SDGs by some university members. AQUA and ACPUA's approach demonstrates that an indicator framework does not have to be an end in itself but can be a way of flagging issues of concern, in this case, progress around the SDGs.

The highly mainstream new *Times Higher Education Impact Rankings* also illustrates some of the subversive potential of SDG-based indicators. University ranking processes exemplify and drive the hierarchical, competitive developmentality that now characterises higher education. The Impact Rankings are similarly a hierarchical global performance table. In contrast to other rankings, though, this one assesses universities against the SDGs using indicators across three broad areas: research, outreach and stewardship.

- **Research**: to what extent is the university creating knowledge to address the world's problems?
- **Stewardship**: to what extent is the university managing resources and teaching well, and enacting the 'good' university?
- **Outreach**: to what extent is the university directly acting in society to help meet the SDGs?

By introducing a qualitative distinction between research that is, and is not, 'creating knowledge to address the world's problems', the Index exposes the normal agnosticism of the research productivity and research excellence agendas on the core questions of what research is on and for. It disrupts the normal, purely quantitative assessment of research value by introducing the SDGs as an evaluative lens. Although the actual way in which the research is determined to be 'addressing the world's problems' remains limited and highly reductionist (based on key word searches), the Index introduces a range of new considerations. By emphasising the use of open questions that prompt critical reflection around the role of the 'good university', and the extent to which the university has the capacity and intention to meet societal needs, addressing the SDGs are

framed and positioned as far more than an area of expertise—but also internal processes and ethos. Of particular note is the emphasis on universities' management and sharing of resources, reflecting wider moves to make organisations accountable for 'externalities' such as greenhouse gas emissions and water use, and more generous towards their local communities and other constituents.

Again, there is significant room for improvement, such as the need to attend to how universities influence the world as large financial investors who may (or may *not*) choose to invest ethically. The point is that the new Impact Index opens the way to include the 'inner workings' of universities as physical entities in and of the world. This is a radical break from the conventional image of universities as largely disembodied nodes of knowledge production and financial flows, which underpins the standard university rankings cultivate. The Index's emphasis on different forms of outreach—not limited to typical knowledge dissemination and public education but including sharing campus facilities and services with community, for example—further supports the necessary new framing of universities as *in* and ideally *of* the world. Thus while governance by data remains problematic, they do offer a window of opportunity to ask critical questions and make visible previously neglected absences, as part of the broader SDG agenda.

Towards and Beyond Tolerance

In addition to, or instead of engaging with the SDG agenda formally, through an expansion and adaptation of their existing audit cultures, some universities are engaging with the SDGs in a more bottom-up manner, demonstrating the potential for more holistic and collaborative approaches to engaging with the SDGs. From an institutional perspective, these are generally in keeping with what we call a Tolerance scenario. However, given that our framework is a heuristic tool only, most examples of existing university approaches are hybrids of the ideal types we outline in our scenario framework.

One example is the experimental indicators that have emerged through the UN's voluntary review process at both the National (VNR) and Local scale (VLR). VLRs monitor the progress of *local* actors towards the achievement of the SDGs across each of the 17 Goals and the associated

targets. While this can seem top down, the crucial point is that they use *locally developed* indicators and often *locally collected* data for benchmarking themselves and monitoring specific needs and challenges. According to the United Nations Development Group, localisation refers to:

> the process of defining, implementing and monitoring strategies at the local level for achieving global, national and subnational sustainable development goals and targets This involves concrete mechanisms, tools, innovations, platforms and processes to effectively translate the development agenda into results at the local level. The concept should therefore be understood holistically, beyond the institutions of local governments, to include all local actors through a territorial approach that includes civil society, traditional leaders, religious organizations, academia, the private sector and others.[34]

A VLR is a tool that was originally designed to allow cities and local councils to assess their achievement of the SDGs and their contribution to the 2030 Agenda. It enables cities to prioritise actions and raise awareness about sustainability both within the administration and within the local community. New York City was one of the early adopters of an SDGs VLR, which it publicly presented in 2018. Many other municipal governments have followed suit. Across those involved, reported benefits of the VLR process for cities include:

- *Internal benefits for the city*—cultivating hidden connections, common framework, links between priority and data, sustainable networks;
- *External benefits at local scale*—encouraging transparent accountability, new cross-sectoral partnerships, building leadership;
- *External benefits at global scale*—engaging with the global community and elevating city leaders and priorities within the global conversation.[35]

As a holistic process, the VLR is as much about the journey as the destination. Local partnerships and networks are a central feature of the SDGs framework and the VLR process offers opportunities to strengthen links and foster collaboration both internally with students and staff, and externally with the community and other stakeholders. A number of

steps have been identified to assist with the preparation of VLRs and involve a wide range of actors and the collection of different types of data (both qualitative and quantitative) to form an integrated review profile and database. This may involve the identification and mapping of strategic goals against the SDGs at scale.

The VLR process aims to create a pathway for transformative action by identifying not only strengths but the silences that require urgent attention. By identifying priorities and ways to better address the SDGs, the VLRs can raise awareness, map activities across diverse areas and engage diverse stakeholders. Within the city context, the VLR seeks to be accountable, replicable and affordable, trackable over time (at least every three years), rooted in verifiable data analysis and comparable with other cities. Lessons learnt by cities who have undertaken the VLR highlight the opportunities and challenges of such an approach, including the fact that they can accommodate different styles and *vary in scope* to include a review of all SDGs or a selection of SDGs.[36]

Given its success with cities, the VLR has been adapted for Universities as a *Voluntary University Review* (VUR), generating interest from universities in Australia, the EU and South Africa. Carnegie Mellon University (CMU) in the US is the first University globally to publicly commit to—and report on—SDGs VUR. CMU is a small privately funded, research university with programmes in science, technology and business, to public policy, the humanities and the arts. The SDGs align with the University mission and the motivation for the VUR is to 'create a transformative educational experience for students focused on deep disciplinary knowledge; problem-solving; leadership, communication, and interpersonal skills; and personal health and well-being' by 'creating and implementing solutions for real problems, interdisciplinary collaboration, and innovation'.[37]

To initiate the SDGs VUR, the CMU undertook a formal commitment through which they: (1) hired an executive fellow; (2) established a web-page and email address for all SDGs-related queries; and (3) initiated a range of activities to engage the CMU community in discussions about the SDGs (e.g. a podcast, articles in the CMU community publication and dissemination of information about SDG-related activities occurring on campus, an interactive SDGs exhibit). This was followed by

a *Knowledge, Attitude and Practice survey* to understand the CMU community's existing activities and level of interest in the SDGs. Additional activities included collaborations with key partners such as The Brookings Institution and The Rockefeller Foundation to gather further strategic insight and information on the SDGs at CMU. The VUR was conducted by a Steering Committee, an executive fellow, a project administrator, a research associate, a sustainability intern and students enrolled in a special summer project course. The Advisory Council and wider members of the CMU community were consulted and provided important input.[38]

The VUR adopted by the CMU did not seek to adopt the metrics proposed by the UN to support the Voluntary *National* Reviews (VNRs) on progress towards SDG targets. Instead, its focus was on the SDGs framework as a cross-cutting sustainability agenda and thematic issues identified for each SDG. Rather than using an existing indicator framework such as the Times HE Impact Index to measure progress and success, the VUR process tracked activities based on desk-top mapping, in-person consultations and a review of CMU information submitted to the Association for Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education (AASHE). In this sense, the VUR arguably illustrates a bottom-up approach, one that demonstrates the way the SDG agenda can be engaged by allowing initiatives to blossom 'naturally'.

It also serves as a stepping-stone to further action. CMU's VUR pointed to various areas that need attention if SDG work at the university is to flourish. These include:

- Putting in place a more systematic or comprehensive process to collect information on CMU's education, research and practice as it relates to the SDGs.
- Increasing awareness across the wider CMU community of how interconnected the SDGs are (e.g. that they address topics such as racial inequality, gender empowerment, safe migration, police violence and many other pressing societal issues—not just the environment and climate change).
- Connecting groups working on specific SDGs in disciplinary silos across the university who were unaware of each other's work.

- Generating new SDGs-related initiatives to respond to COVID-19 and confront racism.
- Strengthening coordination and engagement on the SDGs within the CMU community, within the localities where CMU operates, and with other entities committed to achieving the SDGs.
- Recognising and rewarding SDG work that falls outside conventional coursework or research categories.
- Enabling more student-centred initiatives such as the 'seven summer project' course where students conducted outreach to student organisations to investigate how their activities relate to the SDGs.
- Increasing recognition that part of the value of the VUR is to encourage reflection and increase intentionality in engagement of the SDGs as an organising and inspirational framework.
- Continuing the VUR as an ongoing, iterative, reflexive and flexible process.[39]

In terms of our framework, the VUR has arguably helped move the university from Tolerance towards Transformation. The CMU provost James Garrett has promised to build the SDGs into the CMU's goals, making six public commitments:

1. We commit to educate CMU students around the world about the SDGs, recognising that this framework applies to all of us and represents a special opportunity to create a more peaceful, prosperous planet with just and inclusive societies.
2. We commit to help solve pressing problems brought to light by the SDG framework by acting boldly, taking risks and applying creativity.
3. We commit to do this work collaboratively, an approach deeply embedded in our university culture.
4. We commit that through education, research, partnerships and operational activities, we will demonstrate advancement of the SDGs at CMU.
5. We commit to create a Voluntary University Review of work being done at CMU and will report these findings in New York City as the UN General Assembly meets next year.

6. We therefore commit to do more to align our work with the SDGs and build on the good work already done by CMU faculty, students, staff and alumni—whether focused on mitigating climate change, eliminating food waste, reducing violence or ending human trafficking.[40]

The CMU experience illustrates that a VUR provides a possible pathway for embedding the SDGs within a university. It underscores that the SDGs are a reciprocal agenda for universities, and that they have key roles to play: (1) in working with their communities to lead efforts to achieve the SDGs; and (2) reshaping their own policies and practices in line with the SDGs framework and agenda. Furthermore, the CMU experience sends an important signal that individual and institutional action *can* build on the SDGs framework to create transformative change at scale, demonstrating and helping cultivate a vital sense of agency and thereby helping rescue the SDG agenda from empty rhetoric.

It is important to acknowledge that while the VUR is bottom up in some respects, the CMU VUR example also demonstrates the need for leadership, commitment and resources to turn the SDG agenda into meaningful action. CMU is a small, privately funded university. The capacity for large publicly funded universities to undertake a formal VUR is as yet unknown. Nor is there certainty about the capacity of early adopters such as CMU to continue to advance the SDGs in the contemporary political and institutional environment given that higher education remains predominantly and firmly framed by discourses of economic growth and development. To help positive niches such as CMU's work on the SDGs to thrive, other efforts are needed to help change the higher education landscape.

Towards Transformation

The SDGs agenda with its ethical focus on re-thinking the pathways and goals of sustainable development is, at heart, about 'people in place' and their inseparability from the health and sustainability of the planet. The specific emphasis in the SDGs on the need for 'transformation' raises the

stakes by bringing ethical and procedural focus to the centre of sustainable development. This requires attending to two key critical questions broadly outlined by Mark Pelling, Karen O'Brien and David Matyas:

- Who or what processes determine the mode and objects for change in higher education?
- What are the transformative pathways that will allow action on the SDGs to flourish within the university context?[41]

In her critical assessment of 'The Good University' and the need for radical change, Raewyn Connell argues that fragments are already existing, but need to be brought together in the service of society and planet. This is not universities as resilience machines, but as 'the weave of collective responsibility, labour, activity and possible futures'.[42] Alongside the need for universities themselves to be sustainable, Connell argues this brings to forefront the principles of democracy, truthfulness, creativity and engagement in order to serve society (but not always to agree with it). Building the lines of flight within higher education to sustain both humans and non-humans requires taking action to redress injustice and build community by finding different ways of approaching impact or success.

> The post 2015 development agenda and the SDGs need not only to go beyond "finishing the agenda of the MDGs" but also beyond setting goals and targets. Quantitative targets are powerful as a communications tool and can provide benchmarks for monitoring progress. But a transformative future development agenda requires a qualitative statement of objectives, visionary norms and priority action needed to achieve the objectives including legal, policy and global institutional considerations.[43]

Existing approaches within higher education to generate impact are not adequately meeting societal and planetary needs, nor are they meeting societal expectations or building public trust. If academic institutions are to secure their future, they need to demonstrate a genuine commitment and capacity to work with others to achieve the transformational changes needed. Part of this challenge—and opportunity—is to

re-imagine the role and nature of what constitutes success. All universities have an impact culture of some kind, even if that culture is to devalue broader societal impact relative to other agendas as a proxy for return on financial investment. Critical understandings and practices around success and impact can and must evolve in ways that better address meaningful real-world change.

The idea of impact is progressing from being just a required compliance add-on, market-based indicator or instrument for academic promotion, towards one critically focused on the values, purpose and 'spirit' of research that seeks to enable progressive (i.e. political) change towards the type of world we need to co-produce and create. To this end we outline what we describe as *3rd Generation* impact which uses the power of critical praxis to call out misrepresentations and abuses of impact and fight for a better future for universities and those they are genuinely meant to serve. A *3rd Generation* impact culture is prefigurative—it is needed *now* to generate its own conditions for flourishing. It is also regenerative. This is about forging a range of strategic alliances and tactics and working in both overt and covert ways to generate better, fairer and more sustainable futures, from the inside out. We refer to this as a transformative ethos.

There are three different stages of impact that we conceptualise as currently co-existing within higher education. As we describe in more detail below *1st Generation* has a focus on academic relevance and investment reciprocity, *2nd Generation* focuses on the role of research partnerships and value-adding embedded networks, and *3rd Generation* involves universities critically engaging with how, in what ways and to what ends notions of success and impact are being imagined and pursued (see Table 7.2).[44]

Table 7.2 Generating impact in higher education

Impact culture	*1st Generation*	*2nd Generation*	*3rd Generation*
Key foci	Demonstrating academic rigour and relevance to encourage end-user uptake as impact	Working more actively to ensure legitimacy and collaboration within impact culture and literacy	Purposefully fostering the co-production of impact across boundaries

1st Generation Impact Culture

Many researchers and related institutions still think of impact as a matter of defending public and private investment in the university research sector. We describe this as *1st Generation* impact where the dominant approaches include encouraging a given group of intended end-users (e.g. manufacturers, policy-makers) to adopt the research and thereby help transform it into an innovation; and translating and disseminating research in the academic and public domains by making it intellectually and practically accessible, akin to university 'outreach'.

These approaches can be useful and important, yet this *1st Generation* approach to impact risks being compliant, formulaic and superficial within the broader institutional and societal context. Researchers can struggle to see the point, and are generally under-resourced to assist, understand or even hear about any audience engagement with their work. 'End-users' may not exist in reality or not appreciate being told to use something they may not really want, while actual commercial beneficiaries may lock innovations behind closed doors, limiting their value to researchers and the world. In the midst of this, research funders can be underwhelmed by inflated claims of impact and rigidly focused on an unrealistic ideal of initiatives producing demonstrable, quantifiable, attributable outcomes.

More fundamentally, a *1st Generation* impact culture leaves unexamined the deeper questions around: *Who* informs research and pedagogy? *Why* do the research/learning and teaching/engagement? *Who* benefits from higher education?

2nd Generation Impact Culture

In response to growing cynicism around the drivers of *1st Generation* impact, we argue there has been a shift towards *2nd Generation* impact. This latter approach recognises that in order to produce positive impactful changes in the world, universities need to appreciate that problems and solutions are not self-evident or only of their choosing. What counts as a real problem or a satisfactory solution for a given set of stakeholders

is always contestable, always a matter of shifting priorities and circumstances. This includes greater recognition that the impacts that universities generate are not always or necessarily positive from the perspective of designated 'end users'—but can be maladaptive in ways unintended.

Rather than just seeking to maximise the impact of a given area of research, the goal extends to working collaboratively to generate outcomes that research partners recognise as valuable. Centring partnership perspectives means that *2nd Generation* research impact aims for research that is both relevant and legitimised.[45] The linear 'push' of *1st Generation*—*from* researchers *to* end-users—is replaced with a process that is more circular and iterative, includes social, cultural and environmental priorities in addition to economic and bibliometric ones, and recognises that impact emerges out of relationships and needs to be supported by impact literacy across the university.[46] Yet even as this *2nd Generation* impact seeks to gain momentum, an even more transformative and ambitious approach is needed to drive change.

3rd Generation Impact Culture

A transformative approach to impact focuses on the need for change not just 'out there' in the wider community but also 'in here' within dominant university policies and practices. It asks not just '*what*' new research technologies or data are needed but also '*how, why, for whom and to what ends*' higher education impact is able to support positive societal change. Impact is understood as potentially vital and even radical. It requires critically engaging with both the means and the ends, including the role of an institution's impact culture and what is possible when a positive impact culture is deliberately cultivated.[47]

A *3rd Generation* impact culture cultivates an ethos of impact that doesn't just scale out and up but also aims to *scale deep* through critical engagement with the systemic and societal nature of the societal challenges being faced.[48] It encourages universities and researchers to take the question of impact as a serious question, learning opportunity and critical change agent in its own right. It recognises that research and L&T

involve value-laden decisions from start to finish, and inquires into the collective impact of these and our other endeavours in universities.

A *3rd Generation* impact culture also actively encourages—even requires—bottom-up, community-grounded approaches to reshaping existing hierarchies that inhibit real change. Taking a critical, interdisciplinary approach to the 'public value' of higher education, it calls for difficult conversations in and about universities and related communities of practice. In particular, it calls into question the extent and ways that university-based activity is actually helping the world address key challenges such as the climate emergency. This is why—although a range of impact cultures and success indicators may currently co-exist within universities—it is *3rd Generation* impact that is urgently needed. At an institutional and sectoral scale, it pushes forward the following questions for evaluation:

- What type of world are we helping generate through our universities, individually and collectively?
- What do we need to do more of, or less of, differently?
- How can we create positive impacts across and between the work we and our institutions do?

Overall, dynamic, complex and urgent situations mean that in addition to a diversity of project-based initiatives on the SDGs, larger, more anticipatory, agile, discerning and wide-ranging approaches to higher education success and impact are needed to generate the critical change needed. Although the reach of universities is increasing, so too are impact needs, with current academic practices failing to arrest profoundly dangerous trajectories such as climate change. Too many activities and initiatives remain focused on narrowly defined impacts, too many groups in society remain left out of research conversations, and too often what is asked of researchers by funders is out of step with future challenges and ignorant of realities. But there are alternatives.

Responsible and Intentional Higher Education

The prospect of *intentional* transformational change prompts critical reflection about what we want to change and what we want to protect or grow. Often it necessitates looking beneath surface appearances and revising initial assumptions about goals and presumed inevitabilities. Common to many deliberate transformation efforts is recognition of the non-inevitability of many existing structural patterns and norms. A desire for transformation often pushes community members and decision makers to tackle root social causes such as power imbalances, layered injustices, paradigms, worldviews and values. Conversely, frustration with and desperation about such entrenched problems is often what pushes people to aim for transformational change.

That deep social injustices can and should be redressed is one of the core messages of the SDG agenda. It is transformational in its own right for the way it implicitly exposes society as more malleable than many people assume. Intentional transformational change in society is revealed as a more serious possibility, and the buried choice between normalised incremental change agendas and more systemic transformative ones is brought to the surface.

Concurrently, the SDG agenda underlines that nature (as in the Earth System that we are a part of) is less malleable than assumed by many—or at least by those with an Individualist worldview (see Chap. 2) which presents nature as tough and mouldable. As indicated in Chap. 3, the SDG agenda is consistent with a broad acceptance that nature—including the Earth System as a whole—has limits to the amount of stress and disturbance it can cope with before flipping (transforming) into another state, one far less habitable for today's living beings. Facing this truth reveals unintentional transformational change across all physical and social domains to be a far more serious possibility than usually acknowledged. The problem of immanent, unwanted transformations in the planet and our living conditions once again brings to the surface the buried choice in society between normalised incremental change agendas and the more systemic transformative ones we need.

The challenge is how to avoid unintentional transformational change by embracing intentional transformational change. Unfortunately, how to generate and guide positive transformational change is poorly understood, given previous neglect of the topic. As climate change adaptation scholars Mark Pelling, Karen O'Brien and David Matyas note, many questions demand attention:

> What is the theoretical relationship between transformation, incremental adaptation, stability and resilience, and how might these processes interact? How and where might transformation emerge and spread? In what ways does transformation provoke changes in the approaches taken by researchers and practitioners?[49]

The intellectual and practical challenge of how to stimulate, coordinate and even research positive transformation is at the heart of the SDGs. With its 17 diverse and ambitious goals (eradicating poverty, tackling climate change, creating safe, resilient and sustainable cities, achieving gender equity, among many others), the SDG agenda demands real systemic change but does not articulate how it is to be achieved. The SDGs are a work in progress, a problem statement more than a solution. Vast knowledge gaps remain internationally around how to plan for and implement them, how to monitor and evaluate progress and how to develop the skills and capabilities needed across governments, business, NGOs/civil society and universities to advance transformative change.

Combined with lack of political will, the result is a growing *implementation* gap as the world keeps charging along in the wrong direction, ignoring the warnings of multiple SDG progress reports that, like a GPS map, are tracing the ongoing, and in some cases growing, distance between where we are and where we should be. For example, society's global material footprint (amount of material resources used) increased 17.4% between 2010 and 2017, rising across all categories of materials (metals, non-metal materials, fossil fuels and biomass) from a total of 73.2 to 85.9 billion metric tonnes per year. Partly as a result, climate change and biodiversity loss are worsening, not improving, at the global level.[50]

Although there is increasing support for the SDG agenda, and much action in terms of planning, indicator frameworks, capabilities mapping and SDG badging, too much is stuck in the promotional and marketing sphere and too little is translating into practical action. This leaves us poorly prepared to cope with new problems and 'external' shocks, such as the COVID-19 pandemic that the *Sustainable Development Goals Report 2020* warns has pushed more than 71 million people back into extreme poverty, reversing gains in reducing poverty since 1998.[51]

As part of re-thinking what success looks like in relation to the SDG agenda we would like to offer three key markers of an emerging transformative agenda for universities. Complements to clear and bold action on specific SDGs such as climate action, these cross-cutting areas highlight the different scales, angles and alliances for action that an SDG commitment can engender in universities.

1. *Explicit recognition of Indigenous sovereignty*

As outlined in Chaps. 1 and 2, engaging with the SDG agenda means engaging with the history of (un)sustainable development and universities' ongoing role within it. Inseparable from this history is colonialism. Part of 'bearing witness' and taking responsibility for the harms of these *developmentalities* is redressing silences and inaction on Indigenous truths, rights and sovereignty, both within the formal SDG agenda and universities. Indigenous sovereignty and futures are intimately linked to any meaningful notions of success around the SDGs as a transformative agenda. In universities, recognition of Indigenous sovereignty needs to be embedded into all elements of the institution alongside the SDGs.

Part of the challenge is to re-think forms of knowledge production that privilege predominantly western ways of knowing and being over others: where 'knowledge production and everyday relations are informed by European colonial modalities of power and propped up by imperial geopolitics and economic arrangements'.[52] As articulated by Konai Helu Thaman within the context of decolonising Pacific Studies:

> For me, decolonizing Pacific studies is important because (1) it is about acknowledging and recognizing the dominance of western philosophy,

> content, and pedagogy in the lives and the education of Pacific peoples; (2) it is about valuing alternative ways of thinking about our world, particularly those rooted in the indigenous cultures of Oceanic peoples; and (3) it is about developing a new philosophy of education that is culturally inclusive and gender sensitive.[53]

A decolonising approach to the SDGs means querying universal claims to knowledge and interrogating how they marginalise and discount places, people and knowledges across the world[54] and working to build Indigenous sovereignty into SDG responses whether such responses involve research on cities or climate change, teaching on innovation and infrastructure, investment in programmes and partnerships, or campus sustainability and equity initiatives. It means advancing the SDGs by following Indigenous people in asking hard questions around economic ideology, progress and sustainability[55] and pushing for more ambitious change within colonial institutions and people. It means facing ongoing tensions between claims of transformative change and the continuing violence of everyday colonialism.[56]

2. *A Strong, Empowered Union and Student Movement*

The role of a strong empowered staff and student movement is fundamental to the transformation of the higher education sector towards a more sustainable future. In the face of system-wide inequity and an aggressive economics-first mentality, they are the drivers of action-led change within and through their institutions, particularly when those institutions fail to drive such change themselves.

The importance of university trade unions in advocating for the voices and interests of academic staff, including casualised ones, has been more apparent than ever in recent years as staff have been asked to bear the brunt of myriad financial pressures, worsened but not caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. One of the benefits of these efforts has been to highlight the potential for higher education trade unions to help achieve the transformative potential of the SDGs at the local, regional, national and global scale. Indeed, some trade unions are already very involved in the SDGs, working in solidarity with university staff to ‘uphold freedom

of association, protect social dialogue and collective bargaining, and promote decent work, social protection and the rights of working people'.[57]

Students are similarly showing solidarity through representation in groups that build capacity to tackle inequality and the root causes of the sustainability crises that the SDGs have emerged in response to. The student-led movement for university fossil fuel divestment, for example, demonstrates an awareness of not only the enormous financial wealth that some universities have but of the negative impact that wealth has in the world if not deliberately and carefully directed to positive ends.[58] In loudly calling out government inaction on climate change, student climate protests also make obvious how silent and complacent most university leaders' are on the issue. Students are also beginning to come together over broader sustainable development issues. In 2018, for example, thousands of African students participated in the Africa Students' and Youth Summit 2018 (ASYS) Kigali, Rwanda to contribute towards the SDGs and African Union Agenda 2063.[59]

Given the intelligence and passion of students and staff, some universities are beginning to involve them in not just one-off events but sustained, transparent and genuine institutional efforts. SDG action by staff and students in higher education cannot be bound by institutions. Networks and associations of all kinds—from discipline-based academic groups to professional associations of research managers, from networks of campus managers to student sports clubs—all need to be enrolled in helping reorient the sector towards more sustainable and just futures. At the same time, all need to be asked to reflect on what they are doing, and what they could be doing, to galvanise positive action on the SDGs. To what extent are they inclusive, equitable, environmentally sustainable and working within their spheres of influence for regenerative futures? Alliances across such groups, further deepen their influence.

3. *A Well-resourced and Supported Library*

A third key area that we see as a vital sign of higher education engagement with the SDGs is the health of the library. The role of libraries in relation to their contribution to the SDGs specifically has been articulated as the six 'P's of libraries and development which reflect both

traditional and emerging roles of libraries.[60] These roles include protecting research heritage and presenting it in a way attuned to its tensions and silences; providing research, and research tools, to support staff and students and enhance the quality of their work; empowering staff and students with the skills and knowledge they need to do critical work, such as how to negotiate academic sources in a discerning and just way; providing portals to other services including those designed to support the wellbeing of staff and students; partnering with those working in other parts of the university to generate positive outcomes such as more equitable access to resources or better research impacts; offering platforms for collaboration between staff, students and other groups, serving as community hubs by hosting courses and seminars for example; and producing events and resources to help increase awareness, engagement and positive impact around the SDGs (see Fig. 7.3).

While they do not attract the same attention as the core areas of universities (research, learning and teaching, leadership and external engagement), libraries are at the heart of universities and can act as critical knowledge brokers and conduits for positive change. For example, some libraries are strong advocates for 'open access' and the sharing of knowledge by making resources such as reference collections available to the community.[61] As both physical and virtual spaces that stretch across and beyond universities, encompassing people from diverse age groups and backgrounds, libraries are also often an essential part of a university's infrastructure of care, providing a sense of wellbeing and belonging. Can you imagine a university without its libraries?

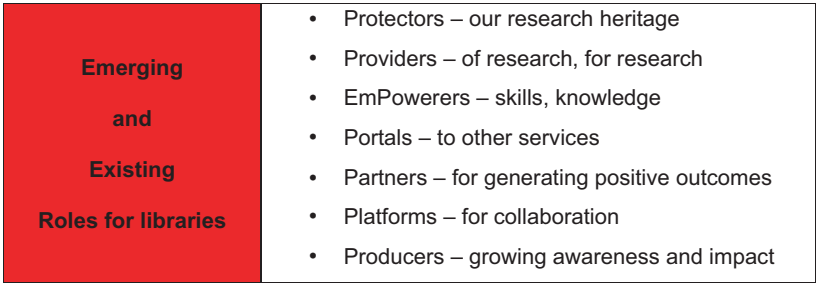

Fig. 7.3 Existing and emerging roles for libraries and the SDGs. (Adapted from IFLA 2020)

Despite their vital role, many university libraries are under budget pressure, especially in the wake of the pandemic,[62] reflecting longer standing struggles to communicate the value of library services.[63] Explicitly positioning libraries at the centre of universities' SDG work could increase the support they receive. To do so, however, requires reconsidering the success of academic libraries in light of SDG outcomes. How do their collections stack up, for instance, from a sustainability, resilience and justice point of view? What sort of world are they implicitly helping create? These are the sorts of questions that all units, areas and services of a university need to ask themselves.

The flourishing (or not) of libraries, staff and student groups, and action on Indigenous sovereignty are all bellwethers of the health and vitality of the university and its capacity, commitment, sincerity and intentionality to really advance the SDGs in a transformative way.

Becoming Sustainable in Higher Education

Success takes many forms and is pursued at different strategic, sectoral, spatial, temporal, virtual and disciplinary scales within contemporary universities. Following Kamola 'It is important to remember that universities are always multiple, with many histories, and many crises'.[64] The unsustainable development trajectory that universities are part of is a critical but neglected element of these crises, one that cannot be separated from or trumped by others. We understand and support critiques of the neoliberalised university model and the crises it has engendered and understand why it has pushed some people to turn away from universities or give up on their transformative potential. However we argue that the importance of the SDG agenda requires that we revive universities, reinstate a more progressive impact imaginary within them and work from the inside out to mobilise transformative change.

It is increasingly apparent that the transformational change demanded by the SDGs requires transformational change in how we work. Three challenges especially need to be tackled. One is the tendency to go for siloed, reductionist solutions. The SDGs are designed (albeit imperfectly) to be an integrative framework, not a menu. Implementing them requires

sophisticated, conscious integration, whether by designing activities at the nexus of multiple issues (for food, water and energy), ensuring interventions are implemented in ways that enhance not hinder progress on other goals, forging agreements across different domains about what counts as valid evidence and a feasible proposition, or building innovative, interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary capabilities and practices. All of this requires redoubling efforts to deconstruct and tunnel through the maze of boundaries we have built at multiple scales between different areas of work, including higher education and 'the rest of the world'.

Second, implementation of the SDG agenda needs to be scaled up, out and deep. Many projects identify great potential but are limited in effectiveness because they do not cultivate the enabling conditions needed to ensure that positive initiatives endure and others are more easily instigated. To go beyond a string of isolated and temporary efforts, SDG projects need to scale up into policy and strategy, deep into cultural norms and understanding, and out into new contexts.[65] To achieve this transformation, we need to remedy our over-reliance on short-term, bounded 'projects' and the short-term precarious jobs that go with them—which in itself demands another transformational change.

Third, we need to evolve the collective SDG 'project' from its UN origins and nation-state hierarchy to more *inclusive* decentralised, transnational practices that open the way for community, not-for-profits, business and individuals to contribute more fully through the local and subnational networks, movements and arenas. Unfortunately, many responses to the SDGs agenda to date are fragmented and characterised by indicator-it is, marketing mania and empty elite endorsements (e.g. formal and formulaic statements of support for the SDG agenda by corporations and large government bodies, often completely divorced from staff and everyday activities). Such an approach is not inevitable and better, more inclusive ways of doing things within the university context are possible.

What constitutes success and impact is constantly evolving and will continue to do so as relationships between universities and society shift. 'Transformative' impact will by definition be 'transforming': political and not passive; enabling and not disabling; and with the capacity to disrupt the development *status quo*. An overly rigid or narrow representation of

what success around the SDGs looks like and the conflation of impact with measurement of fixed indicators ironically serves to reinforce the infamous moniker—'there is no alternative'. As de Sousa Santos articulates in terms of higher education indicators:

> The weakest of them all are the nonanswers, the silences, and the taken-for-grantedness of the new common sense about the mission of the university.[66]

To generate the *significant impact* needed—no matter the size or scale—requires not only working in inward-facing and outward-facing ways but working across boundaries of all sorts. We need critically engaged cross-disciplinary approaches that link across and weave together impact to challenge, subvert, disrupt, resist, re-imagine, recalibrate society's big challenges and opportunities. Work on the 4th Industrial Revolution, for example, demands the insights of the social sciences and humanities if its impact is to be empowering, rather than divisive and dehumanising. We also need to find the critical synergies and lessons across, within and between projects, programmes, partnerships, networks, associations and institutions to create multiple, co-existing forms of engagement and impact.

Critical understandings of and practices around success need to be part of the reciprocal agenda for universities and the SDGs whose actions and outcomes are mutually shaping and must evolve together in ways that better address meaningful real-world change. 'Becoming sustainable' must be 'worked and reworked as a politics that is already and always in the making'.[67] A vital first step is to help demonstrate that a degree of success is possible, cultivating renewed faith in human agency.

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