8

Sustainable Futures

The Urgent Need to Face Injustice and Unsustainability

> *Is there any other institution (except possibly government) that combines so many social functions? Is … so diffuse and unreadable in its core objectives? So self-serving and other-serving at the same? So easily annexed to a range of contrary agendas: conservative and radical, capitalist and socialist, elite and democratic, technocratic and organic? … But the university rarely holds to a single course. It continually disappoints. It always falls short of potential. But we defend it. We sense that if it were lost then something quite fundamental, and probably essential, would be lost.*[1]

Sustainable development in the Anthropocene is not about tinkering around the edges. Just as development cannot be genuinely fixed with international development add-ons, sustainability cannot be addressed with green add-ons. Despite all the effort going into devising new 'eco' things—from energy-efficient buildings to electric cars, low carbon clothes to biodiversity-friendly coffee—the gravity of the sustainability crisis demands that we face up to what John Barry calls 'the politics of actually existing unsustainability'. Barry argues that we need to 'identify

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and reduce existing *unsustainabilities* as a precondition for, and prior to, any aim to articulate and achieve future sustainability or some future sustainable development path'. This means recognising that 'reducing actually existing unsustainability may be as much about "letting go" or reducing existing practices as proposing something new'.[2]

Partly because they have been so environmentally unsustainable, development paths to date have also been profoundly unjust, causing the death, degradation and displacement of people and non-humans around the world. Like unsustainability, addressing this 'actually existing injustice' is also a precondition for future sustainable development and requires far more than add-ons by universities and others. It means acknowledging, arresting and preventing the ongoing social harms perpetuated by dominant systems, and redressing the way in which harm to certain groups is normalised, disregarded and denied by pushing ourselves to design wiser, regenerative approaches that enhance the wellbeing of all.

The SDG agenda aligns strongly with the need to face the politics of actually existing unsustainability and injustice. Encompassing virtually all human activities, many of the goals are expressed as reducing undesirable practices. Some move beyond symptoms to address causes, such as (un)responsible consumption and production, (non)clean energy and (un)sustainable food systems. In this way, the SDG agenda implicitly communicates Aristotle's point that 'What it lies in our power to do, it lies in our power not to do'.[3] That said, the way in which the agenda is being implemented suggests that the politics of actually existing unsustainability and injustice are being side-stepped. Too often it seems that SDGs are being employed only rhetorically or cherry picked and placed alongside business-as-usual activities as a novel side-interest or compensatory marketing-oriented effort.[4]

Our approach in this book has been to position the SDGs as a witness statement to the unsustainable and unjust trajectory of development (including in higher education), and the transformative prospects and pathways for a sustainable future. Combined with the transformational character of the change in the world that the SDG agenda is seeking, this means the adoption of the SDGs in higher education promises to have deep and wide effects for the sector. None of this will be automatic,

however. The SDGs require conscious and reciprocal processes of transformative 'change in education' *and* 'education for change'.[5]

Our starting point is the crisis state of the world, and the need to fundamentally reframe the dominant 'developmentalities'. The goal here is to shift attention from a focus on the 'the what' to 'the how' and 'the why' the SDGs are a priority for re-imagining higher education. As we have described, the story of the SDGs agenda is also the story of development. What the agenda does in practice, however, is far from certain. The SDGs represent the goal posts we jointly need to orient towards in the Anthropocene. These goal posts are wide and diverse but represent a significant shift for both universities and society. Moving beyond the nationalistic and individualistic competitor mindset, the SDGs encourage universities to work with others to heed the global call to action.

Like others, we believe that universities are vital to progressing the SDG agenda and have a fundamental role to play across all four of their functions: teaching and learning, research impact, external leadership and internal operations.[6] What we particularly emphasise is that 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. The urgency and complexity of sustainable development, combined with universities' multidimensional and influential role in creating the present and future, means that they need to be more thoughtful *and* energetic in generating change.

In Chaps. 1 and 7 we outlined four possible scenarios for how universities might engage with the SDGs, structured around the two axes of *institutional commitment* (from shallow to deep) and *innovation* (from conventional to bold and ethical). Together they provide a useful heuristic tool for thinking through options for the university and their implications, including what success might look like. 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? Only by progressing on both axes will universities be able to achieve the sort of transformative change they need in order to contribute to the transformative change that the world needs.

In Chaps. 4 and 6 we outlined the principles underpinning 'Ethical Innovation' as a normative frame for higher education. These principles are: Responsible, Authentic, Disruptive, Adaptive, Regenerative (RADAR). Regardless of topic area, discipline or institution, research institutions need to become more aware of complexity, uncertainty and the deeply political nature of all research choices and endeavours (including those endeavours that are conspicuous in their absence). This is mirrored in the need for critically reflexive higher education that is *about, for* and *through* the SDGs.

Throughout the book we have argued that understandings and practices in higher education must evolve to better address the need for meaningful real-world change within the context of a rapidly heating and inequitable planet. Universities and society are becoming more complexly entwined, and notions of university success and impact are shifting accordingly. As we have emphasised, the role of the SDGs is two-fold here: representing an agenda to which universities are called upon to contribute, but also a map of the many ways universities themselves need to change. The reciprocal character of the universities and SDGs—intellectually, practically and culturally—means that all universities are implicated in the SDGs as potential 'critical spaces' and agents of change, regardless of their particular characteristics.

Universities: Part of the Problem *and* Solution

Shallow or tokenistic engagement with the SDGs by universities risks legitimating business as usual, thereby perpetuating the processes and systems that are pushing us towards deeper injustice and planetary collapse. Jan Vandemoortele argues that because national governments are likely to—and indeed are beginning to—cherry pick goals and targets to suit themselves and avoid real change, 'civil society, academics, social partners, and other relevant stakeholders must become more involved in target setting, monitoring and critiquing SDG implementation'.[7]

We agree fully with this diagnosis and the call to action for 'academics'. However, it is important not to presume that academics are not as guilty of cynical, inauthentic engagement with the SDGs as any others.

Universities' strongly vested interest in novelty and techno-centric innovation, often individualistic belief in a narrow conception of academic freedom, and uncritical endorsements of research impact, mean that they are often in the thick of unsustainable and unjust business-as-usual activities and visions, such as unending growth in research grant income.

At the same time, universities have a unique capacity to take up Barry's call to 'identify and reduce existing *unsustainabilities*' and to help articulate and achieve a 'future sustainable development path'. As we have discussed in the previous chapters, this poses real challenges for universities and all of us working within them. What is needed in universities is not only more effective means of generating impact, but a more discerning analysis of *what impact is needed* given the impacts that have been generated (intentionally and unintentionally) to date. We also need more robust appreciation of the role of resistance, avoidance and strategic ignorance in the *politics* of unsustainability and injustice.

Such politics does not begin outside of the walls of the university with policy-makers, other 'research end-users' and graduates, who often seem to refuse to understand or adopt our findings or teachings. It is firmly at work within universities, working through myriad channels from research funding to peer review, course offerings to curriculum details, HR choices to procurement decisions, institutional messaging to investment portfolios. It is evident in the long histories of universities in colonial and industrial development, in driving and using the Great Acceleration to their own advantage.

There is growing attention to the many ways in which 'mainstream universities are currently more part of the problem than they are of the solution'. Olivia Bina and Levinia Pereira and others from the EU researcher-practitioner network INTREPID argue that the higher education sector and individual universities are deeply complicit in generating the 'Anthropo-Capitalocene' (a term they use to combine the systems insights of Anthropocene science with the political economy insights of the Capitalocene term, one that locates the drivers for the Anthropocene in capitalism).[8] Fundamental here is the pervasive idealisation of economic growth and its far-reaching effects on knowledge production and education. In terms of research, Bina and Pereira endorse South African scholar Archille Mbembe's assertion that 'university research is complicit

in the destruction of the natural world and in the emergence of a new techno-racism'.[9]

Helping enable the use of universities for regressive ends is the evacuation of moral considerations from university decision-making and activities in the name of a purported objectivity and pragmatism. Bina and Pereira argue that:

> By generally omitting (or denying) a space for subjectivity—especially in setting narrowly defined ways of knowing—and related inner change pathways, universities reduce the space to explore the full range of knowing and competencies needed to address the Anthropo-Capitalocene interdependent crises.[10]

Such competencies are frequently absent not only among university graduates, but staff, or at least those in key management roles. Too often questions such as mission, purpose and ethics tend to be reduced to, or dismissed as, mere branding or compliance matters. Universities are at the heart of the knowledge politics that have generated the current crises. The question remains whether they can be at the heart of positive alternatives.

A World in Crisis, Should We Work on Hope?

It is difficult to fully digest—let alone muster up the wisdom and courage—to confront the scope and scale of the challenges the SDG agenda canvasses and those that need to be addressed alongside it. Yet it is also increasingly hard, if not impossible, to ignore that we live in a world in which every one of the crises that the SDGs point to must be addressed. Given this, is it still legitimate to hope for positive outcomes? The many creative responses to these pressures that are emerging around the world suggest to us that it is.

> Today's crises … present opportunities to move beyond the conventional "solutions" of coping and accommodating, managing and adapting, resisting

> and reforming. They create space for social and economic experimentation, new political alliances, new cultural narratives, and alternative social and socio-ecological relations. In short, these crises may give rise to new modes of being in the world that can move us toward a more sustainable and egalitarian future. But how are these new modes of being created and how can activist scholars engage with and support them?[11]

Hope can be understood in different ways. As a verb—*to hope*—the emphasis is on the activity of hoping in the present, whereas the noun *hope* shifts the focus towards the future and what is hoped for. An invitation to think and a provocation to act, hope has been central to social and environmental struggles. Ernst Bloch's *The Principle of Hope* (1950's) discusses utopian hope as the Not-Yet-Consciousness and the multiple principles of a 'utopian homeland' of social justice. In *Pedagogies of Hope* Paulo Freire describes hope as an ontological need. 'The future isn't something hidden in a corner. The future is something we build in the present.'[12] He was writing in the 1970s, but his insight equally applies now. As cultural geographer Lesley Head observes, more than ever, hope needs to be a deliberate practice.[13]

Recognition of the value of hope and utopian imaginaries for social transformation is not new, as highlighted in the previous chapters (e.g. The Good University). While sustainable development remains ambiguous and imperfect, and hopeful sustainable development imaginaries remain on the margins, at base the idea of sustainable development is infused with 'a sense of hope that we can each improve the future well-being of ourselves, each other and the environment'.[14] A growing number of people are helping remake and create new imaginaries of sustainable development through their everyday practices, often engaging in inventive ways with seemingly rigid ideas, politics and realities, as well as forming new and unusual alliances. As Mike Davis argues:

> to raise our imaginations to the challenge of the Anthropocene, we must be able to envision alternative configurations of agents, practices and social relations, and this requires in turn, that we suspend the politico-economic assumptions that chain us to the present.[15]

The SDG agenda is explicitly a Transformation agenda, one that 'will require deep, structural changes across all sectors in society'.[16] For this reason, and all the discussion, debates, failures, lessons, gains and motivation they have generated already, the SDGs are an important resource and guide for the task of remaking sustainable development. So too are universities. As institutions with the privilege of access to knowledge, ideas, networks and dialogue, as well as often unusual degrees of autonomy, universities can and need to contest the 'dictatorship of no alternatives'.[17] As *education* institutions, they can offer alternatives and teach hope to students. In the words of Paul Warwick and colleagues, 'within troubled times of global challenge, hope is an imperative within education'. As they argue, we need to repurpose higher education 'to empower students with the hope of a positive anticipation that more sustainable futures are possible'.[18]

As *research* institutions, universities have an unusually powerful role in shaping the future. Every university has an opportunity to give 'analytical time and space to counter-normative practices' and help open up 'possibilities of alternative futures' if they so choose.[19] To do so, they need to loosen their grip on entrenched assumptions and ways of doing things and shake the habit of 'a paranoid critical stance' that casts anything else—notably anything more hopeful—as 'naive, pious or complaisant'.[20]

Rather than being rooted in dogma, universities can more overtly offer spaces in which ambiguity and ambivalence are acknowledged, and reparative practices of knowing are pursued. As discussed in Chap. 4 on ethical innovation, this means critically reflecting on the way in which our knowledge production practices are, or are not, *(re)generative* of better futures and attending to the atmosphere (both in terms of the Earth's air and society's moods and ambitions) that we are inevitably helping create. Pollution, despair and cynicism—or oxygen, hope and resolve?

An atmosphere thick with cynicism is debilitating. Instead, as Paulo Freire put it, 'We need critical hope the way a fish needs unpolluted water'.[21] To aim for and practice hope is not to imagine it is sufficient. As Freire continues, critical hope 'is necessary but it is not enough. Alone it does not win.'[22] Nor is a commitment to hope simply an effort to wish away the difficulties of the world, deny ironies or 'sidestep the messy

world of practice'.[23] It is to face such difficulties and mess with compassion and commitment. It is to appreciate that the state of the world and universities' role is 'an open-ended story' that we are helping tell through what we choose to think, say and do.[24]

Other more sustainable development futures are still possible. In facing the openness of the future, universities need to face important questions of the sort passionately articulated by Boaventura de Sousa Santos:

- Modern universities have been a product and a producer of specific models of development, including training elites and providing knowledge and ideology. Can the university contribute to dialogues of different models of development and refound its mission?
- Can the university acknowledge that knowledge is everywhere, not just behind its walls?
- In particular, can it recognise that human understanding of the world far exceeds the Western ways of thinking that dominate the structure and content of global higher education?

The work of the Community Economies Collective[25] and their related research networks, for example, demonstrate that other, more just and ecologically sustainable, worlds are possible. This involves 'everyday people in everyday practices' taking part in re-thinking and re-enacting economies: to re-imagine an economic politics that allows us to think creatively to make new economies, building on the alternative economic practices that already exist in the shadow of the capitalist Economy all over the world.[26] Notably, this Collective is a collaboration between universities and local communities across diverse parts of the globe and demonstrates the sort of relational ethics that is needed.

In their manifesto *Take Back the Economy*, some of the founders of the Community Economies Collective, J.K. Gibson-Graham, Jenny Cameron and Stephen Healy, underline the importance of hope in their work, illustrating how it helps connect their twin focus on the very big and the very small, on the very ambitious and the very practical. Some of their recent work includes co-developing progressive and useful impact indicators with communities, contributing to the work of the UN Inter-Agency Task Force on Social and Solidarity Economy to embed the social

and solidarity economy into the SDGs in belated recognition of its neglect in the original formulation of the SDGs.[27] This whole realm of activity demonstrates the potential for academics to work across scales in creative and experimental ways that draw on and feedback on the SDGs to help co-create more positive futures. It also demonstrates the way in which some academics are already working from within universities to help generate dialogue about different models of development, in the way de Sousa Santos notes is needed.

Avoiding Traps

The SDGs agenda can help universities take the action that is urgently needed by encouraging them to avoid the two traps that many of them cohabit or flip between. The first trap is being disengaged from the 'real world'; what Kamola associated with 'a global imaginary' that views the Earth from space. Here, the SDG agenda—while at first blush part of the global imaginary because of its international reach—actually challenges the notion that any of us are divorced from the planet or able to pronounce upon the world from afar. In contrast to the assumption that 'development' is just something for poor countries, it enrols all nations and all organisations in sustainable development and requires universities to look inward as well as outward.

Those of us within universities need to call out dismissive or shallow engagement with the SDGs, particularly that which presumes that the aim of such engagement is to benevolently assist 'those people over there'. We need to demonstrate and advocate for more transformational approaches that begin by identifying universities' role at the centre of the problem and change them from within. As Maori Hirini Matunga powerfully highlights, far from being transformative, tokenistic engagement instead becomes:

> An alienated and alienating blah, that, rooted 'deep down' in its colonial past and present—actually knows the problem, but in a form of soporific amnesia has airbrushed it out of existence, because confronting it requires facing up to its own history, its own complicity with the colonial project, and its ongoing marginalisation and dispossession of the very communities

> it actually needs to engage. … Is it even trying to 'call out' power for what it is? Or has it become so deprived of its dimensions of justice and emancipatory action that it has become a functionary of the economic, political and often racial elite, in what remains an obstinately colonial, settler dominant, market-driven system?

The second trap that universities fall into is that (in an attempt to dodge criticisms of being self-indulgent 'ivory towers') many have strenuously worked to demonstrate their relevance to the real world—but *mistaken what that world is*. While some universities are usefully reviving lost, centuries-old and largely non-economic notions of what universities are and for, many have interpreted relevance in terms of the dominant contemporary discourse that equates the capitalist market with reality. Thus, attempts at 'engagement' and 'impact' are overly oriented towards technological solutions and generating financial returns on investment.

By framing universities and their research partners and graduate employers in economic, hyper-modernist (and often nationalistic) terms, this reduction of higher education to a capitalist activity disguises and justifies the negative effects it is having in the world (e.g. supporting processes that are materially intensive and discriminatory), and marginalises higher education's far broader public value. More generally, this misreading of higher education potential perpetuates the dominant economic discourse that has appropriated and perverted the very notion of value, and perverted the role of government and other institutions such as universities by defining 'value creation' in terms of rapid, content-neutral economic gains.

As economist Mariana Mazzucato argues in *The Value of Everything*, public institutions (including universities) need to 'reclaim their rightful role as servants of the common good' by challenging the logics and metrics that orient them to the short term and underplay their capacity to proactively germinate, nurture and shape markets, not just respond to them.[28] She concludes that a 'new economics: an economics of hope' needs to begin with the fact that 'the creation of value is collective' and then develop 'a dynamic division of labour focused on the problems that twenty-first-century societies are facing'.[29] Universities, she underlines, are crucial to this effort.

The SDG agenda helps universities avoid the self-defeating trap of reading the world and their own role in it through a narrow capitalist lens. It draws universities out of their myopic focus on themselves and their coterie of current industry partners and graduate employers to look further afield to the troubled world and futures they are inadvertently helping create. It begins to unsettle the notions that the economy exists as an independent entity disconnected from the social or environmental, and that value can be divorced from what an activity actually does in the world. Mazzucato advocates strongly for the SDG agenda as a *mission* around which institutions and other actors should coordinate.[30]

The SDG agenda offers a response to the fact that 'to offer real change we must go beyond fixing isolated problems' and instead develop a framework that allows us to collectively and effectively 'work for the common good'.[31] For universities, Patsy Healy suggests, this is about using current instabilities and crises 'in a strategic way, as an opportunity to take stock, to re-think policies, projects and practices, and to build the intelligence and coalitions which could bring future benefits for the many not just the few in our localities'.[32]

Another Future Is Possible

Universities are animated by an inherent future focus, one that is core to their developmentality. The horrors, risks and uncertainties of the Anthropocene do nothing to dim this focus on the future; indeed they underline the need to take the future more seriously than ever. But they do blur our vision and scramble our taken-for-granted maps. They wake us up to the fact that in chasing growth without care for direction, we have already lost our way. In this way, the Anthropocene also demands that we look backwards, and into our institutions and selves, to understand the situation we are in and ask what it is we are trying to develop.

Thinking more carefully about 'the future' is one of the core directives of the SDG agenda. As we do so, we draw on some of the useful knowledge and tools we already have at our disposal, bucking against the trend for universities to manage themselves without ever using the expertise they house to help address their own problems. Of particular use is not

only the work of highly engaged academics such as Mariana Mazzucato, Patsy Healy or the many others we refer to in this book, but also the 'futures thinking tools' developed over the last few decades—noting that the tools themselves are agnostic to what futures are envisaged and created, and so need to be accompanied by careful analysis of directionality and impact.

A simple but compelling approach is offered by the Three Horizons model of Bill Sharpe, now used widely by the International Futures Federation. Its adoption by another highly engaged academic—renegade Oxford University economist Kate Raworth, author of *Doughnut Economics* and advocate for creating more just and regenerative economies—demonstrates how valuable it is in trying to envisage pathways towards more progressive futures. The Three Horizons foresight model[33] proposes that we can imagine elements or seeds of different futures existing in the present. These different 'worlds' are summarised in the model as three horizons (see Fig. 8.1). Horizon 1 is Business as Usual, and when viewed from the present, it is often all that we can see or even imagine. Characterised by 'sustaining' (not necessarily sustainable) innovations, it is focused on sustaining Business as Usual and is poorly adapted to

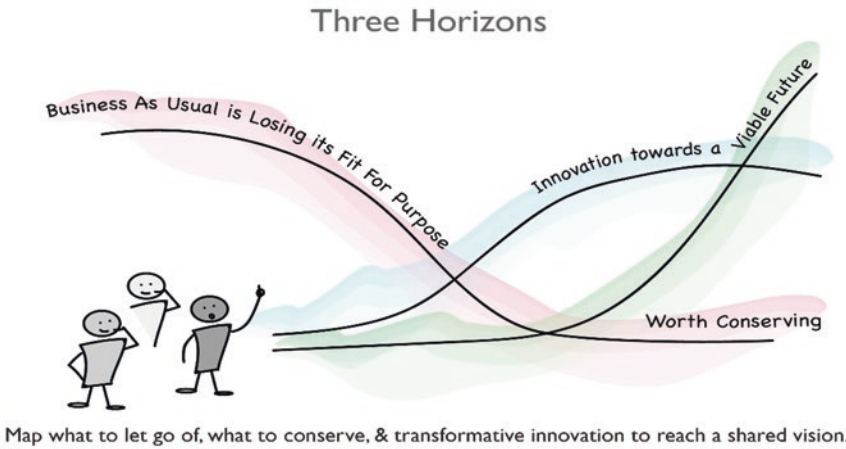

Fig. 8.1 The Three Horizons framework. (Adaptation by the social enterprise, The H3 Uni https://www.h3uni.org/practices/foresight-three-horizons/)

emerging conditions. Not long into the future, it falls away to a greater or lesser degree.

Horizon 2 is about emerging positive changes, seeds of which are evident in the present and quickly grow, but do not, without further help, drive systemic change. Horizon 3 is the more fully transformed world we want to cultivate. Generated through a strategic combination of innovations, structural shifts and dismantling of barriers, it represents foundational change and great upheaval at first. Because it is far better adapted to contemporary and emerging challenges, though, ultimately it is the more sustainable in the long term.

Arguably the SDG agenda is a Horizon 2 intervention—disruptive but not in itself (as a mere agenda or plan) transformational. The question then is whether its (non)implementation will allow it to be captured by the currently dominant Horizon 1, or whether we will be able to harness it to H3 and turn into a H2+ stepping stone to long term positive transformation. Experiences to date with colonial, international and sustainable development, plus evidence of much existing engagement with the SDG agenda, suggest that we cannot underestimate the risk of it being co-opted and becoming what Sharpe and colleages call a H2- pathway, one that looked promising but ultimately becomes entweined with and declines with Horizon 1. But as we have argued in this book, the SDG agenda itself does not predetermine how it is interpreted and implemented. For those of us in universities at least, it *offers* a pathway to much-needed positive change; the question is whether we use it.

So, what does a future, Horizon 3 type university look like and how can the SDGs help? Olivia Bina, Levinia Pereira and the INTREPID network, mentioned above, have examined this question of a Horizon 3 type university in a hopeful but critical register. They offer a vision of future universities as places with six interrelated characteristics (Fig. 8.2).[34] We outline them here, elaborating on their vision by underlining the way it aligns with the SDG agenda:

1. *A place of 'maximum leverage'*: Universities are places in which Donella Meadow's most powerful leverage points for systems change—reassessing goals, reassessing paradigms and worldviews and appreciating the value of different worldviews—are discussed, strengthened and practiced. As Bina and Pereira put it, 'we imagine universities as

Fig. 8.2 Re-imagining the future of the university—six priorities. (Adapted from Bina and Pereira 2020, p. 22)

places where the uncomfortable problems and unorthodox solutions, such as beyond-GDP (gross domestic product) are explored'.[35] Such a role for universities is vital to their capacity to help drive transformational change for and beyond the SDG agenda. The value of the SDGs is they help redress the implicit goals driving dominant development agendas, including in higher education. While universities are heavily invested in historical trajectories, they can become places where, in the spirit of criticality, entrenched worldviews are critiqued, and their positive elements are renovated and combined with vital elements of alternative perspectives.

2. *A place to question and expose*: Universities are places that foster and demonstrate critical thinking, questioning biases and assumptions, exposing implicit goals and intentions, and ultimately confronting the direct and indirect drivers of the Anthropo-Capitalocene in order to

'phase out supporting socially and ecologically unsustainable systems'.[36] This is at the heart of what is needed both to advance the SDG agenda and to call out its own weaknesses. Detailed analysis, sophisticated dialogue and creative experimentation are needed to untangle the factors involved in unsustainability and injustice—all tasks that call for greater university involvement.

3. *A place to transform*: Universities can help transition individuals and society to a more self-aware, reflexive, wise and sustainable basis, including a deep understanding of the fundamental interdependencies of humans and the rest of the world. Bina and Pereira note that the field of Ecologically Sustainable Development that SDG 4 advocates for is crucial here. In addition, we argue that helping question what is valued and demonstrating the value of wisdom is another crucial way higher education can help generate the enabling conditions for achieving and exceeding the SDGs.
4. *A place to engage*: As discussed throughout this book, universities need to re-think their position in the world and in particular challenge the outdated imaginary in which universities are separate to society and the planet. Many are beginning to do so, and it is increasingly apparent that universities *can* help foster new ways of engaging with broader society, including co-production of knowledge and collaboration with local communities. Reshaping themselves as places for diverse groups to engage on shared problems and to pursue the common good is central to how universities can help progress the SDG agenda.
5. *A place to envision*: Universities offer a space in which diverse groups can come together to envisage and create more sustainable, just futures. This includes engaging with the SDG 'transforming the world' agenda, both to help turn the SDG vision into a reality and to push it further, using it as a Horizon 2 stepping-stone towards a truly transformational Horizon 3 world. Working in this way requires university members of all sorts to take seriously their role to inspire as well to inform, in keeping with a Freirean pedagogy of hope: 'a mode of hoping … in the possibility of attaining the goal we dream up [that] lies … in the inspirational qualities of the goal itself, in its capacity to … expand the horizons of possibility'.[37]

6. *A place of whole-of-system change*: To take on the SDG agenda, universities need to change themselves. This is about appreciating the far-reaching physical and social effects that universities generate every minute of the day at multiple scales. If universities are to become less of the problem and more of the solution, they need to not only help others, but change inside out. In addition to weaving SDGs through their curricula or running SDG hackathons or badging research projects with specific SDGs, this requires altering their 'physical, organizational and institutional structures' and 'overall governance and management practices' to ensure that they are working for environmental sustainability and social justice in all they do.[38]

SDGs: A Witness Statement for Higher Education

Like many people around the world, we two Australian authors have recently emerged from catastrophic bushfires, floods, heatwaves and drought. We are living *in* climate change. For all of us, climate change is not some distant agenda 'out there', it's here and now.[39] Combined with the ongoing impacts of COVID-19, including the worsened social and economic inequalities that are in turn deepening climate change vulnerabilities, the need for deep social change is more apparent than ever. One of the reasons we advocate for the SDGs is because they explicitly address the need to take urgent action on climate change and call for the transformative change required to reduce both greenhouse gas emissions and vulnerabilities in order to sustain life on the planet. On this and other issues, the SDGs are the world's witness statement to the planetary and social condition—drawing attention to what needs to be attended to at both local and global scales.

We ignore them at our peril.

Systems change of the sort the SDGs demand and universities require is no quick fix. But quick work is needed to commence it now. For self-serving reasons alone, universities need to rapidly begin transforming.

They are already facing questions from potential students about the value of university degrees in equipping them for the future and are already under pressure to better demonstrate their positive impact. The time is now to renew their purpose and revitalise their role in society. And one such role has to be helping to scale up the SDG agenda from a niche or abstract concept into the culture, literacy and workings of institutions, including but not limited to higher education.

The challenge of changing universities is not to be underestimated. As we argued in Chap. 3, they are highly resilient institutions. Some are likely to be deeply committed to change, but still not do much differently, other than reshape a few processes, leaving untouched key areas such as leadership and business decisions. As critical education scholars have long pointed out, formal education is a mechanism of social reproduction, and so while degrees are sold to individuals as a route to social mobility not social change, universities risk reinforcing existing hierarchies, structures and problems, as well as the social anxieties and ambitions that legitimise them. The neoliberal university's emphasis on changing product and customer specifications (e.g. through course marketing and/or Net Promoter Scores) must shift towards changing university systems, goals and paradigms—including the culture itself—so that society's needs, including planetary integrity, are more effectively met. This 'third generation' approach to impact is not just about new content but new structures, processes and ethos, including the need to:

- *Redirect* the potential role and contribution of universities in addressing and reducing global socioeconomic and environmental inequalities as the central priority.
- *Shift* the focus as a sector from competition to collaboration through partnerships and networks across disciplinary areas and diverse stakeholders, acknowledging that, as Audre Lorde has argued, the transformative challenge of the SDGs is to define and empower not to conquer and divide.
- *Work* across boundaries to link up and scale up efforts across different issues, identify synergies and tensions and foster a new way of working.

- *Balance* the quest for new income sources and resources and the need to do more with less, with increasing public commitment and belief in the role of the university.

This is the transformative SDG agenda we imagine, animated by the critical, regenerative politics needed to reshape the dominant unsustainable development trajectories in higher education and society more broadly. More sustainable worlds are still possible, and higher education has a vital role to play.

Notes

1. Marginson, S (2010) Marginson, S. (2010), 'The University: Punctuated by Paradox', *Academic Matters*, May, p. 14–18.
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