

Centre for Global Higher Education working paper series

The University and the Social Imagination

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Working paper no. 82

May 2022

Published by the Centre for Global Higher Education,
Department of Education, University of Oxford
15 Norham Gardens, Oxford, OX2 6PY
www.researchcghe.org

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ISSN 2398-564X

The Centre for Global Higher Education (CGHE) is an international research centre focused on higher education and its future development. Our research aims to inform and improve higher education policy and practice.

CGHE is a research partnership of 10 UK and international universities, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, with support from Research England.

The University and the Social Imagination¹

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Abstract

What is the role of universities in fostering and cultivating alternative visions of the future? Can universities play this role or are they part of the problem? And what are the ethical implications of taking on this position? This talk will explore the recent demand for universities to address the ‘crisis of the imagination’ and argue that if Higher Education institutions are to play a role in nurturing transformative futures this will require, in turn, a disruptive act of imagination about what a university is – one that demands a disentangling of the relationship between the contemporary university form and the institutional practices of modernity. The talk will explore some of the practices and philosophical assumptions that might support such acts of imagination and responsibility.

CGHE acknowledgment: This Working Paper is being published by the ESRC/RE Centre for Global Higher Education, funded by the U.K. Economic and Social Research Council (award numbers ES/M010082/1, ES/M010082/2 and ES/T014768/1).

Author acknowledgements: I want to recognise the support of the three universities, the funders and networks that have helped to develop the arguments in this paper. The Zennström Initiative at Uppsala University, the departments of

¹ This is a transcript of the keynote that Keri Facer planned to give at the seventh annual conference of the Centre for Global Higher Education, held online on 24-25 May 2022.

education at Gothenburg and Bristol Universities, the UNESCO Futures of Education Commission writing team, the Transforming Education for Sustainable Futures Programme, the Ecoiversities network, the Balaton Group, the British Academy and the AHRC Connected Communities Programme.

Universities & the Social Imagination

So – today I want to talk about the role of the university in fostering a rich critical, relational and experimental social imagination that is adequate to the time we find ourselves in.

There are a lot of areas in which we might want to exercise this imaginative capacity – from how to address deep inequalities to the decline of democracy.

To provide a little focus, though, I'm going to look particularly at the role of the imagination and of universities in cultivating it, in relation to the question of climate change.

Before I do so, I just want to take a moment for us to cut through these words 'climate change' that get trotted out all the time at the beginning of talks like this.

Let's just stop for a second, and think about when we each realised that our world's climate patterns were changing and that this 'climate change' thing was no longer an abstract concept but came home to your world – what did you see, feel or notice?

For me, it was when the dam near my hometown in the Peak District nearly collapsed under pressure of extreme rainfall, causing thousands of people to have to be evacuated over night. It was when the moors of the hills I love went up in flames for a second year on the run. It shocked me, it made me incredibly sad, and it also made me think and begin to feel a growing sense of kinship with all those others who are already losing land and fighting to prevent this loss around the world.

When was it for you?

Climate change is not a 'future problem' nor an abstract technical concept. It is a locally unpredictable, lived experience that impacts homes and livelihoods, gradually seeking out vulnerabilities and ripping them open. It takes different forms in different places and we are prepared in different ways to respond.

Acknowledging and living with a changing climate will require us to confront our histories, understand our shared and different vulnerabilities in the present and begin to reweave social relations in ways that open up the possibility of alternative futures. Universities, I want to argue, have an important role in this process – not only as scientists and educators, but as sites for fostering the imagination – this is a role that we are not yet playing to our fullest capabilities.

So first – let's get into this question of what we think climate change is? What are its causes and what responses are suggested? As Sharon Stein argues, if we aren't clear about the nature of our diagnosis of the predicament, we are unlikely to be able to envisage adequate responses by higher education.

There are four ways of thinking about climate change that tend to dominate both public debate and academic analysis - each of which invite different roles for the university. The geophysical, socio-economic, epistemological and mythic lenses.

The geophysical lens draws on climate science to frame the situation through one key measure – the level of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere and the material causes and consequences of this increase. This is the lens that offers us climate models and a view of the planet as a system. Such models and systems are useful in pointing out that our current way of life is pushing us towards at least 2.7 degrees warming by the turn of the century. They are even more useful in pointing out that even this figure is dependent on technologies for carbon capture and storage that will require 5 planets worth of land. They are useful in helping us to model and understand what 3 degrees warming would involve – last time it was camels in the arctic. And in telling us that half of humanity – 3.3. billion people, live in areas that are vulnerable to dangerous impacts of climate change even if temperatures only go up by 1.1 degrees. This lens also gives us the idea that we can govern the global climate, that we can model what is happening, that the planet can be controlled. It is a lens that has foregrounded scientific explanations and technological solutions for 30 years. This perspective has given us not only transformative energy solutions but

also provides the justification for mega dam projects and for geo-engineering. It is the planet as scientific problem demanding technological and engineering solutions.

This way of framing the problem is the one that Boris Johnson mobilised when he gave his welcome speech at the Glasgow COP26 summit in November last year - before flying back to London for dinner with the chair of the UK's leading climate denial charity.² He opened his speech suggesting that it was time to follow the lead of James Bond (a Glasgow native) and defuse the 'ticking bomb' of climate change. His speech concluded with the following:

*We have the ideas
we have the technology
[...]
we may not feel much like James Bond
not all of us necessarily look like James Bond
but we have the opportunity
the duty
to make this summit the moment when humanity finally began – and I stress
began – to defuse that bomb³*

The consequences of this sort of story at COP26 last year – let's call it the James Bond account of climate change - was a car park full of electric cars, buses and aeroplanes that looked like a supermarket on a wet Sunday afternoon. It led to an agreement that didn't mention oil and gas phase out and that only suggested limited aspirations on reducing coal, and an inadequate commitment to meeting the costs for loss and damage for low income and developing countries.

A second way of making sense of the situation is the social and economic one mobilised in sociology, critical economics and increasingly amongst climate activists. Climate Change here is recognised not only as a scientific and technical problem but

² <https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/politics/boris-johnson-races-back-cop-25371485>

³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pm-address-at-cop26-world-leaders-summit-opening-ceremony>

also a problem of society, politics and economics. This is the lens that argues, as in the latest IPCC report, that *'To secure a healthy, liveable planet for everyone, we need to transform our way of life fundamentally.'*⁴

Here, the problems are understood as structural and economic – they draw attention to the deep inequalities in emissions production both historically and in the present, in which 10% richest of the world's population produce 50% of the emissions (most academics and students figure in this 10%). They draw attention to problems such as the capture of states by fossil fuel interests and society's structural dependence on economic growth, a dependence that is incompatible with living within planetary boundaries. This perspective draws attention to fact that fossil fuel industries made up the largest delegation at the last climate summit and to the sustained thirty-year campaign of disinformation and distortion and delay by these industries. This perspective asks questions such as whether, instead of just aiming to switch combustion engines to electric cars, we might rethink assumptions about how we move around, why we do so, whether we can create collective public transport solutions instead. This lens is best captured by the slogan on the streets 'systems change not climate change'.

The third 'epistemological' lens for making sense of the situation is one which sees it as a problem of knowledge. In this analysis, modern-industrial institutions are inadequate to developing the knowledge needed to deal with the complexity of what we are facing. In the familiar phrase – the world has crises, universities have departments. In this perspective, social, technological, material factors have to be thought together and Indigenous Knowledge Systems are recognised as having a critical role to play in deepening and challenging the existing scientific and technical accounts of both problems and solutions. Without respecting and recognising the diverse forms of knowledge, the situated and multiple forms of knowledge, that allow us to conceptualise the predicament in all its complexity, this perspective argues, we cannot hope to develop intelligent responses.

⁴ ARG WG11 Overarching FAQs, Feb 22

The final lens for analysing the causes of climate change is to see it as a problem of dominant belief systems that have divorced people from their deep interdependent relationship with the other beings of the lifeworld. Here, we see arguments originating in Indigenous traditions, from marginalised land-based knowledge in the global north, and from philosophical traditions in Asia. All of these argue that it is the myth of the 'separability' of humans from other beings that drives extractive and exploitative behaviours which in turn fuels climate change. Without addressing the fundamental myth of humans as masters of and separate from nature whose destiny is to use our superior skills and technology to achieve supremacy over the world, this perspective suggests, we will not begin to address the current situation, let alone experiment with other ways of knowing, being and living. From this perspective, a fundamental shift in human consciousness and a complete rewriting of the 'narrative' of progress is required.

These four lenses offer different and conflicting diagnoses of the situation and suggest different societal responses:

The geophysical analysis, as it is translated into contemporary politics, makes a case for science and technology innovation to address what is framed primarily as an engineering problem. The second socio-economic account argues for rethinking economic assumptions, social innovation and political action to legislate for wider social changes. The third epistemological critique offers a challenge in particular to universities and the research ecosystem, leading to calls for dialogue between different academic traditions and with wider society – the sort of 'slow science' advocated by Isabelle Stengers. While the fourth analysis – which we could call the mythic - invites a profound reflection upon assumptions about who and what we are as people alongside other beings on the planet, this implies an educational and a philosophical response.

Each of these lenses and responses has an important contribution to play in helping to understand the situation. They help us to see the scale and complexity of the situation and to orient ourselves to the nature of the predicament we find ourselves

in. There is important work for universities to do to tease out and work on the tensions between them.

I want to argue today, however, that the processes of confronting and working through this multi-layered and complex problem also requires something else – a rich, relational, critical and experimental imagination.

To explain why – I will tell a little story...

A couple of weeks ago, as I was travelling from France to Sweden, I stopped overnight in Hamburg and went for a drink at a bar on the lake that I often go to on this journey. It's a beautiful spot. Silver light on the water, ducks with broods of 7 or 8 ducklings paddle past you. You can sit and watch the sun go down wrapped in a blanket. As I was sitting there, I started talking with a couple of guys at the next table who had just been sailing on the lake. They were insurance and IT brokers who were in conversational mood after having had an afternoon in the sun. They asked why I'd travelled to Hamburg by train and when I told them I worked on climate change, education and social transition, one of them laughed: "I love sailing" he said "rising sea levels are good for me", before going on to tell me that climate change was a conspiracy cooked up by Bill Gates, that Trump was probably right about things, and that I shouldn't worry my little head about it all – everything would be fine. This is a common response, particularly amongst men who seem to keen to quieten down women who are saying awkward things. And as usual, I politely but firmly disagreed with him, and we carried on talking. They wanted to stay on the subject though and after a little while, the loud sailor started showing me the video he'd taken the day before of dolphins by his boat, telling me how delighted he was to see them and that he was worried about the state of the Baltic sea, while the other guy started talking about how he was trying to ride a bike in the city as he was beginning to be a bit worried about emissions for his kids.

And as we talked, it became clear that these men - well qualified, highly educated, affluent – had a rarely admitted love and care for the world that they did not easily express. And that they couldn't express this - not only because to do so would not be

sufficiently 'macho' for their identities (check out Martin Hultman's excellent work on climate denial and masculinity) - but also because they felt such care was futile, that it was impossible to act on.⁵ They were convinced that no one else really cared about sea life or clean water, that the sorts of structural economic and social changes required could not be achieved and that therefore, change couldn't happen. For them, a future different from rising sea levels and ecological degradation was so unlikely that they were better off numbing themselves to the harms, ignoring it and ordering another beer.

This also came up in a study that Steve Lewandowsky, Ullrich Ecker and I carried out during the Covid pandemic.⁶ We asked 1200 hundred people in the US and the UK what they wanted from the future after the pandemic. And a clear and consistent message came out – given the option, more people wanted fairer, more sustainable, more communal and co-operative, societies in future than wanted a return to business as usual. The desire for a different future was in the majority. We also, however, asked – what futures do you think other people will want and which futures do you think will happen? Here the results were reversed, in the main, respondents thought that *other people didn't* want sustainable futures and, that these futures therefore wouldn't come about. More than this, their responses suggested latent unease about whether other people could be kinder, more sociable, more caring, more communal, more connected – as though the actions during the pandemic were an aberration that couldn't be sustained to create the futures they wanted.

These observations are echoed elsewhere. A recent survey of 10,000 young people across Australia, Brazil, Finland, France, India, Nigeria, Philippines, Portugal, the UK, and the USA, for example, reports that 75% of them saw the future as 'frightening'.⁷

⁵ Jonas Anshelm and Martin Hultman, "A Green Fatwā? Climate Change as a Threat to the Masculinity of Industrial Modernity," *NORMA* 9, no. 2 (April 3, 2014): 84–96, <https://doi.org/10.1080/18902138.2014.908627>.

⁶ Stephan Lewandowsky, Keri Facer, and Ullrich K. H. Ecker, "Losses, Hopes, and Expectations for Sustainable Futures after COVID," *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications* 8, no. 1 (December 2021): 296, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-021-00961-0>.

⁷ Caroline Hickman et al (2021), 'Climate Anxiety in Children and Young People and Their Beliefs about Government Responses to Climate Change: A Global Survey', *The Lancet Planetary Health*, 5.12 (2021), e863–73 <[https://doi.org/10.1016/S2542-5196\(21\)00278-3](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2542-5196(21)00278-3)>.

The lack of desirable images of the future has been defined by some commentators, most recently Geoff Mulgan, as a ‘crisis of the imagination’.⁸ Johan Rockström and Mattias Klum, leading climate scientists, argued that ‘The world needs a new narrative—a positive story about new opportunities for humanity to thrive on our beautiful planet...’.⁹

I want to suggest, however, that that what these fragments of research are telling us is that this is more than just an absence of positive stories about the future – it is a loss of a richer concept of the imagination – one that is relational, critical and experimental, one that allows us to conceive that we might might common cause with other people, question the world and work together to explore how it might be different.

As Maxine Greene argues – the *relational* imagination is the capacity to tune into what others are feeling, needing and offering as a basis for “*new beginnings in transactions with the world*” (Greene). This relational imagination is the form of imagination invoked by Paolo Freire in the practice of *conscientisation*, the collective social practice for identifying shared problems and routes to respond to them. This is also the sociological imagination of C. Wright Mills, drawing attention to shared social problems reflected in personal experiences. The relationality of the imagination is also recognised by Lev Vygotsky, who understood it as central to inter-personal dialogue and learning.

The fears for the future and a numb sense of the impossibility of change expressed by these insurance guys and by the respondents to the surveys - also suggests a loss of the critical imagination – the capacity to see the world as though it is strange, to approach it with curiosity and to ask how we ended up where we are today. In other words, to see today as non-inevitable. It is the loss of what Keats and more recently Roberto Unger called ‘negative capability’ – the capacity to see current arrangements as provisional. In Maxine Green’s words again, we can think of the

⁸ Geoff Mulgan, UCL STEaPP, and Demos Helsinki, “THE IMAGINARY CRISIS (AND HOW WE MIGHT QUICKEN SOCIAL AND PUBLIC IMAGINATION),” 2020, 40.

⁹ Big World, Small Planet, Johan Rockström and Mattias Klum (2015, p. 11)

critical aspects of the imagination as the capacity “*to disclose a different state of things, to open the windows of consciousness to what might be, what ought to be*” (Greene, 2008, p. 18).

This richer conception of the imagination is also experimental, it ‘*allows us to break with the taken for granted*’ (Greene, 1995, p. 3) and to “*provoke persons to take action together — to transcend the deficiencies, to transform.*” (Greene pp. 8–9).

The crisis of the imagination is not just an absence of stories of the future, it is a loss of a richer conception of a critical, relational and experimental imagination, a form of imagination that is essential if we are going to work out how to respond, with others, to the predicament we find ourselves in. We need to learn to trust each other, inquire with each other, and experiment with each other to explore how things might be different.

This is where universities should come in. We need our institutions of education and culture to help us to do this. We need institutions that might form a place of collegiality and inspiration for the two insurance brokers sitting drinking their beer in Hamburg and wondering if anyone else might give a damn about the sea quality, or for the hundreds of people filling in our post-covid questionnaire thinking that nobody else wants to try to live differently, or for the millions of young people who are struggling with eco anxiety and want to start now with creating different worlds.

To that end, Martin Mahoney, Silke Beck and Cassie Robinson amongst others, have begun to make the case for an *imagination infrastructure*, for widely accessible social institutions and practices that foster democratic dialogue, analysis and experimentation with possible worlds.¹⁰

As Cassie Robinson points out, this idea is manifested in organisations like ‘Civic Square’ in Birmingham – which defines itself as

¹⁰ <https://www.emergingfuturesfund.com/blogs/imagination-infrastructure-what-do-we-mean>; <https://steps-centre.org/blog/infrastructures-of-the-imagination-uncertainty-and-the-politics-of-prefiguration/>

- A public square ‘a place to gather, make, create, grow, organise, play and connect’
- A neighbourhoods economics lab – an experimental social lab, focused on exploring, experimenting and testing and building resilient, regenerative neighbourhoods
- A creative and participatory ecosystem – a connected, collaborative and open platform, shaping our everyday experiences by placing creativity and participant at their heart¹¹

Universities should be playing a critical role partnering and supporting such initiatives, and in fostering their own. They should be at the heart of an infrastructure of the imagination – fulfilling our remit to act as spaces for public debate, for critical reflection upon the world and for the exercise of freedom. ¹²

If we are to play this role in relation to the question of climate change, however, we will need to reimagine ourselves. And to do so, we will need to start with an act of critical imagination of our own – questioning how we have ended up where we are today, recognising that it is not inevitable, forming alliances to open up new possibilities.

This must start, however, with a reckoning with our own role as universities in contributing to the conditions of ecological degradation and climate heating that we find ourselves in.

Let’s imagine that climate change is a fire.

In some areas, universities have been doing a very useful job (alongside Indigenous communities and environmental charities) of pointing out the problem and telling people it is happening. We make good graphs and models. The work of the IPCC, after all, is the product of a truly international effort by climate scientists to

¹¹ <https://civicsquare.cc/2020/03/09/civic-square-2020-2030/>

¹² Sheila Jasanoff, “Future Imperfect: Science, Technology, and the Imaginations of Modernity,” *Dreamscapes of Modernity: Sociotechnical Imaginaries and the Fabrication of Power 1* (2015).

understand the mechanics and processes of climate change and how these might be influenced. The work of hundreds of academics goes into telling policy makers and world leaders, in increasingly urgent tones, just how bad the situation is. We are also getting increasingly good as educators and public engagement specialists, in telling students and the wider public about the situation. Many institutions are now benchmarking their courses against the SDGs, for example. That such activities might increasingly be recognised as a form of terror management, does not mean that they are not useful or successful within their own terms.¹³

However, and at the same time, we must acknowledge that universities have also been doing a pretty good job of adding fuel to the flames.

If we look at this through the geophysical lens - from an emissions perspective, there is the undeniable fact that as student mobility increases and as academics emerge goggle eyed from 18 months of zoom calls, the carbon costs of the day-to-day life of universities through student and academic flights, food, buildings, campuses and transport intensify. And of course, there is the much wider question of the underlying business model of universities and the way in which it works against wider sustainable development goals – but Adam Habib covered all of that yesterday in his fantastic keynote so I won't touch on this here Equally, in wealthy nations, many universities and their pension funds have investments in fossil fuel and related industries. Others rely on fossil industry funding for research – whether this is in mining, geology, aeronautical engineering or industrial agriculture. Others have also, as Stuart Tannock's research shows, partnered with fossil fuel interests to write curriculum that shuts down opposition or criticism of these activities.¹⁴

If we take the socio-economic analysis of the causes of climate change seriously, we also have to acknowledge that many universities are, through the work of their business schools and economics departments, in fact also researching how to fund

¹³ Cathryn Van Kessel and Kevin Burke, "Teaching as an Immortality Project: Positing Weakness in Response to Terror," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 52, no. 2 (2018): 216–29, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9752.12301>.

¹⁴ Stuart Tannock, "Learning to Plunder: Global Education, Global Inequality and the Global City," *Policy Futures in Education* 8, no. 1 (March 2010): 82–98, <https://doi.org/10.2304/pfie.2010.8.1.82>.

the fire and how to profit from the fire, as well as teaching economic theories and models that keep the fire going.¹⁵ For many universities, business schools remain cash cows that cross-subsidise activities across other parts of the institution. There is little doubt today, however, that the nature of economics teaching and research taking place in many of these institutions is part of the problem we are facing in addressing climate change. Those business schools that continue to reproduce students inculcated in a neoliberal economic theory which treats environmental harms as externalities, and humans and other beings as resources for extraction, must be seen as fuelling not only climate change but actively working against the wider sustainable development goals that many institutions claim to support. This is not the only way to teach economics. Other approaches are available.

We also have to recognise that the imbalance in funding in universities also militates against engagement with socio-economic questions in relation to climate change. Indeed, the scientific and technological narrative that allows our current prime minister to present James Bond as an appropriate hero for the current situation is actively encouraged by the dominance of STEM analyses and solutions in our universities. A press release put out just days before Johnson's speech, for example, saw Prof Nicole Grobert, chair of the Group of Chief Scientific Advisors to the European Commission, argue that '*Science provides solutions*'; Dr Xavier Estico, director general of the National Institute of Science Technology and Innovation in the Seychelles, stated that '*History has taught us that science, technology and innovation [...] bring timely solutions to challenges that seemed beyond the reach of humankind.*' And just in case we missed the coded message, Patrick Vallance, Chief Scientific Officer for the UK argued '*This has got to be the decade of R&D. We must make sure R&D and innovation are applied and scaled up.*' The research community here speaks with one voice: make sure that Q has enough funds, and he will invent the gadgets needed to get James Bond out of trouble at the last minute

From the epistemological lens of course, our publishing systems and promotions procedures systematically work against interdisciplinarity and deep engagement with

¹⁵ Martin Parker "Shut Down the Business School: What's wrong with management education" (2018) Pluto Press

knowledge systems outside universities. As Trish Greenhalgh discussed in her opening keynote, universities do a good job of maintaining disciplinary consensus and closing down alternative perspectives.

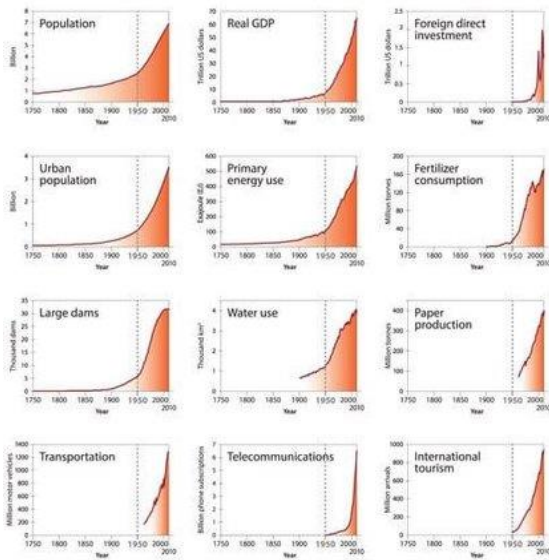
And finally, as institutions that are increasingly required to sell higher education as a good to increase future income, we are active in fuelling both debt and economic growth – both of which fuel climate change. Our students are more likely to be higher consumers and contribution to greenhouse gas emissions than those who didn't go to university. And teaching 'sustainability' is not enough to disrupt the narratives of students as consumers. One colleague teaching sustainability courses in Sweden recently told me of a conversation with a student who was asking if they could leave the class early to fly to Stockholm to go to the Black Friday sales. Where and how do we actively encourage our students to reflect on their interdependent place in the world?

As institutions of higher education, then, we are not just pointing out and trying to understand the fire, we must recognise that as a whole we are also adding to it, benefiting from it and discussing it in ways that are not always particularly helpful. We are entangled – as are all other institutions of the industrialised world – in the problems we are trying to address.

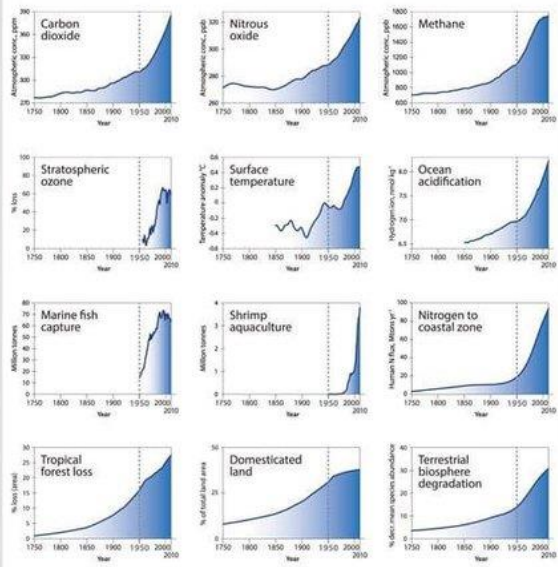
Indeed, while higher education figures aren't mapped onto Will Steffen's graphs of what he calls the 'great acceleration', there is little doubt that the numbers attending universities globally follow the same pattern of significant acceleration¹⁶. While correlation does not equal causation, there is no doubt that increasing ecological harms have happened alongside increasing higher education, and that, as David Orr has argued, the damage that humanity has inflicted upon the planet has come not from the poorest and least educated, but from those with degrees from some of our 'finest' institutions.

¹⁶ https://link.springer.com/referenceworkentry/10.1007/978-94-007-0753-5_2599

Socio-economic trends



Earth system trends



Updated Great Acceleration Graphs

Source: Will Steffen et al. "The trajectory of the Anthropocene: The Great Acceleration." The Anthropocene Review, March 2015

We are part of the predicament, then, not outside it. It is not just business as usual we need in our universities; it is a different approach. We need not only to name the scientific facts of the situation, but to recognise and address their social, ecological, epistemic and cultural foundations both in the world *and* as they manifest in our own activities.

In other words, *if universities are to support the development of a social imagination adequate to the current predicament, we need first to cultivate an imagination adequate to the task of transforming ourselves.*

Reimagining Institutions of Higher Education: Reckoning with harms

Where to begin? Let's begin by exploring how institutions of higher education might address the harms we are causing.

The place most universities begin is to ask how to stop fuelling the fire themselves and to attempt to get to grip with carbon emissions. Led in many cases by students

through programmes such as Green Offices, there are a wide range of activities oriented towards creating sustainable campuses.

The University of Victoria in Vancouver's Climate Action Initiative offers one example of how leadership by students and faculty can create a wide range of changes on campus. Here, there was a cross-university consultation with students, faculty and local community to identify 10 priorities for climate action on campus. This led to a commitment to 50% emissions reductions (Scope 1,2 and 3 *without* offsetting – which is a non-trivial goal) by 2030 and net zero by 2050; to the incorporation of climate justice as part of Equality and Diversity goals; and to a competition for student-led action supported and mentored by university sustainability specialists. We could talk about the joint initiative between my current home university of Gothenburg with Chalmers, which is a serious whole institution programme to address ecological and economic sustainable development goals through the institution, the research and teaching. There are many other such student and staff-led initiatives around the world that are starting to deal with the material reality of universities as physical entities. The development of carbon sensitive transport policies (something unimaginable just three years ago when I first started discussing this with university leadership) are now increasingly standard. Shifts towards vegetarian and local food policies are becoming the norm. Rewilding of campuses and land management for biodiversity is developing. These actions are also the focus of rapid knowledge sharing – through networks such as CANIE.org, ACTs (Australasian Campuses for Sustainability), EAUC (the Alliance for Sustainability Leadership in Education), the AASHE (Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education) amongst others.

If we recognise that our aim is, in the IPCC's language, to *transform our way of life fundamentally*, however, we cannot kid ourselves into believing that reducing our emissions alone will be sufficient.¹⁷ More substantive changes are required.

¹⁷ From AR6 report. See also Kevin Anderson, John F. Broderick, and Isak Stoddard, "A Factor of Two: How the Mitigation Plans of 'Climate Progressive' Nations Fall Far Short of Paris-Compliant Pathways," *Climate Policy* 0, no. 0 (May 28, 2020): 1–15, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14693062.2020.1728209>.

Another starting point for reckoning with the harm of universities, focuses on their role as economic actors. The divestment movement, for example, a campaign that demands university endowments, trusts and pension funds stop funding fossil fuels, is gaining ground; even Harvard recently joined the movement. Others are going further, exploring how endowments might be used for social and ecological benefit through social investment. The related ‘fossil free research’ campaign to ensure that university research and programmes are not furthering fossil fuel interests by greenwashing or laundering reputation – is also growing, along the lines of the successful campaigns to remove fossil fuel sponsorship in the Arts and of Museums.

These campaigns are also associated with a growing movement to question how economics is taught in higher education. This makes the case for teaching ‘economics that matters’, picking up Robert Kennedy’s critique of GDP as a reliable measure for economic success and questioning the sustainability of an economics premised upon continued growth.¹⁸ Some academics and management scholars are also making this case within the institution – at considerable risk to themselves if we look at one universities’ recent shameful targeting of critical management scholars.¹⁹ The ‘new economics’ these students are demanding is hardly radical – it is an economics that recognises that human activity is part of the wider ecosystem, and it is being taken up by cities from Amsterdam to Barcelona as tools for redesigning and planning cities for social and sustainable flourishing.

Another common starting point for reckoning with harms is to shift attention of universities from spaceships to relationships, in other words, to attend to universities’ role as a actors in the wider community. This takes many different forms depending on the context. The climate action campus programme in Vancouver, for example, led to the ‘Living Lands’ initiative - a collaboration between the university and local Indigenous knowledge holders and elders.²⁰ A different approach can be seen in Cleveland’s ‘Community Wealth Building’ initiative.²¹ In this programme the supply

¹⁸ See for example: <http://www.isipe.net/>

¹⁹ See: <https://economicsociology.org/2021/01/28/condemning-the-university-of-leicester-standing-for-political-economy-and-critical-management-studies/>

²⁰ <https://www.uvic.ca/climate-solutions/living-lands/index.php>

²¹ <https://democracycollaborative.org/cwb>

chains for the institution are recognised as important ways of achieving local sustainable regeneration. A detailed analysis of all the universities' goods and services is conducted to explore where they can be localised.

And of course, a key site for critical reflection is in the area of curriculum and the role of disciplines more generally. Given the growing concern about climate issues amongst students – and the now robust evidence that climate science needs to be matched with the experience of positive collective dialogue and action – we can see many courses and institutions beginning to develop interdisciplinary, hands-on programmes oriented towards engagement with diverse community knowledges.²² Here, the work of Malaysia's International Islamic University, is particularly ambitious. Their whole institution 'communiversity' approach combines interdisciplinary programmes with hands on community engagement as well as processes of deep self-reflection. It is now being trialled over the next 6 months in universities across Malaysia and promises potentially transformative change in these institutions.

All of these are important moments of reckoning with the modern-industrial institution of higher education today. They are the beginning of a reparative process that recognises the harms and complicity of our institutions in the causes of climate change and begins to clear the way for new practices to emerge.

Reimagining Institutions of Higher Education: Scaffolding the social imagination

I want to turn now, though, to this question of how universities might play a role in scaffolding the social imagination. Over the last few years, we have seen a whole range of activities that are attempting to work in this arena:

²² Maria Ojala, "Hope and Anticipation in Education for a Sustainable Future," *Futures* 94 (November 2017): 76–84, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.futures.2016.10.004>; Maria Ojala, "Hope in the Face of Climate Change: Associations With Environmental Engagement and Student Perceptions of Teachers' Emotion Communication Style and Future Orientation," *The Journal of Environmental Education* 46, no. 3 (July 3, 2015): 133–48, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00958964.2015.1021662>.

At Arizona State University, for example, the Centre for Science and the Imagination brings together artists, authors, scientists, technologists and ‘community members’ to create new forms of science fiction that aim to offer, in their words ‘*inspiring, inclusive technically grounded visions of the future*’. Brought into existence after the Science Fiction author Neal Stephenson argued that we were experiencing what he calls ‘innovation starvation’ the centre uses approaches such as ‘applied science fiction’ to use storytelling as a way of influencing the future development of science and technology.²³

The Chalmers University Challenge Lab, for example, sees students as the main facilitators for experimental futures-thinking with key stakeholders across the city. Here alternative futures are used as a site for knowledge sharing, for exchanging ideas about what might be possible and for setting a strategic direction against which current activities can be assessed.

Henry Jenkins’ and colleagues ‘Civic Imagination Labs’ at the University of Southern California uses the resources of popular culture to facilitate workshops between community activists and academics to explore how things might be otherwise, and to examine the seeds of alternative futures in the present. Their key assumption is that the imagination of alternative futures is critical to the creation of agency and collective action, that it can be a resource for confronting the horrors of the present and as stimulus to creativity.

In my own work with Helen Manchester, in Bristol, we have brought together people from different communities to use alternative futures as a resource for exploring the potential for collective agency in the present. For example, with the All-Age Friendly Cities programme we invited representatives from young people’s and older people’s groups to explore what it would take to create a city that met all of their needs and interests – prompting a complete rethink of how housing could be designed, parks managed and transport organised – and in particular, making clear the potential for

²³ Quoted in Ed Finn and Ruth Wylie, “Collaborative Imagination: A Methodological Approach,” *Futures* 132 (September 1, 2021): 102788, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.futures.2021.102788>.

common cause to be made across and between these two groups whose interests are often set in opposition.

The Climaginaries programme at Lund University is a particularly rich source of strategies to develop the social imagination. They have, for example, developed a tour guide to a fictional city 'Notterdam' to allow people to explore a fully decarbonised Europe in the year 2045. Written in the format of a typical 'rough guide' to any city it draws on research into sustainable urban development – the sorts of transport systems, housing, energy systems and mobility that would be required to get to low carbon living – and invites the reader to walk around it, recognising both what has stayed the same and what has changed. It creates a storyworld in which other ways of living, working and loving might be imagined.

These projects, and others like them, are beginning to point the way towards the sort of interdisciplinary, collaborative and imaginative work with communities that might begin to foster a collective social imagination. They demonstrate how alternative futures and storyworlds can act as useful shared territory for discussion and negotiation between different communities, and their powerful affective contribution to sharpening attention and commitment to action.

There are limits in how far these approaches get us in nurturing the sort of critical, relational and experimental imagination needed today. These limits are epistemological and structural.

First, many of these activities focus on the future rather than the present as a site of the imagination. This tends to privilege discussions of action, agency and technological change. Such a swift move to action can shortcut the sort of critical reflection on the causes of problems that is required to create substantive change. As a consequence, many of these futures-oriented activities struggle to imagine changes in deep social mores or cultural assumptions. Indeed, just as William Morris's early science fiction 'news from nowhere' was able to envisage a future socialist utopia but not a world where women were not doing the dishes, so too are these imaginative practices too often oriented towards the assumption of continued

economic and social relations of today. Cultural critic Mark Fischer has coined the term 'capitalist realism' to describe the way that it seems hard to imagine futures that operate under different economic and social assumptions. As a consequence, these imaginative practices might risk adding fuel to the techno-centric 'we've just got to diffuse the bomb' account of the future, one that – as the social imagination fails – lends itself more and more easily to geo-engineering solutions as a short cut.

To add to these practices, then, something else is required that might foster a richer, critical imagination capable of unsettling such taken for granted assumptions.

Namely, the reconnection of these imaginative practices with the broader reckoning with way in which we are all, as individuals and institutions, entangled in the forms of life that have and are still causing harm. We can see glimpses of this in the 'Museum of Carbon Ruins' by the Climaginaires team which locates participants in a storyworld in the year 2072 in which a low carbon society has been achieved and invites them to explore the social and cultural changes, the losses and harms and privileges and assumptions that had to be confronted, to achieve this goal. We can also see it in other practices that focus on different forms of storytelling, on history and grief as starting points for the imagination. Feminist science fiction accounts – such as Ursula Le Guin's 'Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction' – open up space for stories that do not involve the heroic conquest of nature and the other. Joanna Macy's grief work invites the exploration of deep sadness in confronting ecological loss and harm as a precursor to any attempt to imagine other worlds. The slow, patient and embodied work of the Gesturing Towards Decolonial Futures Collective invites a careful attention to how we might learn from the ongoing death and decline of the institutions and mindsets of modernity in the present to weave and re-weave human relationships.

The second limit these activities face is structural. All of these activities with the exception of the Chalmers Challenge Lab, are project-based and grant funded. They offer temporary sites for the exercise of imagination, rather than sustained partnership with communities. The work is institutionally vulnerable, dependent upon enthusiastic individuals and upon continued project funding. What I have learnt over 10 years of studying and being part of such collaborative projects, is that such short-

term activities tend to privilege engagement with those who are already in the ambit of the university and those whose ways of thinking and working are likely to be easily intelligible to academics.²⁴ The slow, difficult, uncomfortable work of building relationships with those with good reason not to trust universities, with those who have radically different worldviews, with those whose political and social projects might contrast with ‘ours’ in contrast, requires a time, good brokers and intermediaries, humility, the slow development of trust and ‘institutional patience’²⁵.

Finally, these activities, with the exception of the work of the team at Lund, are strangely blind to the conditions and institutions of their production – they rarely work backwards on the university itself as an institution and as a site of imaginative reconstitution. Failing to consider changes in universities themselves – which play such a considerable role in legitimising knowledge, in shaping values and in educating future professionals and leaders – is a serious omission.

Our challenge, then, is to reweave the university itself, to build dialogues between those who are fostering these acts of the imagination and those who are leading the critical reckoning with the university’s own role in shaping the narratives and knowledge that underpin our current predicament. Our challenge is to build the relationships, honesty and spaces for experiment that will allow us to foster *our own* critical, relational imagination in a way that is adequate to the sorts of changes we need.

²⁴ Keri Facer, “Convening Publics? Co-Produced Research in the Entrepreneurial University,” *Philosophy and Theory in Higher Education* 2, no. 1 (January 1, 2020): 19–43, <https://doi.org/10.3726/ptihe.2020.01.02>.

²⁵ See Bryan, D., Dunleavy, K., Facer, K., Forsdyck, C., Malek, M., Salt, K., (2018) Common Cause Research: Building Research Collaborations Between Universities and Black and Minority Ethnic Communities, Arts & Humanities Research Council/Connected Communities Programme (144 pages) https://cpb-eu-w2.wpmucdn.com/blogs.bristol.ac.uk/dist/a/358/files/2018/09/CC_Enablers_Barriers_final_sp-2c2f4bh.pdf

Universities as critical infrastructure for the imagination: a modest proposal

To conclude, I want to return to the predicament we are facing. We are living in a world in which, for many people, and in Kyle Whyte's terms, "the apocalypse has already happened", in the forms of colonialism, de-industrialisation and globalisation. And where for others, the reality is beginning to sink in that we have a 50/50 chance of reaching 1.5 degrees in the next five years, with all its implications for our children's and other people's children's lives.²⁶

Under these conditions there is a need for a form of imagination that is *relational* – oriented towards tuning into and engaging with other people's views and experiences – *critical* – able to ask hard questions about how we got here to avoid getting stuck in the same old patterns of thought – and *experimental* – able to open up with creativity and care to practices of remaking our world in different forms.

If universities are to support the development of such a rich imagination, we need to reckon with our own pasts, get our own house in order, reconfigure ourselves as sites of hospitality to very different views, and settle in for the long-term partnership working. This cannot, clearly, rely on ad-hoc, voluntaristic and project-based approaches.

I will conclude, then, with two recommendations of how we might go about doing this at the scale and pace that is needed. I am addressing, now, the UK context as this is the one I know best, there will be different approaches more useful elsewhere and I look forward to hearing your suggestions.

- First, the higher education sector as a whole needs to rapidly pivot towards programmes of adult and community-based education oriented towards social learning and social innovation. These programmes need to create interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary collaborative research-based learning

²⁶ <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/05/1117842 - 50/50 chance of 1.5>

communities. They should be open to everyone from those in carbon intensive industries seeking new jobs, to those without work seeking to create sustainable livelihoods, to those with positions of influence in wider society looking to shift whole sectors to other ways of working.

- Second: governments need to redefine how they allocate infrastructure funding, recognising that for the practice of the social imagination it is time, people, relationships and the everyday small interactions from food to bus tickets, that constitute infrastructural investments. We need to see 5, 10, 20-year investments in collaborative, community-based partnerships that allow the building of trust, the tackling of hard questions and sustained collaborations around the problems of living.

These two recommendations start from the position that the current situation will not be resolved with more technologies, more mega dams or more electric cars but that it requires, as the IPCC report recommends, *a fundamental transformation in how we live within the next five to ten years.*

Such a transformation requires a mature analysis of the reasons for the situation that we find ourselves in. And it requires a democratic, critical and experimental social imagination that can help us untangle ourselves from the ruins that James Bond and his cronies have left behind. Universities have to be at the heart of that process not as saviours, but as imperfect, compromised, entangled institutions of modernity who are nonetheless willing to reflect and learn and experiment with the new roles that they might play.