

# Whose future?

Or why we need to think more expansively about the future of Australian higher education

**Richard Hil**

'The future depends on what we do in the present' – Mahatma Gandhi

## Around the corner

Future gazing has become something of a hobby among higher education boffins. It's more head-scratching than staring into the tea leaves and crystal balls, but the thinking caps are definitely on – well; sort of.

While there's certainly no shortage of venues to indulge this stuff – conferences, seminars and roundtables – most tend to dwell on dreary questions like:

What sorts of skills and training will graduates need for the jobs of the future? Are universities equipped to deliver job-ready graduates? Where will the necessary funds come from? What role will academics play, and what sort of workplace conditions will they face?

Typically, such lines of inquiry concern themselves with the trends and patterns of today, and what's likely to follow. In the more economic-centric gatherings, the future of higher education is linked to issues of economic growth, global competitiveness, productivity, employment opportunities, 'skills shortages', training needs, and so forth. Mercifully, these dismal concerns are sometimes enlivened by bouts of reflective analysis, including how universities might respond to rapid technological change, particularly the challenges presented by robotics, artificial intelligence and automation. Sadly, however, concerns about the desirability of cyborgs strutting the Anthropocene tend to be subsumed by the need to secure the 'jobs of the future'. The only thing left to figure out is how universities can meet employers' incessant demands for employable graduates, and particularly how to expand

opportunities in health, welfare, teaching, 'creative industries', finance, marketing, IT, tourism, construction and other fields. Labour market conditions may change and technological developments intrude, but the role of the university sector, or so it seems, is to do its mandated duty as a feeder for the neoliberal economy.

To this end, education ministers, senior university managers, business leaders, and a bevy of highly paid consultants tirelessly devote themselves to the task of job supply. Academics and students – and the 'general public' for that matter – are rarely consulted about such matters, which is all a bit strange when you think about it, given that as 'knowledge workers', academics would seem rather well placed to ponder the direction of their own institutions. Sadly, this silencing also extends to those who hold different perceptions of the future based on their own traditions, experiences and understandings of the world. The voices of First Nations people, for example, are often marginalised or dismissed as narratives of the past, which suggests that ideas about the future are as subject to colonising practices as the past and present. Indeed, the very idea of 'the future', devoid of the voices of dissent and difference, means that other narratives tend to prevail. And they do.

## A herd of elephants

Perhaps most striking about most future gazing fora is their capacity to ignore not one, but an entire herd of elephants in the room. The first of these is the seemingly

obvious question: what constitutes 'the future'? It's a fuzzy temporal category that receives less attention than the blueberry muffins served up at morning tea. On the rare occasions it is seriously considered, the world of tomorrow is immersed in the usual concerns of the economy and job readiness. Why so? Well, largely because universities have been fully integrated into the neoliberal economy, so what ails the economy, ails universities, and what the economy demands, the university sector usually delivers. Not surprisingly, therefore, what passes for the future in this scenario is – if not quite Groundhog Day – then something not far removed.

But are things that simple? I'm no futurist or clairvoyant but I do know that tomorrow's world is made up of what former US Defence Secretary, Donald Rumsfeld, referred to as the "known unknowns". Wicked problems and unpredictable events are all part of the mix of uncertainty that constitutes the future. That's a known known, even for an old war horse like Rumsfeld.

What tends to be missing from many of today's higher education chat fests, however, is human agency; that is, our capacity to think about and shape the sort of future we want, based on the values we hold dear. This can vary wildly of course, depending on ideological preferences and other considerations. But agency does at least allow for the possibility of reimagining something different to what is. That, surely, is more exciting than the drudgery of economic forecasting, to which most current discussions seem wedded.

Granted, it's hard to break out of this straight jacket, especially in the current university environment. The fact is that the nature of institutional governance is such that discussions about 'future directions', or what the suits like to refer to as 'strategic planning', are conducted in the narrowest of terms, often privileging senior managers with an eye on brand promotion, market share and bottom lines. The gulf between senior management and academic staff – even when supposedly mediated by university committees – means that certain voices tend to dominate policy discussions, and rather than questioning the neoliberal orthodoxy, they continually reinforce it.

## Here comes trouble

When I stood up to address the future of higher education at a recent conference, I blurted out that "there are millions of people around the world who don't have a future, or not one that is survivable, and that might include you and me". It was perhaps an errant outburst in the circumstances, having listened to numerous talks

focussed on the economy, skills, training, pay, employment conditions, etc., but nonetheless, I proceeded to wade into the idea of the future – something, surprisingly, that hadn't been done up to that point. I suggested that the crises and challenges we face will, as author-activist Naomi Klein (2014) puts it, change everything. What we know today might be irrelevant or meaningless tomorrow, so why drone on about the future without facing up to what is happening right now?

Bolstered by my usual penchant for melodrama, I assailed my audience with the following list of actual and potential calamities: the climate crisis (profoundly existential in nature and consequence); the economic crisis (unprecedented levels of inequality, wage stagnation, massive levels of casualisation and underemployment, and the very real prospect of another major financial meltdown); the crisis of disconnection (epidemics of loneliness and anxiety and allied mental health problems); the 'post truth'/'fake news' epistemic crisis (designed to befuddle us and undermine democracy); the deepening crisis of nationalist populism (with its tendency toward extreme violence and division); and the potential crisis posed by artificial intelligence and robotics (the capacity to alter the very conditions of human life). Last but not least, there is a crisis of governance in just about every area of government, whereby decisions are made by ill-informed and self-interested elites, often without any reference to the populations they claim to be representing. Sound familiar?

You've probably got your own list of problems. The point is: how on Earth is it possible to talk about the future if there may well not be one, at least not in the form currently conceived?

Don't get me wrong. I know that universities can't solve all these problems alone, but they have for many years, through their teaching, research and other activities, assisted the process of elucidating the nature and causes of crises. Now, however, these intellectual practices are jeopardised by the constant restructuring of workforces and workload intensification, making it more difficult to undertake the knowledge work that we so desperately need.

Indeed, some (like me) would go as far as saying that universities are part of the problem. If we accept that higher education institutions are part of the neoliberal matrix, which has variously contributed to many of the crises and challenges we now face, then surely you might want to think outside the usual box? Some serious reimagining might be warranted. What about discussing the values, ethics and practices that might help create a

different, survivable, just, peaceful and regenerative world, and the role of education in all this? It's not a question that can be easily answered, but as knowledge workers committed to understanding the world in which we live, academics should surely be at the forefront of debates about the future – some are, but not too many. Arguably, without the constraints placed upon them by current managerialist regimes, academics would be better placed to engage the public in conversations about the sort of future they would like to see.

All this might seem light years away from economic concerns, industrial relations and job readiness. But is it? Perhaps we need to think about the sorts of jobs we might need to create a more compassionate, connected, cooperative and, dare I say, kinder society? Or, what about the jobs that might help us transition out of environmentally destructive and violent occupations such as in the weapons and extractive industries (which are so enthusiastically supported by universities)?

Just a thought...

## Other conversations

Another elephant at the conference was the fracturing of neoliberalism which, according to economist Richard Denniss (2018) at the Australia Institute, is occurring from within and without, taking us further into some dark repressive places and ensuring more of what David Harvey (2004) refers to as “accumulation by dispossession”. No-one is quite sure what will follow. And yet, in the midst of all this we are witnessing an amazing contestation of ideas, with many now predicting a very different future – dystopian and otherwise. On the left-progressive side of politics, there are some fascinating debates going on. The following books are testament to new and exciting ways of thinking about ‘the future’: George Monbiot’s (2017) *Out of the Wreckage*, Kate Raworth’s (2018) *Doughnut economics*, *Post capitalism* by Paul Mason (2015), *Utopia for realists* by Rutgers Bregman (2014), *Drawdown* by Paul Hawken (2018), *Call of the Reed Warbler* by Charles Massy (2017), *No is not enough* by Naomi Klein (2017), *Climate – A new story* by Charles Eisenstein (2018) – to name but a few. The point is that we are indeed in the middle of a profound period of change, a struggle over ideas about what might serve us better in the future. At the very least, the future is seen as unpredictable,

uncertain, even mysterious, although it is a future that can and will be shaped by what we think and do now.

How does this relate to the conference I attended? Well, perhaps we should start our conversations about tomorrow’s world of higher education by providing some context and allowing for the possibility of reimagining a very different way of being.

And perhaps we should begin by peering over the neoliberal parapet to those higher educational initiatives that are much better placed to address the problems that now confront us. Buddhist and Indigenous universities and programs (including many of the latter in our current system), slow/free universities, progressive colleges in the US, Canada and many parts of the global south, Schumacher College in the UK, the School of Life in

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England and Australia, and a host of informal community education initiatives are just some of the alternative approaches that concern themselves with the quality of life, well-being

and regeneration rather than economic growth and productivity.

They’re interested in reconnecting with the earth and each other through the trilogy of head, hand and heart, as well as weaving Indigenous wisdoms through curricula, research and community-based projects. They’re about decolonising curricula, unlearning modernist, materialist and environmentally destructive values and practices, and understanding how power works in a corporatised world. They promote critical pedagogy through dialogue and nomadic ways of thinking that enable students to become active citizens rather than neoliberal denizens. Above all, they see the crucial importance of understanding our complex interconnections with the planet and the need for collaborative, sharing, non-hierarchical and participatory relations. For these institutions, a commitment to peace, social justice, and human rights is the starting point of education, not a by-product.

Advocates of such approaches see the purpose of higher education not simply as preparing students for the jobs of the future – although, yes, we need highly educated graduates – but rather, as involving them in meaningful dialogues about the values, ethics, practices and relations necessary for a better world.

It would be silly (and insulting) to suggest that none of the above occurs in the neoliberal university, because it does. There are brilliant, committed academics devoted to critical scholarship and the rest. But in a system

where 'critical thinking' itself can be commodified and blended with vocationalised 'graduate attributes', and where academics are dragooned into supporting the corporate brand, the opportunities for reimagining are, let's say, restricted. Indeed, as I have often said, progressive academics pursue their work in spite of rather than because of the neoliberal university. More's the pity.

## Now what?

The conference I attended was organised by the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU). It proved to be a fascinating exchange of views and ideas, but not for the reasons I had anticipated. There's no doubt that the conference participants, me included, remain extremely concerned about excessive workloads, suspect regulatory practices, reduced academic autonomy, casualisation, corporate influence, commercialisation and so forth. These are important areas of struggle in which the Union continues to play a key role. Many of these concerns, however, sit within the framework of what is commonly referred to as 'industrial relations'. This battlefield is intimately connected to other, wider struggles that are formative for the world of tomorrow.

They are struggles closely related to the crises and challenges identified earlier. The question that arises from all this is: if academics are to retain and create the intellectual spaces necessary for meaningful critical scholarship - scholarship for a liveable future - then what sort of politics should they engage in? I don't have the answer, but a good place to start might be to link our struggles over the governance of universities to the very reasons why these institutions exist in the first place. And even though many academics have been co-opted into the neoliberal university and given that most do not belong to the union, there is surely a case for a different sort of conversation, one that raises the prospect of an entirely different sort of higher education beyond the remit of neoliberal junk values.

I would urge the NTEU to continue to link its work explicitly to those international campaigns in defence of the public university. It should also continue to promote a public conversation about the sort of society (and future) we'd like to see, and the role of universities in this regard. Unions have long been integral to those great social movements that have sought to advance democracy, social justice and human rights. They have in many instances acted as a bulwark against tyranny and social division. It's a proud tradition that can and should be upheld, especially during these most troubling of times. What we should not

do, however, is buy into a neoliberal conception of the future. That's the road to oblivion.

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