

HE for the Global Good: Visions, Spectres and Collective Action

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Introduction

My vision for HE in 2050 rests on the assumption that there is a dynamic inter-relationship between the past and the present, and that the future will be produced through human intervention, and in interaction with material and technological forces. My hope is that universities will undergo transformation (while retaining a relative autonomy from narrow nationalistic and market forces) to heal the growing fractures dividing humanity, and to develop collective responses to avert the catastrophes that threaten to engulf us all. These fractures include an exponential growth in inequality, the return of absolute poverty and fault lines between those who have secure employment, those who work in precarious conditions, and those who are excluded. Migration caused by war and poverty has led to large scale suffering and there are increased threats of global pandemics. Social solidarity within and across countries is being steadily undermined, leading to rising violence and xenophobia, and the erosion of democracy. These catastrophes are occurring in the context of a global environmental crisis that threatens the survival of humanity and there is a danger that our planet may be on the road to destruction by 2050.

In outlining my vision, I will focus on the public university and I will focus on the major roles of education and research, outlining how I envision these to contribute to better futures. My dynamic temporal conception suggests that universities have a responsibility to preserve valuable foundational assets developed over long periods of time, discard those that are obsolete, and transform. My vision anticipates that the spectres of the present that haunt HE, such as market fundamentalism and the competition fetish are likely to become even more powerful, preying on universities, and thus requiring challenge and resistance.

Research Resolving Grand Challenges of Our Time

The fractures that I have outlined above are globally connected and multi-dimensional and best addressed by multilateral and multi-disciplinary research teams. My hope is that a global network of researchers will increase in number and strength, crossing disciplines and borders to form new disciplines and alliances. Universities, as institutions that are both nationally anchored and globally linked, are well positioned to forge transnational synergies into the future. If we survive until 2050, universities should also be at the forefront of research into space exploration, warning against the mistakes made on our own planet and averting the super-exploitation of outer space. I would wish that the balance in cross-national research power (which privileges research responding to the concerns of the powerful in rich countries, while excluding the crises facing the majority of the world's population in low-income countries) is altered to respond in a more authentic fashion to global wellbeing, as outlined in UNESCO's sustainable development goals. In addition, western enlightenment principles should reflect on insights from scholars such as Bonaventura Dos Santos and Raewyn Connell on southern epistemologies; and Vandana Shiva on the patenting of biodiversity and biopiracy, indigenous knowledge and inter-species relations. An important step forward for research would be to replace live animal

experimentation with simulated experiments and technological artefacts that avoid the suffering of other species.

The relative autonomy of universities against narrow political and market pressures needs to be strengthened to create genuine space for innovation in response to global challenges. The response of universities to the current Covid-19 pandemic exemplifies both the promises and the grave threats for future research. The Human Genome Project which involved scientists around the world sequencing the genome made possible the sequencing of COVID-19 and the production of vaccines at unprecedented speedⁱ. This was possible because scientists were able to tap into the long roots of cross-disciplinary, cross-country public investments in science spanning back into time. However, in the absence of production capacity, universities have partnered with large pharmaceutical corporations. These partnerships have raised difficult tensions including conflicts in intellectual property rights, licensing and the profit versus the public interest motive resulting in low-income countries gaining inadequate access to the vaccines. This contemporary example highlights the dangers of the commodification of knowledge into the future, where publicly funded research may be subjected to closure and treated as private intellectual property.

My hope is that universities in the future will be in a position to resist the colonisation of market fundamentalism (a quasi-religious belief that the free reign of unregulated market forces will lead to equity and prosperity) and the idea that the profit potential of knowledge and the interests of mega-corporations have claims that come before those of the public good. I would like to see a balance between the prioritisation of research for profit, and research which focuses on the social, political, economic and cultural functions of HE for global wellbeing.

This is particularly important in relation to research on artificial intelligence with the danger that prestigious universities and powerful technological companies will partner in order to reap financial and status benefits, while actively displacing human labour and bringing untold misery to the majority of the world's population. Universities should be at the forefront of building a world where the potential of artificial intelligence is realised for the advantage of the majority, by releasing human-beings from arduous and repetitive work and creating opportunities for meaningful and rewarding activity that benefits humanity. Universities should lead discussions around ethics and the reframing of incentive structures so that smart-machine innovations are guided by the aspirations and needs of marginalised communities, rather than the maximising of shareholder value.

I also hope that HE in 2050 escapes the trap of what I have termed the competition fetish, which is a modern-day magical belief that competition will enhance equity and quality and solve all the problems of HE. Market competition, state-sponsored excellence contents and status competitions such as rankings often combine to pit universities against other universities in a global race to achieve goals that exclude some of the most important functions of HE, including how universities contribute to the public good. At the apex of this competition is the battle for world-class university status which legitimates the concentration of funding in research elites, while weakening national systems. There is increasing evidence that elite research circles and over-concentration of funding reduce research diversity and creativity. I would like to see hyper-competition supplemented by other forms of organising research in 2050 including a re-investment in blue-skies research and collaboration; a wider dispersal of research power and funding to avoid super-concentrations, and incentives to

encourage divergent research missions to maintain and enhance integrative power in Science.

Inclusive, Critical Education For Equity and Democracy

HE in many countries has shifted from an elite to a mass system with better representation of women and certain ethnic groups. However, access and success is still problematic for working class students and certain groups of students of colour with evidence of growing intersectional disadvantage which is likely to increase into the future. The sociologist Pierre Bourdieu has remarked that it is not individual universities that contribute to inequality in any given society, but the combined workings of the HE system as a whole; a development which I have termed the combined and uneven development of HE worldwide. There are growing numbers of high-status, well-resourced universities in poor countries that recruit the elite. These universities partner with the global elite, apply decontextualised measures of academic merit based on performance (rather than potential) and connect graduates to global power nodes. At the same time, the richest countries in the world have rising numbers of institutions designated as low status. These recruit the most disadvantaged students in the country. They are poorly resourced and constrained to their locales.

By 2050, universities should include avatar-teachers and cutting-edge technology to enhance access (via testing for academic potential) and success (via financial and individualised technological and pedagogical support) for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Dysfunctional stratification should be overturned with diverse institutions offering high-quality academic and vocational choices with inter-connected progression routes incentivised through funding and policy. While students are likely to demand education that links in a direct manner to employment, the rise of platform capitalism, artificial intelligence and technological developments will make the labour market increasingly uncertain. A broad, interdisciplinary, critical education that challenges what Paulo Freire has termed a banking mode of teaching, and which is not measured solely through market verification, managerial indicators and student satisfaction is fundamental to give students the skills and the dispositions for lifelong learning. In addition, the incorporation of advanced skills to decarbonise the world and protect other sustainability goals is essential and may contribute to increases in labour demand. Getting this right is vitally important for a more just and ecologically more sustainable world.

Given current political trends, barely regulated predatory capitalism combining with right-wing movements will grow encouraging deeper divisions amongst exploited and disadvantaged communities (for example between white and black working class young people) through the manufacturing of fear, the inscription of hyper-competition and the spread of disinformation. If we add to this scenario a global context where there is parliamentary democracy, but where wealth and power are concentrated in the hands of the few who make crucial planetary life-decisions, leaving the majority with little genuine choice, we are likely to enter a highly volatile context with accelerating violence and an environmental emergency.

In this scenario, universities should focus on creating the space for critical analysis and dialogue, including the incorporation of the liberal arts and humanities so that young people develop identities as global citizens with critical reasoning, rather than technically trained hyper-individualistic machines. I would like to see virtual reality incorporated into learning so that students can be transported into other virtual worlds, where they can 'stand in the

shoes of the other' to empathise with the suffering of near and distant communities and identify the most serious threats that democracy and our planet faces. The challenge of course will be how to take the principles of university education that arose out of the very different conditions of a more liberal period and implement them under the changing conditions of national, global and possibly even inter-planetary conditions of the future. Getting this right is vitally important for a more just and ecologically more sustainable worlds.

Finally, the university should move beyond its own walls and its own students to engage educationally with those who remain outside the ivory tower. This will be particularly important for an aging population, who may wish to learn new skills to contribute to society or may need intellectual stimulation for their own wellbeing. I would also like to see a renewal of the university as a space for global dialogue, particularly if we continue in an era where xenophobic organisations are collaborating across borders, where experts are not trusted, and universities themselves face rising forms of populist revolt. Rather than being simply outraged, my hope is that universities will find answers to the difficult questions that new forms of populism are likely to raise, that universities will still be in a relatively privileged positions to go where others fear to tread; and that universities can apply academic rigour to throw light on the causes and conditions which give rise to the catastrophes facing society. It is important for universities to create a cognitive space to support the conversations of conflicting groups and to help communities shape and make choices about possible futures. Universities need to find ways to reach those who have been left behind and those who are cynical and disillusioned through popular, rather than populist, forms of engagement, creating an enlarged space for democratic deliberation with the potential to respond to global challenges and to create a more inclusive world.

In conclusion, my hope is that the public university will still be in existence in the future, that it will have undergone various stages of transformation (while slaying the spectres of market fundamentalism and the competition fetish and ensuring that it does not morph into just another for-profit enterprise, which will inevitably lead to its rapid demise) and that universities worldwide will work collectively to make a significant contribution to healing the fractures dividing humanity, while developing collective responses to avert the catastrophes that threaten to engulf us all. ⁱⁱ

ⁱ This was a point made by Margaret Heffernan in the video interview: [Whither Higher Education?](#)

ⁱⁱ I would like to thank Ian Jamieson and Ian Gough for their important challenges and helpful comments.