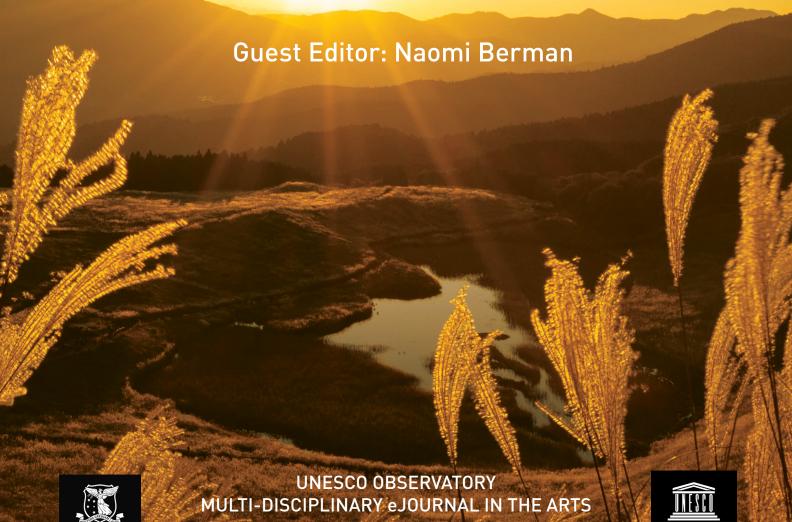# Revitalising Universities in (Post-)COVID Times

Special Edition: A collection of papers from the Revitalising Universities in (Post-)COVID Times Symposium held at University of Tokyo 2022

Guest Editor: Naomi Berman

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The UNESCO Observatory refereed e-journal promotes multi-disciplinary research in the Arts and Education and arose out of a recognised need for knowledge sharing in the field. The publication of diverse arts and cultural experiences within a multi-disciplinary context informs the development of future initiatives in this expanding field. There are many instances where the arts work successfully in collaboration with formerly non-traditional partners such as the sciences and health care, and this peer-reviewed journal aims to publish examples of excellence.

Valuable contributions from international researchers are providing evidence of the impact of the arts on individuals, groups and organisations across all sectors of society. The UNESCO Observatory refereed e-journal is a clearing house of research which can be used to support advocacy processes; to improve practice; influence policy making, and benefit the integration of the arts in formal and non-formal educational systems across communities, regions and countries.

INTRODUCTION

This special Issue presents a selection of papers presented at the Revitalising Universities in (Post-)COVID Times Symposium, held at the University of Tokyo, November 2022. This hybrid event gathered academics, educators, and experts from Australia, Japan and other regions to discuss the future of higher education as universities navigate pathways out of the pandemic. The experience of the pandemic may vary between countries based on cultures, expectations, and social organisation, therefore exploring a diversity of experiences and expectations as universities reopen offers a fruitful point of differentiation and comparison between globally diverse educational spaces.

Echoing Connell's original call to rethink the 'good university', COVID has thrown into question taken-for-granted notions about the position of universities, forcing a reframing of understandings around their social purpose. The pivot to online during the pandemic has highlighted the potential for digital technology to transform the way we teach and learn. Yet it has also become clear that such transformation does not come without its social, economic and wellbeing costs. Indeed, questions around whether the response measures introduced by universities across the globe early in the pandemic are still valid and viable need to be asked, as institutions decide what gets kept, thrown away, amplified, or diminished. The symposium provided a space for reflection on these questions as well as broader philosophical and theoretical deliberations on the 'good university'.

Naomi Berman
Guest Editor

REVIVING UNIVERSITIES FROM CRISIS

AUTHOR

Professor Emerita Raewyn Connell

BIOGRAPHY

Raewyn Connell is Professor Emerita, University of Sydney, and Life Member of the National Tertiary Education Union. She has taught in several countries and is a widely-cited sociological researcher. She is the current recipient of the International Sociological Association's quadrennial Award for Excellence in Research and Practice. Her books include Ruling Class Ruling Culture, Making the Difference, Gender & Power, Masculinities, and Southern Theory. Her most recent books are The Good University and the co-authored Knowledge & Global Power. Her work has been translated into twenty-four languages. Raewyn has been active in the labour movement, and in work for gender equality and for peace. Details at www.raewynconnell.net and Twitter @raewynconnell.

I have worked mainly in the Australian university system, which like all others is part of a global economy of knowledge. It is not at the global center of the economy of knowledge, like the 'Ivy League' institutions of the United States, or the equivalent universities of Western Europe. Still, the Australian system is relatively well resourced and able to participate in the academic exchanges in some detail. So, some of what I say will be familiar to colleagues in Japan. But some points may be new. I hope we will have good time for questions and comments when I have finished and I'm very happy to invite your comments, as well as particular questions.

The COVID pandemic in many parts of the world led to campus closures, cancellations of particular courses, layoffs of higher education staff. There was a dramatic and rapid shift to online teaching. There were border closures, especially in the earlier part of the pandemic, which meant that significant number of overseas students were effectively trapped. And there was an increase in some forms of inequality in the university system. This included loss of income for insecure ('casualized', we call it in Australia) or precarious workers on short term contracts. There was an impact in gender terms, given the sudden increase in care responsibilities, which in most parts of the world are mainly undertaken by women. That meant a reduction, among women academic staff, of the capacity to be productive in research.

So, there are some dramatic and unusual effects. But also, the pandemic, I think, has revealed things that existed before. One was the vulnerability of the business model on which many universities had come to rely, depending especially on fees paid by overseas students. It also revealed the universities' vulnerability to decline in government support, because a significant number of governments, including the Australian government, made sure the universities did not receive the funding that other organizations, other sectors of the economy, did receive as support payments for coping with the effects of the pandemic.

So, the vulnerability of the universities' financial position was suddenly very traumatically revealed. Also suddenly revealed - though this was no great surprise to me - was the resilience and capacity of the university workforce.

A very large number of the teaching staff moved very rapidly into other forms of teaching, especially online teaching. The university workforce showed its capacity to keep the research process going, even in the constrained situation set up by the pandemic. And the capacity to use industrial action (by unions) to sustain the well-being and income of the university workforce. But that has become a difficulty in some parts of the world, including my country.

So, the pandemic certainly put new pressures on the system, but it also revealed some old problems, which have continued to be with us and are with us in the recovery. One of those is the turn in the last generation or so to finance public university systems through student fees. Now fees had been charged in early periods of history, that is not entirely novel. But in the last 30 or 40 years, there has been a qualitative shift towards this mechanism, since public sector funding for higher education, relative to the number of students, has fallen in most parts of the world.

This shift towards privatisation was pioneered in the Caribbean. The island archipelago in the Americas became the site of a new generation of commercial universities, especially medical universities, which began to flourish in the 1970s. There are now, I think, 30 or 40 such universities, in different states in the Caribbean region, which draw most of their students from the United States and Canada. A whole industry of offshore University was created then, and that is a model that has been globalized. In the Gulf States, for instance, we find a number of offshore universities, which are branches of American or European universities mostly, and are fee-charging. They provide degree studies, sometimes for people from the mostly Arabic-speaking populations in that immediate region, but more often for people employed by the multinational companies in the oil industry or for other incoming overseas students.

And as even public universities moved more towards this commercial model, their internal power structures changed. University administration has shifted strongly in the direction of corporate-style management, techniques of control pioneered by profit-seeking corporations in the private economy.

And with them have come new forms of control over the academic staff: with less reliance on professional norms and professional pride as means to guarantee good performance, and a turn towards surveillance and auditing. At the same time there has been a marked shift in the way university managers have looked on students, seeing them much more as 'consumers' than as fellow participants in a knowledge process.

This was dramatized for me when the University of Sydney introduced a new student identity card. Here is a picture of it. It's a credit card, believe it or not. And for all I know, this is now common. The shift to fee-based funding has been accompanied by a massive rise in the volume of aggregate student debt, which has now reached trillions of dollars in North America.

Those were trends already visible before COVID, and they are still with us in the recovery phase. Accompanying that turn towards a corporate model have been shifts in the employment situation of university staff. There has been a turn to part-time and casualized work, to short-term contracts. About 70% of our undergraduate teaching in Australia - perhaps even more - is now done not by the permanent academic staff, but by people on short-term contracts. Outsourcing has grown strongly for the non-academic half of the university workforce. And various practices promoting the intensification of labor have appeared in university management.

In this situation we see greater distrust by managers towards the university workforce - and by the workforce towards university management. Therefore we see a rising number of industrial actions by university workers. Here for instance is a picture of a strike at the University of Sydney, where I was working some years ago.

Universities have been running into what I regard as a cultural crisis. As universities have become more commercialized, they have been more concerned to control their image. They become more involved in advertising, and the creation of more or less fictitious images of what universities are actually like. Here is an image that has been much used in University of Sydney advertising.

It shows, apparently, a happy tutorial group sitting on the lawn in front of a beautiful Jacaranda tree in the main quadrant of the University of Sydney. Now there are two very serious problems with this picture. Firstly, no one is allowed to hold a tutorial on the lawn in that quadrangle. Secondly, the Jacaranda tree blooms in November. But by November, in the Australian academic year, all the tutorial groups are finished. So, it's a confected image for the purposes of advertising. That is quite typical of the way universities now advertise themselves. This to me is a serious cultural problem. Our cultural standing depends on our concern with the truth. That's what research is about. Every researcher knows how difficult it is to establish the truth. But that is what we are trying to do.

On another scale, the world scale, there are problems of inequality in the university system, huge economic inequalities. The University of Sydney is relatively rich on a world scale, but its wealth is trivial compared with Harvard University, which has - if I have the latest figures - about USD 53 billion in its endowment. A university with such gigantic resources is just not the same kind of institution as a public university in almost any part of the world. Yet the global 'ranking' systems pretend that all universities are comparable, can be ranked in terms of 'excellence' on the same scale.

So, what can we do about it, what are our sources of hope? And what are the principles on which we should be acting now?

One of the sources of hope I have already mentioned: the resilience of the university workforce, which was dramatically shown in the pandemic. One reason for that becomes apparent when you look closely at the nature of university work, the 'labor process' (if you don't mind a little sociological jargon). It is a feature of university work that it is fundamentally *cooperative*. It involves the interaction and constant cooperation of different groups of staff, academic and non-academic, too, constantly facing new situations, and inventing solutions. University work draws every day on the creativity and capacity for coordination, the inventiveness of the university staff. That applies to teaching, applies to research, and applies to solving the administrative problems of the university on a daily basis.

In other words, universities as organizations (I'm now speaking in the jargon of organization theory) work from the bottom up. They don't actually work by command from above. In that respect they are fundamentally different from profit-making corporations. There is a mismatch between the corporate model on which university management is increasingly run, and how universities as higher education and research organizations actually work in an everyday way. The mismatch is expressed in the very high levels of frustration and distrust that we now see among the university workforce. That creativity, and that cooperative labor process, are to me a source of hope. We could build on them in different ways.

My second source of hope is the social need for higher education and research. We are doing something that our society really needs. We are not fabricating artificial needs as parts of the consumer economy do. And that value is recognized. There is popular support for public, accessible higher education. This was dramatically shown some years back when there was a major conflict in Chile in South America over the university system. A student movement arose criticizing the reliance on fees and demanding an expansion of public higher education. At the peak of that movement, students called for a public demonstration in Santiago, the capital. Here is a picture of the demonstration. There were said to be nearly a million people. It's a dramatic demonstration of the level of concern that there can be for good public higher education.

My third source of hope is that we, or people like us, have done it before. There is actually a rich history of more inventive, experimental and democratic universities. We don't hear very much about this history in the era of international league tables where everyone is trying to converge on the market leader and make ourselves look like Harvard. But there is a fascinating, radical history of universities also. I want to show you one example of that, an innovative university started just a hundred years ago in Bengal, then a province of the British colony of India. The poet Rabindranath Tagore had set up a group of village schools and decided they needed a higher education 'top', so he set up an independent college. It's called Visva-Bharati.

It struggled financially but after India became independent in 1947, Tagore's college was brought into the public university system by the new Indian government, and it is still there. Tagore refused to copy the colonial universities set up by the British government in India; he developed a different curriculum. He did not reject European culture and science, he included that. But he also included indigenous knowledge and art from India, from other Asian civilizations - Tibet, China - and from Islamic cultures, too. Tagore conceived his college as a meeting place of civilizations. He tried to produce what we might now call an intercultural curriculum for his students. It's an astonishing story, and it's not the only story that should be much better known to enrich our idea of what can be done in higher education.

And there are other ways, too, in which citizens can be involved in the disciplined production of knowledge. Here is an example, a project that was set up in Sweden, I think in the 1970s, maybe in the 1960s, sponsored by the trade union movement. This picture is the cover of the book written by Sven Lindqvist, one of the designers of the project. In English the title reads Dig Where You Stand: that is to say, research your own job. Workers in industry researched the histories of their own jobs - and who would better know that job, than the people who did it? Collaboratively with others in the same workforce, they went on from the history of their job to the history of their firm, the history of the industry, and the economic history of the region and the country, building their skills as researchers on the way.

These projects were very popular, I believe - a truly remarkable example of knowledge constructed 'from below'. There are other popular knowledge projects which are worth thinking about too, in the natural sciences such as popular astronomy, popular ornithology (bird-watching), and so forth. They give us different ideas of how a democratic university system might work.

I have told these stories, and some others, and have given my account of where we might head in university reform, in this book called The Good University - please excuse a little advertisement of my own. There you will find sources for the examples I have been talking about.

There are remarkable contrasts in the character and problems of different universities and university systems. Here is an advertisement from my alma mater, the University of Melbourne, claiming to be "Number 1" in the country. It pains me to see my own university buying into the fundamentally unsound 'League Tables' as if they were real measures of the quality of the education or knowledge work.The ranking scales mainly reflect levels of funding available to different university systems, and the connections and exclusiveness that particular institutions are able to apply in their pursuit of prestige.

But there are other contemporary ways of doing university work. So, here are two other examples. The first is from Venezuela in South America, a country that's demonized in corporate media because of its left-wing government. One of the things that government did was try to expand a previously elitist university system by creating a new institution, called the Bolivarian University of Venezuela, for working class and indigenous peoples. Small campuses were set up in towns and villages around the countryside. There was an attempt to develop at a different and more student-centered pedagogy. That was not always successful - a radical experiment like this is hard to do, even with government backing. But it does exist, and we can learn from it.

In another part of South America, in Bolivia, a university has been created which teaches in indigenous languages. This is rare anywhere in the world. Here is an image for the branch of this university for people who speak the indigenous language called Quechua. It has created pathways in higher education for this community. It leads on, if students wish, to other higher education institutions, which in this part of south America are mainly Spanish-speaking. There are other examples in the region now, of universities establishing a new relationship with indigenous communities, changing the curriculum and the language of instruction, intending to change the accessibility of higher education in a democratic direction.

That leads me to my final thoughts, which are about the criteria for a good university and a good university system. My criteria for a good university are:

Reviving Universities from Crisis - **Professor Emerita Raewyn Connell**

1) it is democratic in its purposes and in the way it functions internally - it is an industrial democracy. 2) It is engaged, serving real community needs. 3) It is truthful, it doesn't go in for false advertising or specious claims, but it is much concerned with the establishment of truth. 4) It is creative, being willing to recognize different forms of creativity. 5) It is sustainable, not only in environmental terms but also in human terms. It doesn't put unbearable pressures on its workforce, and it tries to sustain its workforce all the time.

A good university also depends on a good university system, because an individual campus is not autonomous, fundamentally. For a good university system, my criteria would be 1) it is cooperative, and doesn't force universities to try to compete with each other (competition actually produces more conventionality and less diversity in the university system). 2) it is inclusive in social terms. 3) it is public, in its ethos and funding. 4) it is diverse. We can have very different models for different universities with equal resources, if we have a well-funded public university system.

These are my criteria. Putting them into practice is a big question, of course! We certainly need to define new directions of the university system, we need to build new alliances for the support of higher education, we need to organize at the base, union membership in universities needs to develop, student organization needs to develop. We need ways for involving families, not just as payers of the fees but as active supporters of the institutions.

We need to multiply our new agendas, in curriculum, in research, in pedagogy, and in social engagement.

Now, much of that is already happening - on a small scale. So, one of the strategic problems is to scale up the initiatives that already exist, to work on a larger scale and change higher education more broadly.

And with that, I'll finish my presentation and hand it over to you for comments and questions. Thank you.