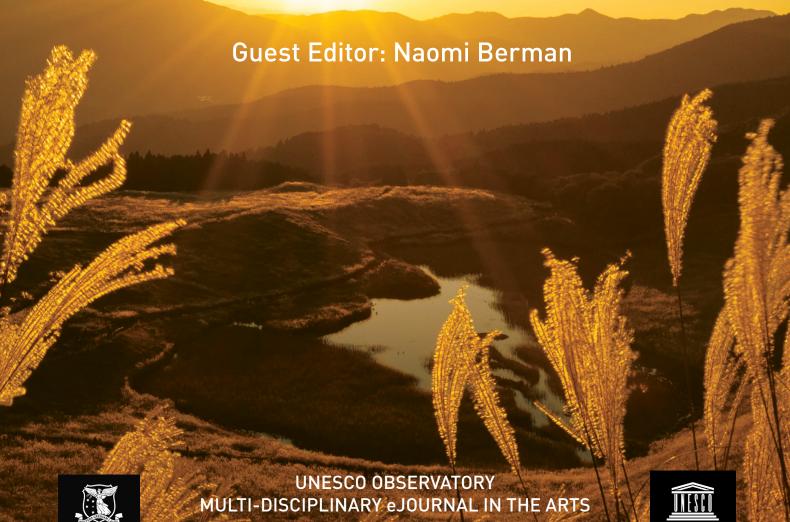# Revitalising Universities in (Post-)COVID Times

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

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**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

# EDITORIAL:
# REVITALISING UNIVERSITIES IN (POST-)COVID TIMES

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This symposium was a response to Professor Emeritus Raewyn Connell's call to rethink what universities do amid a period of transformation that, although commencing before the pandemic, needs to be newly considered in light of the significant upheaval since. The pathways out of the pandemic for higher education are beset by uncertainty, forcing a reframing of understandings around the social purpose of the university. Tensions exist between competing discourses that, on one hand, present an optimistic narrative of universities in the midst of a 'digital revolution', as they 'transform' or 'pivot' from face-to-face to online modes of teaching and learning. On the other hand, though, there exists 'crisis talk' (Connell, 2022), about the future of universities as they fight for survival in precarious economic conditions. These include a need to address questions regarding the validity, durability and viability of the original response measures that were introduced in universities across the globe early in the pandemic. As Betts (2020) asks, what gets kept, thrown away, refreshed, slowed down, or powered up? Importantly, any vision of a sustainable future for the sector requires a 'significant reconsideration of purpose, position, strategy, culture and business model' (Betts, 2020, para. 13).

As we begin to understand the adverse impacts the pandemic has had on students and staff, Connell's original question regarding what kind of university would be good to work in, study in and fight for is even more relevant. However, any attempt to answer this question requires a deeper interrogation of the broader concepts and ideas framing our previously taken-for-granted understandings about the social purpose of universities within a new set of conditions.

This symposium seeks to provide a platform upon which such a conversation can be started, in the achievement of, as Connell advocates, a more hopeful future for the higher education sector.

This special issue comprises nine papers from academics based in Japan, New Zealand, Australia, South Africa, Hong Kong, the US and Chile who attended the Revitalising Universities Symposium in November 2022. Opening such diverse conversations in academic scholarship blends conceptual and theoretical frameworks along with practice and personal experience. Drawing from a range of educational contexts and practices, this special issue aims to foster a deeper understanding of the challenges and opportunities in higher education in a (post-)COVID world in order to both enrich knowledge and inform policy and practice.

Connell's paper, 'Reviving Universities from Crisis', establishes a keynote for the special issue through a well-argued discussion of how university is 'done' and funded around the world, and how this corporate model run by fees rather than funding showed its deficit in the light of the pandemic. However, it also paints a picture of hope for the future based in the strengths of academia. It raises issues that are crucial for the effective navigation of this period of immense change in higher education.

Each of the remaining papers presents a deficit in the modern higher education system that was exacerbated by the pandemic of the past three years. Many of these papers turn to personal notes, with Matthews' autoethnography and Ridgway's semi-fictional accounts that movingly show the challenges of higher education while bereft. Both these papers, along with the work of McGhie et al., Mori, and Ridgway et al., show the need for human connection, empathy, and compassion as vital elements in ensuring student success.

Other papers look beyond the interpersonal to systemic changes. Frielick and Teo et al. each propose models for 'doing' university in a new way, with Frielick focused on an ecological model of higher education that includes the staff/student relationship other papers point out as vital. Teo et al. set their sights even higher, looking at how to not only prepare in advance for the next major interruption to higher education, but to do so in a way that is not only viable but fundamentally 'good'.

Frelick's paper argues for looking at nature as a model of the university, creating an ecosystem out of the exchange of information and accepting our interdependent nature as academics. He proposes an ecological model of the university, a living system in which each part is connected to the whole.

Grib, meanwhile, provides a meta-analysis of online extracurricular events held at Japanese universities during the pandemic that discusses both methods of implementation and the benefits and drawbacks of online, or hybrid, student participation.

Matthews' paper uses autoethnography as a method of describing her own experiences with grief as an undergraduate and doctoral student, then supplies ways autoethnography itself might be beneficial to students grappling with the grief of the pandemic.

McGhie et al. surveyed first-year students at a historically Black university in South Africa with the goal of reimagining higher education, and particularly the role of the university in social justice, in light of student experiences during the pandemic. Their findings tie together the ways in which historical oppression contributes to modern issues with higher education, with an actionable plan for professors that relies on compassion, empathy, and human understanding.

Mori combines the ideas of academic development with the family theory of a secure base, and posits how staff might be trained to provide this safe space to students, decreasing loneliness and helping students to confidently reach their potential.

In a poignant semi-fictional story of loss amid a pandemic, Ridgway points to the gaps that remain in university bereavement policies, noting how necessary it is to have such a policy, and the life-saving effects of even the smallest human-to-human interactions in the midst of loneliness.

Ridgway et al. go on to provide some potential bereavement policies, drawing on research into both good and lacking responses at universities worldwide to the COVID-19 pandemic. They give an actionable list that universities would be wise to consider in the support of bereft students.

Teo et al. take the aerial view of the problem, discussing a system that might work to prepare for emergencies within the higher education sector before they happen, so that the scrambling of the COVID-19 pandemic won't need to be repeated. They argue for a new model, HEED, to address risks, prepare for alternatives, and ensure these alternatives are not only viable but 'good'.

The results of this symposium make it clear that higher education is more than equipped to handle the challenges of a new paradigm, where universities can learn to adapt to sweeping, sudden changes, while allowing their staff and students the human connection that has proven to be irreplaceable in the student experience.

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