



Editorial: Re-Purposing Universities for Sustainable Human Progress

Iain S. Stewart^{1,2,3*}, Victoria Hurth⁴ and Stephen Sterling⁵

¹ El Hassan bin Talal Research Chair in Sustainability, Royal Scientific Society, Amman, Jordan, ² Sustainable Earth Institute, University of Plymouth, Plymouth, United Kingdom, ³ Centre for Climate Change and Sustainability, Ashoka University, Sonapat, India, ⁴ Cambridge Judge Business School, University of Cambridge, Cambridge, United Kingdom, ⁵ Centre for Sustainable Futures, Sustainable Earth Institute, University of Plymouth, Plymouth, United Kingdom

Keywords: universities, sustainability, purpose, wellbeing, transformation, futures

Editorial on the Research Topic

Re-Purposing Universities for Sustainable Human Progress

Humanity is confronting the most acute and urgent threat it has ever consciously faced. Soaring inequality, accelerating climate crises, ecological collapse, and social and psychological breakdown represent a multi-faceted socio-ecological crisis that is threatening viability of life on Earth. The undeniable evidence of this is fueling a growing global recognition that something has gone badly wrong with the ways in which our society has sought to optimize its wellbeing and that of non-human life which it brings into its ethical sphere of care. But what is the culpability of universities in allowing this systemic unsustainability to emerge? And how can this existential threat be dealt with if academic institutions are not firmly in the vanguard?

Whilst the need for fundamental change in universities is acknowledged in various quarters, thus far these largely narrow disciplinary perspectives have failed to resonate across the global higher education sector. What has been lacking is both a deep-level dissection of the roots of the crisis and a cross-sector, cross-disciplinary consensus about how we might address it—both in terms of research but also *via* urgent practical change regarding how the institutions are governed, managed and structured. Moreover, given the complex makeup of academia and its institutions, and the pressing and “wicked” nature of the socio-ecological challenges that threaten long-term wellbeing for all (“sustainability”¹), solutions need to offer a realistic plan for how prudent, meaningful change might be operationalized at scale and at pace. With that mission in mind, the 23 articles within this Research Topic bring together multiple voices—university academics and practitioners from business, government and civil society—blending theory and practice and bridging disciplinary silos to offer a radical re-imagining of what needs to change within universities worldwide.

Several papers focus primarily on laying bare the deep epistemic roots of the current unsustainability crisis. Maxwell restates his philosophical critique that it is in no small part a calamity of academia’s own making, with universities’ favoring a fixation with collecting, cultivating and curating knowledge for its own sake at the expense of the creation of wisdom about how to tackle the “problems of living.” Maxwell’s long-standing accusation that this pursuit of *knowledge inquiry* over *wisdom inquiry* constitutes a “betrayal of humanity” resonates throughout the volume. This is specifically taken up in the policy dimension by Green in a provocation that

¹The most widely accepted definition of the goal of sustainability is that conceptualized by the Brundtland Commission report in 1987 as development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. The essence of this—long-term wellbeing for all—can be considered as an expression of society’s “meta-purpose,” as also argued in the Brundtland report.

OPEN ACCESS

Edited and reviewed by:

Rodrigo Lozano,
University of Gävle, Sweden

*Correspondence:

Iain S. Stewart
iain.stewart@rss.jo

Specialty section:

This article was submitted to
Sustainable Organizations,
a section of the journal
Frontiers in Sustainability

Received: 21 January 2022

Accepted: 25 January 2022

Published: 15 March 2022

Citation:

Stewart IS, Hurth V and Sterling S
(2022) Editorial: Re-Purposing
Universities for Sustainable Human
Progress. *Front. Sustain.* 3:859393.
doi: 10.3389/frsus.2022.859393

argues that universities' failure in their fundamental mission for society and the planet means they are increasingly regarded as part of the problem rather than the solution. Sterling dissects that collective failure from an educational standpoint, highlighting how higher education has maintained and disseminated a dominant but restrictive Western modernist paradigm that now needs to be transformed urgently toward a holistic, relational, and ecological worldview.

From such theoretical underpinnings two principal premises emerge. First, that universities must retain and expand their potential to become essential and pivotal change agents, critical for helping society deliver humanity's meta-purpose of long-term wellbeing for all.

Second, that as currently configured, universities will fail in that mission.

Higher education can advance and accelerate the learning that supports socio-ecological sustainability transitions, develop the human capacity for societal change at scale, and provide the moral leadership by driving change within their own institutions (Fazey et al.). However, to date, despite growing pockets of excellence (e.g., Tyndale et al.; König et al.), those very institutions have been criticized for their slow response and inadequate action, for simultaneously promulgating high carbon and consumptive lifestyles and economies, and for entrenched intellectual practices and pedagogies that underpin these miscarriages. Invoking the notion of system failure, Sterling argues that universities are largely maladaptive, echoing a sentiment across the collection that our academic institutions are no longer fit for purpose.

For many, a fundamental barrier to change is that academic institutions are beholden to the same economic forces that have brought society to the brink of crisis (e.g., Green; Bauer et al.; López-López et al.; Hurth and Stewart). The late twentieth century's "great acceleration" in global economic growth and material consumption has been reflected in the re-direction of academia toward the marketisation and commodification of university operations, alongside the adoption of a global accountancy culture of rankings and metrics. Hurth and Stewart reappraise this conventional economic framing in the light of the rise of the "Wellbeing Economy" and the recent emergence in the business sector of "purpose-led" companies, which operationalise this new, sustainability-aligned economic imperative. They argue that concept of "purpose" offers universities a roadmap to a rapid journey toward being fully wisdom-driven and sustainability-driving organizations.

To deliver on this call for change, "*universities will need to renew their commitments to serving the public good, be dedicated to an unwavering challenge-orientation, create post-disciplinary structures, and be the change one seeks to see in the world*" (Fazey et al. p. 1). These authors see three levels of threat to this happening: (1) the risks to operations and business models (*manifest emergencies*); (2) risks that arise because assumptions, ideologies, systems, and structures cannot match the scale of the manifest challenges (*conceptual emergencies*); and (3) risks posed as a result of current identities and sense of purpose being incapable of supporting

the changes needed to overcome the conceptual challenges (*existential emergencies*). Despite its potential for collective action, Gardner et al. argue that the academic sector's response to these threats has been limited to three partial adjustments: (1) promoting solutions-focused research; (2) institutionalizing "education for sustainable development;" and (3) reducing their own institutional footprints. But to be proportionate to the scale and seriousness of the planetary challenge, reform will have to go beyond universities merely getting their respective houses in order by greening their research, curricula and campuses and signing up to reputation-enhancing public commitments without commensurate action (Latter and Capstick; Green).

A vital first step in that transformation process is for universities to recognize that there is a problem. Multiple contributors emphasize the deep reluctance within the closed world of universities to confront the culpability of the academic enterprise in our current unsustainability crisis. Historically, universities have proved to be remarkably resilient institutions, keeping external social change at arms-length by traditional practices of inquiry, tight-knit communities of scholars and students, and autonomous governance structures. O'Neil refers to the defensive posture institutions adopt when their autonomy is challenged as *institutional fragility*; to counter this intrinsic intransigence, universities will have to deliberately develop *transformational intent*—interventions to actively disrupt the status quo to open up the possibilities of seeing the world from fresh frames of reference and create capacities for deep transformational change (Fazey et al.).

Transformational intent necessitates a whole-institution cultural shift in mindsets, across research, teaching, knowledge transfer, and campus operations. From the top, it needs to be supported by a facilitative rather than directive executive leadership, allowing everyone—staff, students, and stakeholders—to co-produce the mission and shape the transformation (Bauer et al.). This challenge, according to O'Neil, demands that universities flatten their hierarchical structures, think systemically, collaborate, be authentic, be just, be equitable, be inclusive, build relationships, and enact a collective vision that requires collective decision making. Within the heart of the organization, it will necessitate systemic change in and across diverse sectors, and compel academics to reappraise their role as change agents (König et al.). For López-López, the transformation must go further by promoting a "pedagogy of care" that extends the academic worldview to a "Community of Life," blending learning with compassion in a practical application of Maxwell's wisdom inquiry to the problems of humanity. It is a premise that has deep parallels with the environmental theology of Thomas Berry, which Mickey argues underpins the need for sustainability transitions at universities to embrace the intrinsic, not merely instrumental, value of nature in a whole-Earth perspective.

As well as more enlightened worldviews, new governance paradigms and fresh metrics of accountability and responsibility will be required for university renewal. For Robinson and Laycock Pedersen that means destabilizing prevailing governance structures and processes to create a new stable academic system, and the authors use resilience principles to show how this

might be operationalised. Recurrent throughout the Research Topic is the view that the current competition for contemporary views of “scientific excellence” prevents participating universities from fully engaging in a wider set of alternative activities. The widespread use of league tables and accounting to capture and assess teaching and research performance tell us little about how well academic institutions are faring in terms of their core mission (Green). Mono-disciplinary research is still accorded greater value than innovative citizen science, but authentic dialogues will be required with a wide range of stakeholders, including grassroots groups and informal but dynamic social movements (Bell et al.). As Bauer et al. outline, effective engagement with community organizations opens up new ways of learning—individually and as an institution—around urgent social and environmental issues but this also requires radical new structures and processes for participation, facilitation and cooperation between stakeholders from different fields and sectors. Conventional university norms would suggest that “*it is not the proper job of the Professor to go out into the community and stir up political activism!*” (Maxwell) but this is rejected head-on by Gardner et al., who argue convincingly for advocacy and activism to be placed at the heart of the new academic purpose.

There are signs that more organized levels of change, driven from the top, are underway in some institutions and institutional contexts. Fioramonti et al. give a first-hand view of the political innovations occurring in Italy to systematically and inter-disciplinarily align education to a sustainable future. Similarly, Davidson outlines how the 2015 Welsh Wellbeing of Future Generations Act is starting to influence the way universities are approaching research and curriculum. Specifically, Davidson argues that delivering “wellbeing of future generations” or “sustainability” is becoming shorthand for a commitment to designing in future-proofing, systems thinking, creative problem solving, self-awareness, open-mindedness toward difference, understanding of global issues/power relationships, and optimism and action for a better world. Tyndale et al. outline University College London’s decade-long journey to live out their founding commitment to: “innovation, accessibility, and relevance for the benefit of humanity.” They remind us of that there are many foundations in place in universities that can be harnessed and they provide an optimistic view that universities do not need to re-purpose but rather more fully build on the foundation already in place.

Despite such aspirational enlightenment, the reality for many universities, especially in low and middle income countries, is that sustainability remains an accessory to catching up on economic and social development. A telling example comes from Jordan, from where El Hassan et al. describe an unsustainable university sector firmly shackled to the state-building process, which is hindering its academic community re-imagining higher education for wider public good.

But clearly changes are afoot. It is significant that the backdrop to the growing disaffection with the academic endeavor has been the twinning of a Climate and Ecological Emergency (CEE) (Green; Gardner et al.) with a global pandemic. It is a powerful pairing that has provided both the impetus for systemic change and major asperities to hinder it (e.g., Bell et al.).

The way that UK universities addressed Climate Emergency Declarations highlights similar tensions, With many declarations arising less from internal academic concerns and more from external public pressure, and projected less as a collective sector response and more as individual promotional statements (Latter and Capstick). For Green, the lackluster response of universities globally to the CEE is an indication that climate change and sustainability remain “add-ons” or peripheral to core academic business, highlighting the challenge of building long-term thinking on the back of short-term concerns—even those as impactful as a global pandemic. Perhaps more optimistically, Bell and Payne highlight how Fernando Reimers’s edited book on “*Education and Climate Change: the role of universities*” provides examples of how the inherently contextual nature of climate impacts are revitalizing global concerns at the local level. Writing here, Reimers explores how the pandemic has motivated universities to develop more socially-embedded learning systems, although these reactive initiatives generally lack clear strategic intent or theories of action.

What seems clear is that the skills, graduate attributes and modes of learning demanded by a re-energized socially-embedded populous who are emerging from a pandemic and gaining deep awareness of the structural unsustainability faced, will be very different to those currently offered. For a start, the fast pace of technological change will mean that technical skills are likely to quickly become obsolete. This, in turn, necessitates a more fluid curriculum and intellectual experience that provides the tools for students to think critically, systemically and creatively about multiple problems that cross traditional disciplinary divides. This may require a complete rethinking about how universities are conceived and located. The COVID19 pandemic has impelled renewed impetus to this, particularly given the rapid transition to online learning. For Costanza et al. this reconfiguration potentially recasts the traditional role of universities as storehouses of knowledge and academics as conveyors of that content. The massive and growing availability of information on the internet provides an opportunity to open up access to top-quality university education in developing countries with relatively modest educational infrastructure. The authors set out a vision for global collaboration—a coordinated “meta-university” that could provide students anywhere access to world-class online pedagogic tools and analysis-based courses, thereby allowing local faculty to focus on interactive, transdisciplinary, in-person, solutions-focused courses that address real-world problems.

Despite the collection’s overarching message that universities are not moving far enough or fast enough, this Research Topic demonstrates a consensus on the nature of the ultimate goal and the immediate need for radical change, as well as, vitally, an emerging roadmap of how to get there. The 23 contributions offer differing visions on how that radical change might be operationalised, but some common calls emerge:

1. Transformative change is not an option: Across the world, academia is set for profound reform, whether it likes it or not. The growing global urgency for purposeful change, not least from student bodies, will present universities with threat

multipliers too overwhelming to resist or forestall. Discussions within higher education institutions, therefore, need to switch from “should we change?” to “how should we change?”

2. Purpose is key: At the highest level, universities need to rethink their ethos and purpose—their *raison d'être*—to center on a bold and ambitious strategic contribution to long-term wellbeing for all (aka sustainability), engaging all stakeholders in this shared journey. Two standards focused on achieving a purpose-driven organization in practice are available to support leadership, and those who can help hold them accountable: ISO 37000—Governance of Organizations: Guidance and PAS 808: Purpose-driven Organizations: Worldviews, Principles, and Behaviors (forthcoming);
3. Deep change can unlock win-wins: This essential deep-level, root-and-branch rethinking of the primary academic mission has the potential to re-energize teaching, research and external engagement, blending the bespoke strengths of individual universities to create genuinely distinctive, meaningful and legitimate institutional identities;
4. Remember, we are all in this together: The operational route to transformative change will be unique to each university, but the broad path will involve a shift to interdisciplinary, participatory, reflexive academic mindsets and endeavors, in which researchers and students are more closely coupled with the communities they serve and the environmental systems within which their ultimate survival is deeply embedded;
5. The writing is on the wall: This challenge presents an exciting but closing window of renewal for a university. Those universities unwilling or unable to rise to the call are likely to find themselves increasingly marginal to the emerging needs of society as it clarifies its core purpose and re-organizes the transformation of resources (the economy) to achieve this purpose securely.

Ultimately, perhaps what emerges most strongly from this collection of perspectives is the realization that at the heart of the current academic identity crisis there lies a leadership void.

It is our sincere hope that this Research Topic inspires the universities' leadership (governing bodies and senior executives) as well as the entire academic body, to dig into their deepest levels of assumptions about the point of universities, and through this unleash their desire and direct their ability to drive the urgent re-purposing of universities. Although we primarily make a plea to university leadership to drive this change, the question of re-imagining and re-purposing higher education for sustainable human progress is a challenge that all stakeholders—including academics, students, policymakers, and those in business and the media—need to embrace fully, if collectively we are to assure a future beyond the apocalyptic one in prospect.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

IS prepared the initial draft. VH and SS contributed equally to major edits and revisions for the text. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

Conflict of Interest: The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Publisher's Note: All claims expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of their affiliated organizations, or those of the publisher, the editors and the reviewers. Any product that may be evaluated in this article, or claim that may be made by its manufacturer, is not guaranteed or endorsed by the publisher.

Copyright © 2022 Stewart, Hurth and Sterling. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC BY). The use, distribution or reproduction in other forums is permitted, provided the original author(s) and the copyright owner(s) are credited and that the original publication in this journal is cited, in accordance with accepted academic practice. No use, distribution or reproduction is permitted which does not comply with these terms.