Raewyn Connell on why and how universities need to change, and soon:
Interview with Richard Hil

Professor Emerita Raewyn Connell is more familiar than most with the vagaries of the modern university. Since the early 1970s, Professor Connell has held academic positions at seven universities, in four countries. She has made landmark contributions in sociology, education and other areas, the best-known being her work on patriarchal hegemony and on Southern theory. Her writing has been translated into twenty-four languages. She served twice on a university council, has been on a lot of committees, and is a long-time and honoured member of the NTEU. And there's much, much more. In short, Professor Connell has made an outstanding contribution to academic life both in Australia and beyond. In retirement, she has pursued her commitment to the idea of the public university. Her book, *The Good University - What Universities Actually Do and Why It's Time for Radical Change*, is at once a brilliant overview of what transpires in the modern university and a passionate case for a more open, equitable and democratic tertiary system.

Here, Professor Connell responds to questions put to her by Richard Hil.

RH: I thought we might begin our discussion by talking about utopianism. It's a much-maligned word, as we know. I like Rutgers Bregman's play on the term 'utopia for realists'. For our purposes it suggests that utopianism has a role in our reimagining of the modern university. What are your thoughts on utopianism as a means of engaging in this sort of process?

RC: Utopian thinking is vital! It's work done by our imagination and creativity – and we will need a lot of that, to get out of the hole our universities are currently in. People who don't like imagination often suggest that utopian thinking must be soggy. But utopias can be carefully reasoned and can deal with tough issues. An excellent example is Ursula Le Guin's novel *The Dispossessed*, which imagines a society attempting to combine equality and freedom, though it has severely limited resources. (Bonus points: the hero is a mathematician.)

You don't have to write a novel to do utopian thinking, either. We often do it in universities. Chatting over coffee with colleagues about better ways our work could be organised; peering at a computer screen and constructing a statistical model; talking with grad students about the future of the discipline – there's a strand of utopian thinking in all that. One could say that theorising, in any discipline, always involves utopian thinking, going beyond the empirically given to a more intelligible world.

Then there are real utopias in higher education – experimental colleges and universities that have actually worked. One story I love is the college Visva-Bharati. It was founded a hundred years ago by the poet Rabindranath Tagore, a critic of the narrow curriculum of colonial universities, to be a place where different civilisations could meet and interact. It survived, and is now a full university in the Indian higher education system.

RH: When it comes to the question of governance, how would you characterise the current state of play in the modern university? I'm thinking here of the rise of the 'manageriat' and the position and status of academic employees.

RC: There is variation around the world. Some countries – Brazil, India, Chile for instance – have a high proportion of privately owned colleges and universities. In these countries the owners and managers have virtually full control, and use it to extract profits from the students (and from the governments). By contrast, there are countries – China is the leading example – where the state and the ruling party have a powerful presence in university management. Here the regime chooses what universities to fund and promote, and what fields of knowledge should be developed. In the United States, in many universities there is still a good deal of autonomy at the level of the department. But this is being challenged by the growth of corporate management; Gaye Tuchman's book *Wannabe U* is an excellent case study of this.

Australia is a curious case. Our universities used to be funded by the individual states, and were informally run by an oligarchy of professors. The Commonwealth government took over the funding in the 1970s and initially just asked the universities to expand their intake.

But from the late 1980s the Commonwealth has used the power of the purse to direct universities down a new path – competition and corporatisation, increasingly funded by fees. Policy now defines universities as competitive firms, though the government has always controlled the terms of the competition. University administrations have been re-shaped on the model of corporate management, gradually centralising control in a top tier of highly-paid managers. Real for-profit corporations have moved in, as more and more functions were outsourced. (At a picket line one day, I found that the security personnel watching us, though wearing University uniforms, were actually from an outside company.) As the Coalition's 2020 Job-ready Graduates policy shows, government control of a notionally public higher education system is now systematically used to promote corporate interests.

RH: University councils and senates are increasingly comprised of a majority of people from business backgrounds, often with little or no direct prior experience of universities. What's your view on this?

RC: It's an important change. When I served on a university council a generation ago, as an elected staff representative, there was a wider range in the membership. The predominance of business executives now has troubling effects. They bring, of course, their own occupational culture and collective interests to the role. There's nothing exotic about their outlook, they share the general culture of the rich and powerful in contemporary capitalism. They support top-down decision-making, they prefer secrecy, they assume a world of profit-taking, they assume competition not co-operation, and they don't care to mingle with the proles. They think it's natural to pay senior executives a million dollars or more, while making the workforce more precarious to drive down labour costs. It's good business sense.

RH: You've written an important book called *The Good University*. I wonder whether you might sketch some of the major changes that you think might alter governance arrangements in the modern university?

RC: Thank you! In the final chapter of the book, where I sketch out the criteria for a good university, I use the dangerous phrase 'industrial democracy'. That includes equality in wages and conditions, shared decision-making, and shared responsibility. It doesn't take rocket science to recognise that the people who know most about the work of a university are those who actually do the work.

We know lots of ways to run organisations more democratically. Universities have experience with them! They include circulation of leadership, decentralisation of power, deliberative bodies, election of representatives, participatory decision-making, inclusive discussions of policy... The crucial thing is to make democracy normal. It can sound a bit strenuous. But I'm sure that once established, it will take up less time than the current system of surveillance, hierarchy, box-ticking, reporting, re-structuring and anxious compliance with unending, badly-written directives from above.

In the same chapter I also speak of criteria for a good university system, since it's crazy to think of universities as isolated from each other, despite the ideology of competition. We need ways to make decisions about cooperation among universities. We used to have a statutory Universities Commission in Australia – not very strong and not notably democratic, but at least it was there, as a forum and a counterbalance. It was first weakened, then abolished, in favour of ministerial prerogative – the political version of entrepreneurial management.

RH: In the book you drew on some great examples of, let's say, more progressive universities around the world, particularly when it comes to governance and other matters. Why do you think these examples are important in terms of discussing the future university?

RC: Yes, there is quite a history. Indigenous universities, anti-colonial universities, labour colleges, do-it-yourself Free Universities, greenfields universities in Britain, university villages in Venezuela, community-based access programs, popular research movements, bi-cultural universities, and more. I love the story of the Flying University in Poland, opposed to three authoritarian regimes in turn. It was called 'flying' because its classes had to move around to dodge the secret police.

There's a colourful history of universities, which ought to be better known. I value this history not just because of the colour, but because of the practicality. These were colleges, universities and movements that have actually existed, actually taught and researched; they are not pie in the sky. That's an excellent thing to bear in mind when we discuss future universities: we can make fresh ideas work in practice.

Some didn't last, some changed, some got taken over. So what else is new? They are as rich a source of ideas as Humboldt's University of Berlin or Kerr's University of California, and a much better source than Newman's reactionary *Idea of a University.*

RH: I wonder whether we can do some reverse sequencing – management-speak for tracking how we get to our desired outcome. Let's start by asking who should be involved in this process? I'm especially interested here in the roles of students, administrators and even some of the manageriat themselves.

RC: Students are the largest group on campus – or on-line – and are vital in a process of democratisation. Most don't come to university intending to re-organise it; they come to learn, and to participate in the campus life. But for many, perhaps most, the experience is not what they hope for; there's a widespread experience of alienation from the institution. Richard, your own research shows this vividly! Students have entirely legitimate needs – complex intellectual, social and cultural needs – that the managerial university and the 'customer satisfaction' mantra miss.

A full half of the university workforce are non-academic groups: professionals, tradespeople, maintenance workers, clerical and administrative workers, building attendants, and more. Much of the discussion of university problems proceeds as if academics were the only folk who matter, and this always gets up my nose. In the first three chapters of *The Good University* I look at the actual labour process, and show how both research and teaching depend on the know-how and co-operation of multiple groups of workers. Universities work from below, not from above.

So of course, the administrative staff need to be involved in democratic reconstruction. They may perfectly well lead it, as they currently take leadership roles in the NTEU. They have vital skills and information; there are many good administrators around. They have legitimate needs for good working conditions, secure jobs, and the opportunity to develop their own ideas and agendas.

As for the top managers: it may be that some of them have valuable skills. I find it hard to judge. So much of top management now is done behind closed doors, reporting upwards not downwards. What is sent out to the rank and file of workers is a mixture of non-negotiable directives and inane propaganda. Any other skills seem to be overwhelmed by the function of command. I'm sure dissident members of the manageriat may be helpful in launching organisational change. But in democratic change, their privileges and their power must go.

RH: How can we engage policy makers in these sorts of discussions?

RC: Some of them can't be engaged, because a democratic reform of universities is against their interest, or because of their political line – the know-nothing

populism pursued by Barnaby Joyce would be an example. With others, the fact that the universities matter to the economy as the basis of professional education might count for something. If universities are in trouble, the 'knowledge economy' in Australia is in trouble.

I think it has dawned on some in government that Australia's dream run as supplier of raw materials to industrialising economies overseas is coming to an end, and if another economic future is possible, it has to have a large place for knowledge producers. Some, especially on the Labor side, might see a positive role for social sciences and humanities. The COVID-19 pandemic has widened fissures in Australian society that complacent governments prefer to gloss over – witness the paramilitary occupation of working-class south-western Sydney (officially, 'areas of concern').

RH: What specific forms of, let's call it academic activism, do you think might generate collective action for change in the university?

RC: First, let me repeat that academics are only half of the university workforce, and that the other half is equally important in making a university work. Collective action to reform the institution has to come from the staff as a whole. That is one of the great strengths of the NTEU in Australia; it's an industry union not a craft union. When I have mentioned this overseas, where academics and general staff are usually organised separately, there is surprise and interest.

There are many forms of action: legal defence against victimisation, industrial action around enterprise bargaining, public demonstrations and electoral campaigning around policy, coalition-building, whistle-blowing about corruption and bullying, grassroots organising to build up strength, local boycotts of irrational demands or overloads. All of these are needed, and they are all demanding and absorbing.

So I'll emphasise a form of action that is sometimes pushed aside in the shuffle, but is really important in the long run: creating working models of good practice. For instance, democratic decision-making at the level of a department, unit or project; mutual support in difficult circumstances; and other actions that aren't defensive but actually create elements of the university we want for the future. This approach used to be called 'prefigurative politics'; it involves utopian thinking that can be turned into immediate practice. It is possible in many circumstances, though not all; and when it's done, it's important to tell people about it!

RH: What obstacles do you envisage in this process?

RC: Managerial prerogative; intimidation and threats, especially towards casualised staff; corporate ideology; legal obstruction; slander from the Murdoch media; sneers from Coalition politicians; exhaustion. Remedies: solidarity; determination; pacing oneself; support from outside; and knowing that struggle now matters profoundly to the future of universities, their staff and their students. And to society as a whole.

RH: Let's assume you're a level B academic who's been given a continuing contract – an increasingly threatened species in the modern university. What might this person do if irritated by the top-down exercise of power?

RC: I have a good three-point plan: 1. Join the union. 2. Join the union. 3. Join the union. Seriously, only collective action is effective as a response to power. In almost all cases I would recommend talking with others in your department or unit about what annoyed you, as it's likely they will be affected too. You will need their support to push back against management pressure. To push back usually requires you to show that a certain demand, restructure or imposed system – whatever the exercise of power might be – damages the proper concerns of a university: teaching, research, outreach, staff and student wellbeing. The way the current system works, it's rank and file staff who have to look after the future of universities.

Postscript: Universities and being human

RH: Thanks for taking the time to answer these questions Raewyn. You've certainly prompted me to reconsider a few things – in particular, that whatever action academics take it must be alongside other staff and students who make up the university. The public too have an interest in what goes on in these places. You make it clear that the university is much more than academics and management.

I think it's worth mentioning a recently established advocacy group that has done some extraordinary work of late, mainly in highlighting dubious investment and accounting practices.

APU also notes that COVID-19 has been used by university management as a pretext to cull casual staff, most of whom are women, and to cut courses. But there's more. Members of the APU have been working hard to show that Australian universities have shifted away from their core business as public institutions (as stipulated by state and territory legislatures) to what look like private firms. One of the favourite moves is constant restructuring which, during COVID-19, has meant the axe for many

tenured academics (especially if they are troublesome, outspoken types. Really? Yes, just ask around).

I won't repeat all the failings of the modern university you have so clearly articulated, Raewyn. Suffice to say that the neoliberal university falls well short when it comes to good governance, workplace conditions and social justice.

What's forgotten in all this is that the people that make up universities are human – not simply 'employees' or 'service providers'. The majority choose to work in these places because they are passionate about the idea of the university. They believe that universities should contribute to the common good, seek out the truth, and act as bulwarks against tyranny. They shouldn't be industrial sausage factories or edutainment shopping malls. They want their students to have a joyful, rewarding educational experience that makes them better citizens as well as competent in their chosen fields. They don't want them to become career-obsessed automatons, nor for education to resemble a McDonalds drive through.

Which is all a long-winded way of getting to my question:

Raewyn, you're one of Australia's most respected social scientists; someone who has throughout her career fought for the idea of the public university. You believe in the democratisation of these institutions and their uncoupling from neoliberal agendas. As a seasoned academic, if I can put it that way, how do you feel about what you're witnessing in the modern university? And, what are the prospects of radical change?

RC: How do I feel about it? Mainly, a mixture of sadness and anger. Sadness: about the blighted hopes of so many young university workers. About the loss of trust and confidence in what universities are doing. About the shrunken vision among policymakers and managers. About the decline of cooperation and experiment. About the loss of joy in the university world.

Anger: because this was avoidable. These losses, this shrinking, have been deliberately produced. The short-term aim is to produce a cheaper and more easily controlled workforce, in the universities themselves and in the economy downstream. The long-term aim – but there is no long-term aim. Corporate Australia, including its political wing, has realised that it doesn't need a flourishing university system in Australia. An economy centred on raw materials exports doesn't need a local research capacity – the technology is imported – nor a highly educated national workforce. So why waste Jobkeeper on universities, when the money can be given to deserving billionaires?

The conservative parties in Australia today are basically businesses: small bodies of professional power-seekers,

funded by the corporate rich and closely linked to the corporate mass media. They assemble votes through a combination of fear campaigns, religious loyalties, regional stereotypes, coded racism, and the economic interests of property owners. When they win elections, they treat government as a well of money to be channelled to their backers, through privatisations, outsourcing, tax cuts and out-and-out handouts. Don't expect the Coalition to expand public institutions like universities. The trajectory of slow cuts and backdoor privatisation will continue.

And the Opposition? So far under the current leadership, the Opposition is Morrison Lite, and happy with the results. Like the conservatives, the ALP is no longer a mass party. Its working-class voters can influence policy, with complicated effects. Working-class families' aspirations for higher education were one of the drivers of the Dawkins policies; but those policies in the long run handed over the universities to the corporate world. The last time the party had national power, under Rudd and Gillard, it ended full-fee local degrees, but continued on the path of 'efficiency dividends', competition and corporatisation.

Prospects of radical change from the current political system? Nil. But that doesn't mean we should just roll over. I can see two paths along which we can get radical change under way. One is the path of prefigurative politics: building practical utopias locally, both inside and outside existing universities, on principles of industrial democracy, cooperation, and work in the public interest. It doesn't matter how small the scale; it all builds practical experience.

The other is the path of organising: good old-fashioned, gritty, face-to-face organising, to change the wider environment in which policies are made, nationally and internationally. Some unions are doing this, some of the climate movement is doing this, so are other social movements. Much of the energy is still siphoned off into NGOs and social media, and of course the COVID-19 pandemic has pushed our thinking on-line. But as the corporate world 'opens up', new possibilities for politics too will emerge. Yes, the universities and their workforce are in a grim situation. Sadness and anger are warranted. But other reactions are possible too: hope, determination, and joy in building something better.

Authors

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Richard Hil is Adjunct Professor in the School of Health Sciences and Social Work at Griffith University and Adjunct Professor in the Faculty of Business, Law and Arts, Southern Cross University.

In the last decades of his life sociologist Erik Olin Wright dedicated his time to identifying alternatives to capitalism. His major contribution to debates about a more inclusive, more just, future for humanity – *Envisioning Real Utopias* – diagnoses the internal contradictions of capitalism while analysing the practical ways that societies could become more cooperative, equal, and free. An emancipatory social science would be an essential element in bringing about positive change. In *Transforming Universities in the Midst of Global Crisis*, authors Hil, Lyons and Thompsett take up Wright's challenge of analysing structures of power – in this case within and outside of the modern university. They do so by employing the kind of critical, emancipatory social science that Wright so dearly sought.

The authors trace the colonial roots of education, showing how biases about land ownership and property rights contributed to the brutal dispossession of indigenous populations. They show how, in more recent times, the embrace of neoliberal ideologies and practices have contributed significantly to climate change and to ecological destruction. That is, because of their capture by colonial, masculinist and neoliberal ideologies and practices, universities are perpetuating, rather than solving, the great problems of our time. Curricula and pedagogies, along with the research undertaken by universities encourage the commoditisation of nature while promoting individualism, social disconnectedness, economic inequality, and unsustainable growth. Higher education is firmly entrenched in this rapacious model of 'progress'.

Neoliberalism is all about a small state and privatisation of public resources, and higher education – once a public good – has become the opposite of what it promised. Freedom of expression has been compromised, research is being pushed down corporate lines, and values such as respect, compassion, reciprocity and collegiality have been seriously eroded. Battered by funding cuts, damaged by right-wing political attacks in the 'culture wars', and being told by governments to become more efficient and cost-effective, universities have been forced into competition, relying upon market mechanisms to ensure survival. The business model accompanying these changes has seen Vice Chancellors become corporate managers, distant from academic staff and from students, instead doing the bidding of the corporate sector. Managerialism has excluded the academic community from involvement in important decisions, while giving priority to commercial imperatives like market share and profitability. A primary goal of the modern university is to produce job-ready workers for industry, not equip graduates to think critically and creatively about complex futures.

While much of the above has become a standard critique of the university-under-neoliberalism, the authors go beyond this by exploring the many 'spaces' and strategies that challenge and undermine centralised structures. They explore the 'edge work' that is located in resilience initiatives, radical reading groups, inter-disciplinary collectives, community education and the like. They provide detailed examples of successful initiatives in education – attempts at democratic governance (the Sands School in Devon, Deep Springs College in California, the University of Bologna, co-governance models in Latin America, the Social Science Centre in Lincoln, England, and the 'Free' universities in the US and Mexico). They are also cognisant of the very hard times ahead in seeking transformational change for universities. Nevertheless, they consider there is a major chink in the armour of the corporate university – it has proven itself incapable of addressing the range of global crises that beset the planet, whether it be climate change, environmental destruction, social dislocation, economic inequality, or the current pandemic. The authors go so far as to pronounce the modern university 'dead' and say its replacement must be a dynamic mix of active citizenship, peace, justice, ecological health, and indigenous sovereignty (p. 152).

The goal of the authors is clearly radical and provocative – wanting to reinstate a sense of 'the commons, community and communality' into university life:

> The future university, we contend, must be grounded in a shared commitment to de-colonise, decentralise and democratise institutional arrangements, and to situate human experience within the broader web of life (p. 29)

The major achievements of the book are fourfold. First, its compelling critical and analytical dissection of the modern university exposes the latter's undemocratic decision-making structures, its vulnerabilities under neoliberalism, and its inability to serve the public's interests in solving the big problems of our time. Second, its exploration of alternatives – while somewhat tentative – demonstrates that different power (and decision-making) structures exist and provide worthy options for the future. Third, the book is extremely well researched – with a plethora of up-to-date and pertinent references accompanying each chapter. Fourth, the book is an original and provocative academic contribution to debates about the future of universities. It has been written in a clear and forceful manner; the authors do not shy away from proposing and endorsing features they believe must be part of a re-imagined, re-invigorated, university sector.

There are two issues of concern. The first is that of incorporating the 'local' into what has become a global university system. They argue for local community involvement as part of future democratisation. It could just as easily be argued that the global community is as much a player in the modern university as the local. Does a global community have a role to play in deciding on future governance structures, pedagogy, curricula and so forth? If so, how might global citizens' voices be incorporated? Second, it is a long bow to draw to pronounce the modern university 'dead', or less dramatically, in need of 'hospice' care. Evidence abounds to show that there are healthy, productive, collegial spaces in most universities and that these continue to house creativity and innovation – often encouraged and nurtured by managerialist VCs eager to secure external prestige and status from the work of their employees!

While the book has a strong Australian flavour, it is a must-read for a global academic audience, in fact for anyone involved in the university sector. It provokes us to think there might be different and more collegial ways to live our academic lives while producing knowledge that will bring tangible benefits to people and to the planet. And, as for Erik Wright? I feel certain he would have viewed the book as a major contribution to the development of a real utopia for future tertiary education.

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War is hell

in my father's Mess in North Africa
when moustache growing contests

became tiresome the officers
were avid readers of Damon Runyon

giving each other nicknames in his
manner such as Harry the Horse

Dave the Dude Benny the Barker
until a new posting to the unit

introduced himself by his real name
as James (call me Jimmy) de Joux

and the suspicion lingered ever
afterwards he was having them on

or that the transfer was mischievous
engineered by those bastards at GHQ

TONY BEYER