



Connell, Raewyn (2019). *The good university: What universities actually do and why it's time for radical change*. Zed Books Ltd.

Fadhil Ismail^A

A

Lecturer, Kaplan Higher Education Singapore

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37074/jalt.2020.3.2.24>

A recent study argued that the salaries for vice-chancellors in universities in Australia and the UK were very high amidst falling standards in higher education institutions (Heffernan, 2019). Throughout her book, *The good university: What universities actually do and why it's time for radical change*, Raewyn Connell echoes this argument consistently and provides an authoritative and sharp critique of the current state of higher education. Some readers however, may find this scholarly writing rather dry and elaborate. On the other hand, those with an interest in higher education's role in society and the economy will be drawn to this astute analysis of the current state of higher education institutions around the globe. The book captivates audiences with its coherent narrative, broad examples and pointed arguments. The author's voice remains lucid in all the chapters, articulated through her rich and diverse observations and experiences conducting research and working in various universities. She makes it clear that the global state of higher education is at a crucial intersection (at the point of publication), although the COVID-19 pandemic has now completely altered this reality and very likely, transformed higher education into a global complexity.

Formerly a senior lecturer with the University of Sydney and renowned social science researcher, Professor Raewyn Connell has been described as an educational reformer and an intellectual of the Australian Left. Shining a stark and opportune light on this contentious issue, Connell provides a powerful and expansive critique of the current state of higher education in universities. The author, throughout her illustrious career, constantly campaigned for a reformation on how universities ought to be managed and considered. One of the main themes that emerges in this book is the abject state of affairs in many universities. She lamented at how tragic it was to have higher education institutions meant to serve the public are at the same time, creating and sustaining significant social inequalities. It is confounding to comprehend and acknowledge the fact that universities are founded to serve society for its betterment and also for the common good (Dorn, 2017) but as Connell argues, they are now equally responsible for rising inequalities and legitimising them with regressive policies (Sherrington,

2020) that favours the powerful and the elite (Sullivan et al., 2018; Jack, 2016).

Connell's approach carries a certain magnetism, fashioned by the candidness and logic of her arguments. This approach was clearly demonstrated in the first three chapters. In these chapters, she explains in elaborate detail what modern universities actually do. For example, in Chapter 1, she explains that universities are primarily research centres and places of knowledge where teaching and learning takes place. In the next chapter, she extends and develops this line of argument by pointing out the tension between a hegemonic curriculum and the oppression it causes to delimit knowledge formation that benefits society. She added that academics in universities perform the role of composite labour, grappling with having to teach effectively while conducting research under irrational deadlines and adhering to stringent budgets. This struggle, she suggests, is to the detriment of the university and its students.

Connell grieves at the idea of portraying intellectuals as a new breed of an elite class with its own dependent culture separate from common folk. The third chapter develops this point further by discussing the plight of the support staff working in universities. She argues that this idea is severely skewed as the workers forming the workforce at universities are often disregarded and treated as invisible despite their crucial roles to the common good of the institution and their right to be considered as part of the collective intellectual. Her central argument here is that the activities and processes in universities are essentially social processes requiring the collective involvement and seamless collaboration of the people involved at every level in the institution. However, she claims that many of these institutions are now governed by strategies, research funding and targets and more often than not, give credence to managerial vanities instead of acknowledging that universities are massive institutions of research and learning held together informally by networks of people, both academic and non-academic ones.

According to Connell, universities around the world currently face a deepening crisis. In Chapter 4, she argues that

historically, these institutions have served the elite class, and policy research agendas that are predominantly Eurocentric and serve to magnify the Western tradition. This hegemony tragically continues to cast aside societies from marginalised populations, resulting in social and economic inequalities. She situates universities as epicentres of the global economy of knowledge while pointing out the commercial inclination of these institutions with citation indices and publishing contracts. Drawing on international studies, Connell illustrates clearly the leaning of higher education institutions toward corporate-style management, kept afloat by government subsidies, has shifted the objectives of the university from research, teaching, and service to an emphasis on status and competition, which has led, in part, to increasing and overwhelming student debt. She contends that the outsourcing of support services and dependence on adjunct faculty reduce employee commitment, threaten academic freedom, and create a disengagement and deepening the chasm between teaching and research. Despite her sharp criticism on the abject states of modern universities, Connell would later provide a glimpse into her vision of what is the criteria of a 'good university' (p. 178) in the last chapter of the book.

The culmination of all the arguments made in the first four chapters presents itself in Chapter 5. In this chapter, Connell frames universities as 'privilege machines' (p. 104); which happens to also be the title of this chapter; accusing them of undermining collective approaches of public interest research projects to pander to the whims of the managerial elite in the universities, stopping short of naming names. She faults universities for engendering elitism and describes them as institutions purporting an ideology of hierarchy favouring the elite. She extends this explanation in Chapter 6 how universities are now caught in a maelstrom and operated like business enterprises. In addition, the author points out, with several examples from different parts of the world, that neoliberalist attitudes now govern universities. She highlighted that governments considered universities as profit-making organisations instead of being part of the public education system. This, she suggested, was simply treating education like a commodity and therefore, turning it into a privilege for the elite class who could easily afford such education. With this privilege, education then becomes a marketing instrument for universities. Consequently, access to these privileges can be traded and one notable example she mentioned was the increasing tuition fees at these institutions leaving students with little choice but to pay them. As a result, students are instead forced to consider their time at the university in neoliberal terms. Their education now acts as a form of investment to secure their future as well as to meet the needs of the economy.

The last two chapters, potentially the most important ones in the book, turned out to be a stick in the mud when compared to the earlier chapters. In Chapter 7, Connell suggested 'alternative models' (p. 148) and proposed 'reform movements' (p. 161) to facilitate the development of her 'universities of hope' (p. 148) (a term which also forms title of this chapter). However, it is disappointing that these ideas are sketched out aphoristically with little critical evaluation. Unfortunately, Chapter 8 is equally disappointing as the criteria and conditions for the 'good university' (p.

178) mentioned in Chapter 7 were described albeit with little detail on how to go about fulfilling and realising them. Connell describes that a 'good university' ought to be democratic in its operation, be supportive of academic freedom as well as facilitating research that answers social needs. Such institutions would have to be honest in their operations and in presenting themselves to the world, be authentic and innovative in research and teaching, encourage student agency and operate sustainably in the long run. Yet it is likely that the very people who actually manage and run universities today would consider this vision hopelessly utopian and the criteria, despairingly impractical. However, Connell reasoned that such an ideal institution, immersed in cooperation, not competition, is realistic but will require government commitment, societal cooperation and tax support.

The author and Terry Irving, influenced by the New Left student movement at the University of Sydney in the 1960s, aimed to challenge and reform the university by creating democratic processes to facilitate the sharing of views and perspectives of students studying at the university (Irving & Connell, 2016). Nearly half a century later after the initiation of this movement, the author remains steadfast to this cause. Her vision of introducing changes to achieve her idea of creating a 'good university' (p. 178) for the collective public good is encouraging. To observe the author's dedication to this noble cause and her emphasis on promoting research as part of a collective partnership to encourage its integration as transformative knowledge in society is most heartening. At the same time, the notion of moving beyond traditional academe by imagining a collective collaboration of all staff as full-fledged university workers, each one a crucial part of a 'collective intellectual' contributing to the betterment of the university and society, is also laudable. Yet, one fears that to challenge neo-liberal ideas of people who view higher education primarily as a business or commercial enterprise, the author's idea of 'a good university' for the collective good of societies may not be sufficient. It is significant that change must be initiated within academia in its entirety with the involvement of all stakeholders to inform and determine the true definition of a 'good university'.

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic caught the world in a global health crisis (Connell, 2020; Liu et al., 2020), and universities are struggling to keep courses running and research evolving (Thatsara & Kelum, 2020). It appears inconceivable to achieve and realise the idea of a 'good university' while many universities wrestle with budget cuts and staff redundancy (Schleicher, 2020). However, a hopeful start might be to consider organising strengths-based collaborative studies of universities around the globe to mitigate the effects of the pandemic in times of austerity and possibly, realise Connell's vision of reforming universities for the common good of societies around the world.

References

- Connell, R. (2020). COVID-19/sociology. *Journal of Sociology*, 00(0), 1-7. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1440783320943262>
- Dorn, C. (2017). *For the common good: A new history of higher education in America*. Cornell University Press.
- Heffernan, T. A. (2019). Reporting on vice-chancellor salaries in Australia's and the United Kingdom's media in the wake of strikes, cuts and 'falling performance'. *International journal of leadership in education*, 1-17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603124.2019.1631387>
- Irving, T., & Connell, R. (2016). Scholars and radicals: Writing and re-thinking class structure in Australian history. *Journal of Australian Studies*, 40(1), 3-15. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14443058.2015.1120224>
- Jack, A. A. (2016). (No) Harm in asking: Class, acquired cultural capital, and academic engagement at an elite university. *Sociology of education*, 89(1), 1-19. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038040715614913>
- Liu, Y., Lee, J. M., & Lee, C. (2020). The challenges and opportunities of a global health crisis: The management and business implications of COVID-19 from an Asian perspective. *Asian Business & Management*, 1-21. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41291-020-00119-x>
- Schleicher, A. (2020). *The impact of COVID-19 on education insights from education at a glance 2020*. OECD. <https://www.oecd.org/education/the-impact-of-covid-19-on-education-insights-education-at-a-glance-2020.pdf>
- Sherington, G. (2020). The good university: What universities actually do and why it's time for radical change. *Journal of Australian Studies*, 44(2), 243-244. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14443058.2020.1755494>
- Sullivan, A., Parsons, S., Green, F., Wiggins, R. D., & Ploubidis, G. (2018). Elite universities, fields of study and top salaries: Which degree will make you rich? *British educational research journal*, 44(4), 663-680. <https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3453>
- Thathsara, M. K., G. & Kelum, A. A. G. (2020). Novel coronavirus (COVID-2019) pandemic: Common challenges and response from higher education providers. *Journal of Applied Learning and Teaching*, 3(2), 40-50. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.37074/jalt.2020.3.2.20>