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Tertiary Education and the Sustainability Agenda¹

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Tertiary Education and the Sustainability Agenda

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Abstract

The idea of sustainable development has grown steadily in prominence since the 1970s, and by 2015 had captured the global centre ground with the agreement of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The notion plays the important role of bringing together environmental and social concerns, but as a “shell” concept has been interpreted in very different ways, running the gamut from anarcho-communist and decolonial positions to efforts to shore up the durability and profitability of global capitalism. Tertiary institutions are closely linked to this agenda. While the invoking of “education” in international agreements is generally vague, tertiary education sectors have actively embraced sustainability and the SDGs in their activities. Institutions commonly map their teaching and research in relation to the goals and are expanding efforts to ensure environmentally-friendly campuses and moves towards carbon neutrality. This lecture attempts to map the multiple and intersecting

ways in which tertiary institutions relate to sustainability, drawing out implications for the nature of the institution and planetary futures. These engagements are sometimes *projective* – in the sense of aiming to bring about changes in individuals or society outside of themselves –sometimes *expressive* – embodying the principles within their activities and communities, and sometimes *constructive* – debating and reinterpreting the idea of sustainable development. The lecture argues that, while often reduced to greenwash for continuing marketisation, sustainable development can play a generative role in institutions in drawing attention to their commitments to society and the public good, and opening questions about epistemic monocultures and complicity in environmental destruction. Ultimately the most important and distinctive role that tertiary educational institutions can play in relation to sustainable development may be to question and recreate its meaning.

Keywords: Campus sustainability; Sustainable development; SDGs; Higher education; Tertiary education

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Introduction

Sustainable development has become a prominent focus of tertiary education in recent years – in some cases the orienting principle for institutions. Students are to be educated in sustainable development, academics to research and publish on it and professional staff to ensure the institution itself is sustainable. Yet to what extent can tertiary education institutions (TEIs) meaningfully promote sustainable development, and align their diverse activities around it?

Burton Clark, in his seminal book *The Higher Education System: Academic Organization in Cross-National Perspective* (1983), explored the unique form of organisation characteristic of universities. On the one hand:

A flat structure of loosely coupled parts has been the predominant form, and this has required a conception of the academic organization operationally like that of a federation, or perhaps even a coalition, rather than a kind of unitary system commonly known as a bureaucracy. (ch.1)

At the same time, the institution is bound together in different ways by sets of beliefs, or “sagas”, in many cases disciplinary, sometimes departmental, and occasionally relating to the whole institution. These two features – first, the multiplicity and fragmentation of the institution that impedes a unified aim, and second, the internal binding through shared beliefs and myths – make difficult the adoption and promotion of any external goal or set of values.

In earlier periods, this may have been neither here nor there, with TEIs rarely called on to achieve purposes other than the ones they set for themselves. Yet with the massification and universalisation of tertiary education, and increasing faith that formal education is key to positive change in society, these demands have become ever-present:

Vague societal values are brought down out of the clouds of freefloating rhetoric as they are defined in the chambers of the legislature, the meeting rooms of the political parties, the hallways of the executive branch.... (Clark 1983:240)

The nonchalance with which these social goals are laid at the gates of TEIs is clearly misplaced. As Dewey (1916/1966: 107) argued: “It is well to remind ourselves that education as such has no aims. Only persons, parents, and teachers, etc., have aims”. There are many such persons in TEIs, with diverging views, and limited mechanisms for ensuring compliance. Too rarely is attention given to the constraints in practice of embracing such societal values and achieving their associated goals. Some (e.g. Martin 2022) go further to argue that even if it were possible, the university lacks a clear mandate to promote values other than individual autonomy or flourishing.

Sustainable development is a case in point. In recent years the idea has moved from the confines of geography textbooks and UN declarations to the centre ground of tertiary education rhetoric and strategy. Peter Scott in his 2022 Burton Clark lecture described it as one of the alternative systemic sagas (along with human rights, democracy, global citizenship and individual self-realisation) that could potentially challenge tertiary education’s subservience to (neoliberal) political economy. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in particular have become a common framework around which TEIs both map and classify their activities and actively align their work. There is even an entire academic journal dedicated to the topic (the International Journal of Sustainability in Higher Education). Sustainability has become an apparently consensual idea around which to gather the diverse actors and functions of the institution, and provide a public justification of its existence.

This lecture will explore the coherence, possibilities and limitations of tertiary education’s affair with sustainable development. This task is important in its own right, given the not inconsiderable time and resources being currently devoted. But it also aims to shed light on the broader question of the relationship between tertiary education and society, and the extent to which the former can serve and shape the latter. In doing so, it will interrogate the dominant conception in the literature and in practice that the problem with TEIs is that they are too disparate, and that we need to align, coordinate and avoid silo working.

Sustainable development represents a coming together of two hitherto separate strands of thought and action: firstly, national or international

“development” – as in the economic, political and social progress or improvement of societies; and secondly, the protection, conservation and regeneration of the natural environment. These two movements, both gaining pace in the second half of the 20th century, had largely disregarded each other, with “development” following the dominant modern paradigm of exploitation of nature for human needs, and the environmental movement focusing primarily on the protection of ecosystems from negative human influence. The proposed win-win between these two agendas was that a form of global development could be found that could meet the needs of all human beings “within the carrying capacity of the ecosystems” (IUCN, UNEP & WWF 1991) and “without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (United Nations 1987). After rising gradually in prominence through the preceding decades, the notion gained the global centre ground in 2015 through the establishment of the SDGs which replaced the Millennium Development Goals as the primary global compact orchestrated by the various agencies of the United Nations. As will be explored further below, the supposed win-win represented by the SDGs raises some serious questions.

Before embarking on critical scrutiny of the concept, it must be made clear that social justice, the natural environment and climate change are not just contemporary fads knocking at the door of tertiary education, to be replaced with something else in a few years’ time. Humanity is in the grip of a severe ecological crisis, with interlocking challenges of rising temperatures, biodiversity loss, resource depletion and pollution that severely threaten the viability of our species’ habitat. So in providing a critical reassessment of sustainable development in tertiary education I am not for a moment belittling the importance of the issue – only questioning the posture that TEIs should take towards it.

Nevertheless, there are some highly problematic aspects of the notion. The position taken in this paper is that sustainable development and sustainability are flawed concepts, in their vagueness and consequent susceptibility to either co-optation by agendas that are hostile to social justice and health of the ecosystem, or alternatively a limp consensus accompanied by inaction. Nevertheless, it is better to engage with the notion than not to engage. In the first place, it is an idea that already has wide currency, generally in society, and

within tertiary education, and as such academics must grapple with it, contest it and advocate for better versions. Furthermore, despite its ambiguities, the term does have the potential for alerting humanity to the need for a fundamentally different way of organising itself, and can be a vehicle for much-needed debate and action.

The lecture will first turn to the ways in which TEIs engage with sustainable development. In order to understand the possibilities and constraints on TEIs in this regard, it is important to distinguish between three distinct modes of engagement: projective, expressive and constructive. These considerations will lead us finally to some normative reflections about the organisation and role of tertiary education in the contemporary era.

Three forms of engagement with sustainable development

The dominant conception of an educational institution is that it serves as a vehicle of producing benefit outside itself: as a factory producing new goods, a blacksmith refashioning iron or a surgery rectifying ailments. Most commonly through their teaching function – and in the case of institutions at the tertiary level also through research – they are seen to produce knowledge, skills and values (and through them products, services and technologies) that individuals and society need. Yet we can also see educational institutions in a different way, as having a real existence and value in themselves, in the here and now. Schools and TEIs are communities that matter – despite their transience – independently of the future and external benefit they produce. The latter idea we can term the expressive as opposed to the projective function of education.

These two modes capture much of what educational institutions do. However, there is an assumption in both of them that the ideas or purposes are predefined or externally generated. We might also then point to another function of education institutions – and in this case TEIs are particularly prominent – which is to generate new ideas about what is to be projected or expressed. For this we can borrow the term “constructive” from Amartya Sen. In his well-known discussions on democracy (e.g. Sen 1999) Sen has distinguished between its intrinsic value (as part of what it means to have a valued and dignified life), its

instrumental value (in achieving the kinds of decisions that will further interests of all members of society) and its constructive value: i.e. that “the practice of democracy gives citizens an opportunity to learn from one another, and helps society to form its values and priorities” (p.13).

These three ideas express themselves in different ways in relation to sustainable development, as will be outlined in the sections that follow.

Projective

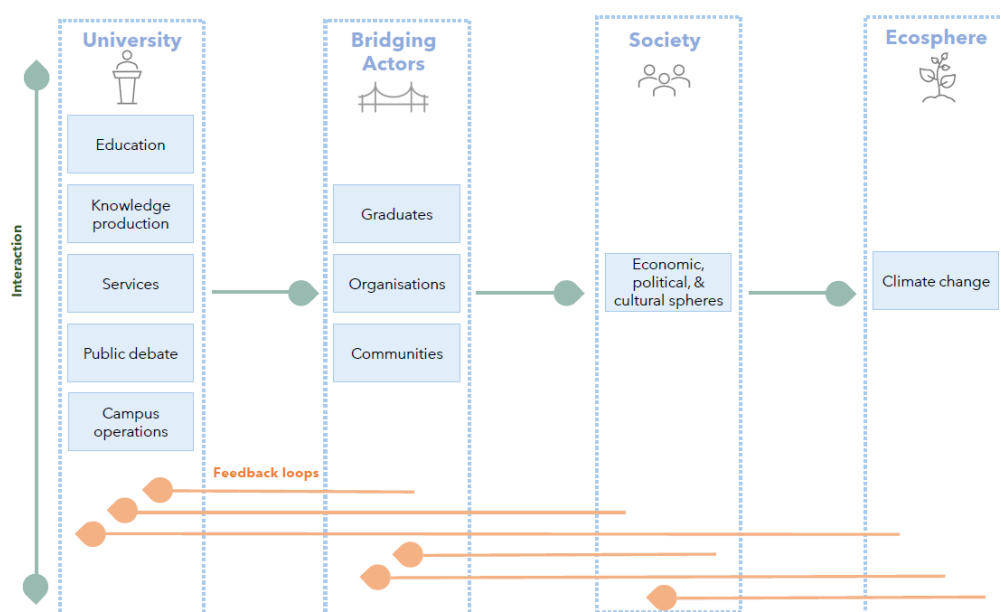
In the first of these modes, sustainable development is something that TEIs help to bring into being. The most common way in which they do this is through teaching their students to be sustainable. This provision is sometimes integrated into existing courses, and conceptualised as a modification of professional training (i.e. the formation of sustainable engineers [Mitchell et al. 2021]), or involve the creation of new courses: in the UK it is now possible to do, for example, a BSc in Sustainable Development at the University of St Andrews, an MSt in Sustainability Leadership at the University of Cambridge or an MBA in Sustainability Impact at the University of Stirling. In other cases, sustainable development forms part of the general civic and personal learning of all students, and may occur outside of the accredited syllabus. There is a sizeable body of literature on education for sustainable development, and on the more specific area of climate change education, involving personal accounts of teaching courses (e.g. Amos & Carvalho 2020), pedagogical approaches (e.g. Lotz-Sisitka et al. 2015), competencies (e.g. Barth et al. 2007) and curriculum models (e.g. Molthan-Hill et al. 2019).

While the main way in which TEIs project themselves is through their graduates, there are also the areas of research and community engagement. The contributions of these areas to society have been the subject of significant attention in the UK and elsewhere in recent years through the “impact” agenda, which has expressed itself in the policies of research funding and evaluation (McCowan 2018). TEIs now commonly map their various research and community engagement activities in relation to sustainable development, and particularly the SDGs. University College London (UCL), for example, has recently conducted an exercise of mapping its publications, research impact case studies, policy citations and student extracurricular activity against the

SDGs (UCL 2022). In some cases, there is an educational role that goes beyond tertiary education students to the broader population: this is the case with MOOCs on the subject (see for example “Educating for Sustainable Development (ESD) in Schools and Universities” on the FutureLearn platform), or with training courses for professionals or the general public – for example, Manchester Metropolitan’s work with the Carbon Literacy Project.

For the purposes of a current research project (McCowan 2020), these various forms of impact have been categorised as passing through four stages (see Figure 1). Starting with five modalities of tertiary education activity (education, knowledge production, services, public debate and campus operations), influence emanates out first through the people who come into direct contact with the TEI (termed “bridging actors”) – most importantly students, but also communities and organisations who are involved in projects, courses and other activities. The next stage is the societal one, involving either knock-on influences through the bridging actors, or direct influences on the economic, political and cultural spheres. Finally, there is the influence on the ecosphere itself, either directly or via the earlier stages. The scheme was developed in relation to climate change specifically, but is equally applicable to sustainable development.

Figure 1: Stages of Impact



[Source: McCowan 2020]

In understanding these dynamics, consideration is clearly needed of the variety of other groups and institutions in society also acting in this space alongside the tertiary education system – a topic that would require separate treatment. The figure above is certainly a simplification of the interplay between the complex systems of tertiary education, society and natural environment, but even in this pared down version there is a multiplicity of different pathways of impact and possible outcomes. Research evidence on these different pathways is highly uneven. Some of them are relatively easy to measure (for example acquisition of knowledge on climate change amongst those involved in a MOOC), while others are extremely difficult (the impact of academics' Twitter activity on public attitudes towards biodiversity loss) (McCowan 2022).

Can tertiary education fulfil the promise of sustainable development through its projective mode? The potential contributions of tertiary education to achieving a sustainable society are extensive: the professional training, personal and civic development, breakthroughs in knowledge and technological innovation can have a profound impact. Some would even go so far as to argue that sustainable development will be impossible without them. However, the impacts of tertiary education are as unruly as the institutions themselves. First, there is the multiplicity of possible pathways stemming from the five modalities and out through various actors in the subsequent stages; as stated above, some of these are extremely hard to measure, and the interplay between the different trajectories of impact is unpredictable. Second, not all agents and structures within TEIs are aligned with the sustainable development agenda, even in its more establishment-friendly forms, leading to some lessening of the contribution, and potentially contradiction and undermining. These tensions are particularly acute in the context of marketisation and financial pressures on TEIs: green credentials can work in TEIs' favour when recruiting students, but when push comes to shove are likely to be sidelined if not benefiting the bottom line.

Expressive

It is not always remembered that TEIs are communities and societal actors in their own right. Attention is sometimes paid to their role as economic actors, in bringing employment and resources to their local areas, but in relation to

sustainable development, this kind of direct influence can be very significant, with TEIs having a marked impact on their environments, not only locally but also nationally and globally. Much of the attention in this area has been focused on the carbon emissions stemming from international student mobility (see the analysis carried out by Shields 2019), and to a lesser extent staff mobility for conferences and fieldwork (e.g. Bjørkdahl et al. 2022) – leading to not a little soul-searching in institutions caught between the financial and reputational necessities of internationalisation and their guilty consciences. TEIs are active human settlements of commonly between 5000 and 500,000 people, with an obvious environmental footprint, even when in the post-Covid era some of that activity has been moved online. TEIs have made concerted efforts in recent years to clean up their act. My own institution (UCL), for example, has established a sizeable sustainability unit with dedicated staff and a broad portfolio of activities including environmentally-friendly building and procurement, supporting biodiversity in the local area, as well as integrating sustainability issues into student learning. A number of TEIs have set targets for net zero emissions, and the London School of Economics and Political Science was actually registered as carbon neutral in 2021. There are also an increasing number of benchmarks, ratings and rankings relating to campus sustainability, for example the People and Planet University league which assesses a range of factors such as carbon reduction, sustainable food and waste, as well as workers' rights and ethical investments, and at the international level the University of Indonesia's Green Metric (topped in 2022 by Wageningen University).

Yet as acknowledged in the People and Planet League, sustainable development has its human side as well as its natural environment side. The expressive mode also involves the dynamics of human interaction in the community, the forms of organisation, and the distribution of opportunities and resources. While the connections to the notion of sustainable development are not always made, we could include here the work taking place relating to equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI), addressing workplace discrimination, harassment and bullying, and ensuring a respectful and nurturing environment. The decolonisation movement which has gained visibility in recent years since the 2015 Rhodes Must Fall mobilisation in South Africa is also a key part of this process (Del Monte & Posholi 2021).

Inconsistencies between the projective and expressive roles can be highly problematic, when for instance students perceive the hypocrisy between the energy wastage in their classrooms and the environmentally-friendly messaging promoted by the institution, or when staff observe the mismatch between their TEIs' statements on gender equality and the poor deal given to female employees in practice.

Unity and coherence would seem to be a much more realistic goal when it comes to the expressive mode than the projective one. Particularly in the case of the physical infrastructure and direct emissions of an institution, there is the possibility of a whole institution transformation, one that has been realised in a few institutions. When it comes to the human community aspects the challenge is greater, as alignment of institutional culture is hard to achieve, even in the context of concerted and charismatic leadership and effective transformation of governance structures. The challenge is made even greater by the fact that the very idea of sustainable development is uncertain and contested, as explored in the section follows.

Constructive

Finally, there is the constructive role of tertiary education in sustainable development. This refers to the task not of bringing sustainable development about, or expressing it in everyday life, but scrutinising and recreating what it actually means. This process involves ontological dimensions (those relating to being and existence), epistemological ones (relating to the nature of knowledge) and axiological ones (relating to values and purposes): the epistemological questions have been particularly acute in relation to climate change, with the scientific community thrown into a very public tussle over the validity of its production (McCowan 2023). TEIs engage in the constructive role in a variety of ways. There are formal, explicit outlets, such as journal articles written by academics that may directly address such a topic, and put forward alternative conceptualisations. Yet there are also a variety of other more subtle ways in which these ideas are constantly shaped, through the interactions in the classroom, discussions in cafés, deliberations amongst research project teams and strategising in professional staff meetings. This formation of ideas takes place not only within the confines of tertiary education, but also outside through

mainstream and social media outlets, engaging with the general public directly and indirectly.

Sustainable development is particularly amenable to these kinds of scrutiny and contestation. As explored in McCowan (2019), it is what we might call a “shell” concept: it has some minimal necessary features – it refers to a process of change that does not extinguish itself – but beyond that can be filled with whichever moral and political vision the user likes. As a result, conceptions of sustainable development range from those based on social and environmental justice, decolonisation and indigeneity, to versions entirely compatible with the maintenance of free-market capitalism at the global level, circling around the dominant centrist idea of a softened market economy, made sustainable through a combination of state regulation and individual and corporate responsibility (Chankseliani & McCowan 2021; Jimenez & Kabachnik 2023; Macintyre et al. 2023; Misiaszek 2020).

The SDGs are the incarnation of this dominant liberal consensus on the future of human society. While containing a range of provisions for supporting basic rights of all and mitigating negative impacts on the environment, they resist calls for a fundamental rethinking of the global economic system and its love affair with economic growth. The targets in SDG8, for example, could not be further from degrowth (United Nations 2015):

8.1 Sustain per capita economic growth in accordance with national circumstances and, in particular, at least 7 per cent gross domestic product growth per annum in the least developed countries

8.2 Achieve higher levels of economic productivity through diversification, technological upgrading and innovation, including through a focus on high-value added and labour-intensive sectors

...

8.10 Strengthen the capacity of domestic financial institutions to encourage and expand access to banking, insurance and financial services for all.

This attempt to reconcile human and non-human interests without any fundamental shift in our economic and political structures has alienated both environmentalists and socialists, who see sustainable development as the acceptable face of continuing exploitative global capitalism. In relation to tertiary education, Shields (2023) for example questions the use of the term given the backdrop of extreme environmental injustice: sustaining makes sense for the privileged, but not for those who have been excluded from the fruits of development, and who need transformation rather than more of the same. Stein et al. (2022) argue that we should replace “education for sustainable development” with “education for the end of the world as we know it”, given the “inherently violent and unsustainable nature of our modern-colonial modes of existence” (p.274).

The term “sustainability” is often used as a synonym for “sustainable development”, and is often preferred when the focus is not at the societal level. However, the picture is made murkier by a somewhat different usage of the term to mean not continuation within the carrying capacity of the ecosystem, but simply continuation, regardless of any external impact. So a company can speak of the sustainability of its mining operations when referring to its profitability rather than environmental impacts, and an NGO of the sustainability of its projects referring to the embedding of the work within the community after funding has ceased. In fact, it is in this sense that Burton Clark (2003) himself used the term in relation to TEIs, in describing the factors needed to ensure the continuation of the gains made in the transformation process in entrepreneurial universities.

Barnett (2017), in his account of the “ecological university”, provides a strident critique of the notion of sustainability. He argues that universities should not be in the business of “sustaining”, but of “improving”. He sees the biological origins of the term sustainability – relating to the resilient and self-regenerating nature of organisms – as inappropriate, since the world can never be sustained and we should instead be looking towards “ever fuller flourishing” (p. 44). However, biology is only one of the roots of the notion of sustainable development. There is also international development, in which the idea of improvement and ever fuller flourishing is central: the qualifier “sustainable” when added to

“development” in this case serves to indicate that this improvement should not be self-extinguishing.

With such a range of factors and variety of channels for scrutiny and deliberation, there is inevitable diversity in the conceptualisations of sustainable development. Rather than a substantive version of the idea then, what tertiary education contributes – at its best – is a process, one which it is hoped will provide an open and inclusive debate on the different possibilities of sustainable development, and involve sustained analysis, reason-giving, creativity and imagination. In that sense then, TEIs can fulfil the promise of sustainable development in the constructive mode – as long as it is understood as a terrain of debate, rather than a settled idea.

In an earlier book (McCowan 2019), I argued that, in addition to working for the SDGs, we need to look beyond them. This constructive role of tertiary education is crucial for identifying and responding to the shortcomings of the global compact, and putting in place the conditions for a more demanding conception. For TEIs, this means not only setting in motion the kind of vibrant debate outlined above, but also directing its scrutiny on itself, questioning the institutional forms that have come to characterise TEIs, and experimenting with new ones. Decolonisation of institutions and the fostering of an ecology of knowledges are important pieces of the puzzle. Furthermore, across tertiary education systems, far more space is needed for experimentation with new kinds of institution, displaying characteristics which may not be immediately recognisable, conditioned as we are with our strongly ingrained expectations of what tertiary education is.

Conclusion

Engagement of TEIs with the sustainable development agenda can therefore take very different forms, involving impact on the broader society, embodiment of those ideas within the workings of the institution itself and generation of new conceptions. Tertiary education can “produce” sustainable development, it can “constitute” it and it can “reconceptualise” it. So returning to the original question – and in light of this expanded understanding of how TEIs might engage with the agenda – is it coherent, viable and desirable to place the goal of achieving sustainable development at the door of tertiary education?

If sustainable development is a single thing, a substantive conception of how our society should be organised and how life should be lived, in the present moment and in the future, then the answer must be a resounding no. There are serious doubts about whether tertiary education can be a vehicle for such a unified message, given the factors outlined at the start of this lecture relating to the multiplicity and fragmentation of the institution, the lack of a clear chain of command, the importance of academic freedom and inevitable diversity of perspectives. If such unity (or homogenisation) is impossible within a single institution, how much less so in a tertiary education system, comprising many diverse institutions. Even if such unity were possible, it is doubtful whether it would be desirable, given the need for vibrant debate considering alternative positions, in the context of epistemic pluralism. More specifically in the case of climate change and sustainability, it is widely accepted that addressing these “wicked” problems actually requires multiple perspectives, experimentation and alternative ideas.

Yet sustainable development is not a single idea or a unified set of values. Instead, it indicates a terrain on which variety of different (quite contrasting) positions may be held. Its vagueness, which for those seeking clarity and purpose may be frustrating, could actually be its strength. In saying almost nothing in a substantive sense, it is an invitation to examine deeply and deliberate about the kind of society and planet that we would like and that can endure through time.

Education, despite being roundly criticised for failing to live up to the mark, is simultaneously attributed almost magical properties, to bring about whatever social goal is thrown at it. It can bring about profound changes of many types in both individuals and societies, but the changes brought are hard to predict and control. Burton Clark’s work interrogating the university as an institution helps us to understand what the limitations of those magical properties might be.

So perhaps the constant lamentation about the lack of coherence of TEIs, their fragmentation and silo working, the need for holistic and joined-up thinking, may be misplaced. As argued by Anna Tsing (2015) in *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, our modern conditioning drives us always to upscale, but the desire

for scale and uniformity may undermine the value of what we started with. Perhaps to echo Schumacher (1973), “small is beautiful” in tertiary education. It is a debate in a undergraduate classroom, a department’s tree-planting initiative, a student-led initiative for fossil fuel divestment, a social media campaign critiquing government energy policy, a collaborative community regeneration project, or even a lightbulb moment of a single professional enrolled on a short course: these actions may not be centrally planned and orchestrated, but together have transformative potential. So the task of TEIs then is to encourage these grassroots initiatives, to nurture them, or at least not to squash or hinder them. It is not that not that TEIs are completely random and splintered and that leadership can bring no change at all: there are some things that tie them together, and positive momentum can be generated. But engagements with societal agendas such as sustainable development should be conducted with an awareness of the variegated and unruly nature the organisation, the value of bottom-up initiatives, and the diverse ways (projective, expressive and constructive) in which tertiary education is linked to society.

Importantly, this is not only a question of impact, but also of critique and reconstruction of the ideas underpinning it. In this process, we can see an important regaining of protagonism for the institution, echoing the calls for greater agency and creativity made by Peter Scott (2022) and Michael Shattock (2019) in their Burton Clark lectures. The problem with “societal values ... brought down out of the clouds of freefloating rhetoric” (Clark 1983: 240), and the common turn to education institutions for solving societies’ dysfunctions, is not only that it contains a naïve and simplistic assumption about how values are acquired, but that it also places tertiary education in a position of mere vehicle. While there are dangers in overreaching, and imagining that tertiary education can transform society on its own, it is equally problematic to cast the sector entirely in the role of handmaiden, “compressed to that of service organisations, responsive to the agendas of others” (Scott 2022: 25). In remaining committed to sustained enquiry and deep reflection, in dialogue with action, and in the context of epistemic pluralism and diversity of ideas, tertiary education can lead a critical interrogation of the notion of sustainable development, and its re-imagination, setting in motion a positive societal contagion that may give us a chance of finding a way out of the current ecological crisis.

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