

Concept Note: Higher education as an epistemic failure of modernity: the case to decolonise, re-conceptualised and offer new possibilities.

Linda Tuhiwai Smith PhD University of Waikato, New Zealand

Greetings everyone in the spirit of good health and well-being. I think it is time to be provocative.

The corona virus pandemic that has gripped the world in the last year has exposed the deep and systemic racialised and economic inequalities within societies and across the globe. These inequalities are systemic because they are ingrained in the very sense of being of nation states, inscribed in their institutions of education, health and economies and sustained globally by the circulation of epistemic hierarchies, technologies and resources. It is not an accident that poor countries are left behind in the access to vaccinations or that pharmaceutical corporations and research institutions are located at their core within countries that are wealthy, powerful and have vested interests based on exploitation in poorer nations and of talented individuals from poorer nations. Higher education as a 'global institution' fails to deliver either equality of educational opportunity or research excellence that advances world knowledge. Instead higher education as a democratic, liberal or neo-liberal 'idea' is failing as an epistemic project of modernity. Knowledge has not set most of the world's population free. It has arguably shown the world how freedom and wealth are aligned and only the few can be its beneficiaries and spokespersons. Higher education as it is currently formed has reached its limits. It is time for significant reconceptualising of the role of higher education in our futures and the modes of education that maybe required to face the planetary train wreck caused by humans.

In many ways institutions of higher education find themselves in a perfect storm;

1. The pandemic has exposed deep global inequalities
2. climate change has cast a deeper and wider shadow
3. In Western countries and the nations whose systems they designed the legacies of racism and colonialism have been challenged e.g. #RhodesMustFall, #BlackLivesMatter.
4. Science has had to prove itself in the pandemic to disenfranchised and sceptical populations who have embraced conspiracy theories
5. Forced lock-downs and the rapid move to on-line learning has shown that while technology solves some problems, social isolation and disconnectedness exposes other problems for teachers and learners.
6. The international trade in foreign students in some western countries is ultimately a business model rather than an education development model
7. University scholars and students are seeing their freedoms of thought, speech and actions thwarted. In some contexts such freedoms have been seen as forms of white supremacy and in others as forms of political suppression.
8. Young people are asserting leadership and moral conscience in key areas where 'old' generations have dithered or just miserably failed to face the future
9. The pandemic has needed multiple disciplinary knowledges far beyond what gets referred to as the hard sciences to collaborate to address the pandemic e.g. specialists who can reach the 'hard to reach' communities, supply chain experts, communicators, food security specialists, front line health workers, cleaners, truck drivers, mask makers - In other words it takes a community to address the needs of the community.

10. During the pandemic the exceedingly wealthy have become more wealthy at the expense of the poor and borderline poor who have become much more impoverished, disenfranchised and marginalised.

My own higher education focus in Aotearoa New Zealand has been working for greater inclusion of Māori and Indigenous people and our forms of knowledge and research in the higher education sector. The term used in New Zealand is 'tertiary education' as it includes all forms of education and training rather than just academic and University education that people associate with 'higher' education. I have worked to do that in the University system and in the establishment of three Tribal Māori institutions of advanced learning known as Wānanga. The Wānanga are legislated to provide further education that is based on Māori knowledge and culture. Their qualifications are approved in the New Zealand system and students can access the student loan scheme and other entitlements. My work at the intersection of these two types of institutions demonstrates the loss of opportunities and stifling of innovation that occur when University systems are territorial, competitive, hierarchical and racist. Higher education and the science system are closely connected. In my view universities in settler colonial societies like New Zealand, Australia, Canada and the United States and Universities in Europe that have been beneficiaries of imperialism and colonialism need to be decolonised and their epistemic power redistributed across different modes of institutions and modes of learning, teaching and research. The pandemic is reminding institutions that their main constituents are in the backyard and that place based ideas provide a rich context for learning and for the transfer of knowledge back to communities and society. Internationalisation has occurred more as a marketing and business model that supports ranking systems but has not worked to empower communities or indeed address the deep injustices within society.

How would I like higher education to be in 2050 and how could higher education contribute to better futures for all by 2050? It will take thirty years from 2021 to create the kind inter-generational change in higher education that is required. By inter-generational change I don't mean the standard managerial focussed restructuring or reform to create more efficient economic units but a change of paradigms and approaches to learning, teaching, curricula, skills, technology and research. I would want to see a deeper respect for the relationship between humans and the non human world, less focus on human-centric concerns, more focus on relationality, connectivity, and living with the diversity of peoples, knowledge systems and cultures. All activity post secondary school would fall under the domain of higher education such as employment, child rearing or civic engagement. The accumulation and curation of life experiences are more integrated into formalised studies enabling wider access that is not time limited. The individual learner or the individual scholar would not be the centre or focus point of higher education but their contribution to a collective idea or problem would be a focus of learning and teaching. Higher education has a unique responsibility to prepare young adults in particular for life and these students need access to safe, joyful and creative pedagogical experiences that focus on well-being. Would institutions remain as real world spaces for teaching and learning? Yes, students and staff need to learn in real world communities. Would qualifications matter? Other than in professions and for the experience of graduating yes but they should reflect a broader set of skills, knowledge and life experiences. They are partial qualifications for can be added to or augmented as portfolios of study. Would academic institutions still value global knowledge and science? Of course but alongside and integrated with a wider set of knowledge, skills and experiences. The focus of higher education needs to be the well-being of the earth, of its diversity and sustainability, its security and beauty. Humans need to become better guardians of the earth and higher education can help them be better

humans and relations of non human entities. There is room for a higher education system that is built on the value of love for the earth, for humanity and oter entities and should work to produce happiness and well-being. That would be a good thing to have my great grandchildren experience - a system that loves them.