

**SPECIAL SECTION**  
**Global Higher Education in 2050:  
Building Universities for  
Sustainable Societies**

# Introduction

## The University at the End of the World

KERI FACER and CHRISTOPHER NEWFIELD

**ABSTRACT** The authors organized a conference, “Global Higher Education in 2050: Imagining Universities for Sustainable Societies,” at the University of California, Santa Barbara, March 4–6, 2020, right before the campus was closed for eighteen months in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The event’s premise was that the futures of higher education will be plural, must be responsive to large international divergences, and must be actively created by global majorities rather than policy elites. This introduction describes the papers’ common project of identifying the key elements in the higher education status quo and features that might lead toward unexpected futures. We summarize the three horizons methodology that guided some of the work. We also outline the activities of the third day, the workshop that sought a means of linking the present to the future. This work continues beyond the horizons of the papers published here.

**KEYWORDS** global higher education, higher education futures, future studies, critical theory, critical university studies, international education, education and diversity, decolonial education

Santa Barbara, March 6, 2020. Gray clouds drift across a blue sky, while a white pelican or two fish in the campus lagoon. A few hundred yards away, the Pacific crashes on a sandy beach where sandpipers run through the foam. A bit further inland, striking graduate students begin to mass around the clock tower, painting banners, setting up AV equipment, signposting march routes. Inside an institutional green room, robust tables and well-worn chairs are hauled into place for group work. Papers and coffee cups are strewn all over, Post-it notes litter the walls, a clear bottle of hand sanitizer is handed around, and the work begins on the last day of the last conference before COVID-19 suspends the university as we knew it—a conference, fittingly enough, concerned with the future of higher education.

The universities of most countries are trapped between the future and the past, unable to build on previous strengths, and unable to describe a future

other than an extension of familiar, mostly losing battles. The UC Santa Barbara workshop-conference was designed to elicit new ideas about what future universities can and should look like and then to draft diverging narratives about the paths from here to 2050.

A year and a half later, we write this introduction knowing what came next—within three days the university was closed down; within a week most international flights were canceled; within a month most countries underwent mass unemployment. A global death toll began to rise that is not close to ending, and an economic crisis was followed by a rebound that now seems most likely to widen all types of inequality within and between countries. Universities spent a full year online, thousands of staff are still out of work, and students around the world underwent a very different education from the one they had imagined would move their lives forward. We are seeing new, inchoate debates about what higher education actually is.

The rapidity of the shift in these events points to the hubris of any visions of global higher education in 2050 that claim privileged knowledge of what will come next. And indeed, for those in countries more familiar with equally catastrophic economic and natural disruptions, such an awareness of the limits of foresight is nothing new. So what, then, is the purpose of a special section exploring this question of university futures? Why think about the future at all when the complexity of the present, the richness of the meanwhile and its attendant latent possibilities, is so hard to grasp?

Our argument begins with the assertion that we are in the realm of politics when we talk of the future. Futures are coordination devices. They are central to the creation and sustenance of political projects and material practices. They act as programs around which people, tools, finances, and organizations are mobilized.<sup>1</sup> The process of attending to futures forms an arena in which groups can construct a collaborative agency where none existed before. More negatively, if we don't think the future, others will think it for us. The process we used at this conference is designed to avoid defensiveness and to build on and beyond critique. The structured imagining of futures is a precursor to political mobilization, to the coordination of action, and to the creation of pathways to new possibilities. The radical idea that things might be otherwise, an idea that expresses and also produces a dissatisfaction with the present and that projects a futurity toward which action can be oriented, is a feature of critique that seeks to position itself as social actor as well as analyst and observer.<sup>2</sup> Here, though, lie risks. The projection of futures is necessarily also a colonizing move. An appeal to the future, a claim of foresight, or a statement of desire, is frequently an exercise in enclosure. Indeed, the long and often murky history of the field of futures studies in the United States and Europe

points to the appropriation of futures projections and techniques as instruments of neoconservative control, modernist planning, and elite technocratic capture.<sup>3</sup>

The ontological and epistemological foundations for working with futures therefore need to be clearly acknowledged: that the future does not (yet) exist, that it cannot be known (however much we believe it can), and that ideas of the future have reciprocal impacts on the present. These foundations require us to pay attention to the continual emergence of new futures, to the necessary provisionality of our own and any other claims to foresight, and to the way in which ideas of the future are already at play in the decisions we are making and the world that we perceive. Futures are, as the anthropologist Arjun Appadurai explains, cultural facts; they coordinate beliefs, actions, and emotions in the present.<sup>4</sup>

An attention to the performative function of futures, however, should not simply justify a return to presentism and to the denial of the future as a site of responsibility and care. As humanity's technological capacities now exceed our understanding of their consequences—from the millennia-long half-life of nuclear radiation to the long, slow timescales of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere—our actions in the present have material, long-term consequences. The future is not simply a space of imaginative fantasy: it is a material reality being built, day-by-day, by the actions of the present. On that day in Santa Barbara, for example, futures in which we are now living were being made—not only in the invisible movements of viruses and the imminent explosion of the hand sanitizer industry but also in the university policies steadily eroding the security and viable working conditions of younger academics; in the constant connectivity of everyone in that room via email, WhatsApp, and Zoom; in the wildfires already starting on the hills above Highway 1.

Thinking about futures requires continuous and sometimes contradictory movement—movement between knowledge, imagination, reflection, and ethics; between what is emerging in the present, wildly divergent ideas of the future, and the past dependencies and inequalities of the world we inhabit already. Such ambiguous ontology troubles conventional academic inquiry and has for over sixty years now.<sup>5</sup> Empirical social science cautions against any inquiry into the future as an epistemological impossibility. Critical social sciences, more comfortable with futures as sites of hegemonic power, attend to futures as discursive problems. Activist social science frames the future as a locus of desires and projects to move toward. In the study of higher education, this ambiguity tends to resolve itself into a situation in which “the future” of universities is treated primarily as a terrain of contesting normative projections and fears.<sup>6</sup>

In the Santa Barbara conference from which this section arises, we attempted, with no guarantee of success, to experiment with a different mode of thinking about the futures of higher education that respects and seeks to work with this ambiguous ontology. To do so we drew on conceptual tools from futures studies, a field that com-

prises traditions that draw both from neoliberal planning, exemplified by projective futurisms of the fossil-fuel industry such as the “Shell Scenarios,” as well as from peace and conflict studies, the postwar ethical humanism of Hannah Arendt and Hans Jonas, and radical social thought. At the heart of this field is foregrounding the anticipatory assumptions operative in any discussion of the future, and an attempt to become reflexive about these assumptions. In critical futures studies, the purpose of such reflexivity is to create an arena of possibility where groups can identify alternative futures that might be submerged, ignored, disavowed, or latent in the present. The goal is equally to explore how to create conditions so that “desired futures” can emerge.

As discussion of university futures tends to veer between inward-looking accounts of inevitable decline and outward-looking techno-fantasies of inevitable transformation, a critical futures practice, we conjectured, might open up a useful conceptual space of possibility. Specifically, we drew on an approach called “three horizons” that has been developed by Bill Sharpe and colleagues at the Institute for the Future that has been widely used in industrial and NGO settings as well as by social movement actors.<sup>7</sup> Its ontological and epistemological assumptions echo those already discussed—of futures as open but shaped by the weight of history, of agency as interdependent and negotiated with other actors, of the gain of futures thinking being oriented toward uncovering possibilities for action and coordination in the present rather than in predictive power. Practically, it also serves the useful purpose of inviting attention both toward surfacing normative desires and assumptions—the universities “we want”—and also toward the competing futures for the university that might be envisaged by other actors—whether human, technological, or ecological—or that may emerge simply from the continuation of present unsatisfactory arrangements.

The framework is a relatively simple one. It invites reflection on “Three Horizons of the Future”:

- Horizon 1: the participants’ observations of the current state of business as usual, its weaknesses, its problems, and its assets;
- Horizon 2: the participants’ assessment of potential disruptions, new actors, and competing ideas of the futures that are emerging—and that have the potential to be co-opted either toward the maintenance of a failing business as usual (horizon 1) and extension of its life, or toward the hastening of the conditions of a horizon 3;
- Horizon 3: the participants’ desired alternative state of affairs, the future that they want to come to pass.

Horizon 2 is the bridge between present and future, and is especially difficult to elaborate.

At its simplest, the exercise aims to support participants to more explicitly articulate innate desires for the future, analyze the limitations (and strengths) of

the present, and look beyond the institution to consider the sorts of other developments that might be catalysts for change. It is “disruption agnostic,” encouraging attention to the potential for any technologies, events, and disruptions to be captured and harnessed either for maintenance of the status quo or for the opening up of new spaces of possibility. Its second helpful feature is its dual orientation—both inward to the existing institution and outward to the world.

We invited conference participants to prepare a short talk on their views of the weaknesses and failings of the present university (horizon 1); the desired futures that they might envisage for the university (horizon 3); and the emerging disruptions, changes and novelties they could see in the present that might have implications for the future university (horizon 2).

Any attempt to think about the future, however, is partial, provisional, and situated in a particular time and place and with a particular set of assumptions. In our case, we did not fully engage with changes outside universities. There was limited discussion of science and technology, reflecting in part the dominance of humanities and social-science expertise in the room. We did not discuss, for example, the potential implications in massive transformations in life sciences for education, something that will inevitably be seen as an oversight in the future. Nor did we discuss the changing idea of the student that emerges as humans increasingly augment themselves with new forms of nonhumanlike intelligence or as human-“nature” boundaries shift in the context of ecological and climate change. Although participants came from a range of countries—Brazil, Colombia, England, India, Norway, and South Africa as well as the United States—and showed us various outsides to the US model with great regularity, the pressing financial, structural, and political conditions of US higher education framed much of the debate.

The papers here also do not reflect the final day of the event: a workshop that included all participants and that considered, through intensive small-group discussion, these questions: What emerges from the three horizons ideas presented over the last two days? What sites of possibility for change were emerging? Where might the leverage points arise for transforming universities? We generated three storylines—each in the form of a headline from 2050, an artifact, and a narrative of how this future came to pass. The purpose of these stories was not to act as a predictive tool, or to test our current strategies against possible scenarios. Rather, its aim was to provide a framework for unsettling what we take for granted today, exploring what we find hard to think about or imagine, helping us to understand what we might want to find out more about, where we might act to nurture seeds of possibility, how we might resist becoming co-opted into futures we don’t want to bring about.

These stories—sketched quickly here—explored the potential for new developments to be harnessed toward either a failing status quo or a desirable future through co-optation, collapse, or transformation.

The first reflects a process of “collapse and slow recovery.” The current university paradigm (horizon 1) continues to grow and grow and become ever stronger. Alternative seeds of horizon 3 that this process calls horizon 2 don’t gain enough purchase to change the system’s fundamentals. A shock, such as a climate event that causes millions of deaths, causes a sudden collapse of the autonomy of educational institutions from their nation-states, which are seized by military leaders in major countries across the world. These figures establish dictatorships to intensify competition for the resources needed to adapt country-by-country to climate disaster. Our story picked up after that dictatorship had been in place for a while.

### Story 1

*Headline: “The Junta Is Deposed and the University Takes Over”*

*Memorial/Artifact: A clean waterfall with drinking water available to everyone*

In the collapse years of the 2020s and 2030s, hundreds of thousands of PhDs formed networks with each other and in solidarity with local communities, playing a reparative role in collapse; a cohort of critical academics from across all disciplines left to join these communities and set up Fugitive Universities—working to reclaim land, space, and knowledge production. These universities play a role in housing, feeding, and redeploying technology for survival. Over time, they become central to people’s daily lives and take over government after a period of authoritarian dictatorship. How does this new combination of roles play out?

---

The second story is “capture and extension.” Here, horizon 3 ideas of a university for sustainable societies are so far from the mainstream that they can’t gain purchase. Business as usual successfully captures all the innovation and emerging possibilities in horizon 2 to prolong its success. But business as usual still decreasingly fits with changing needs and conditions. By 2050, the system has not collapsed, and the familiar hodgepodge university systems are still in place, with today’s wealthy private universities doing better than ever in more countries of the world, while everyone else is doing somewhat worse. But stabilizing practices are increasingly counterproductive and, by 2050, generate powerful contrary responses.

### Story 2

*Headline: “Uber Grant Funds New General Education Curriculum”*

*Memorial/Artifact: A statue of the university president holding hands with the graduate student strike group*

As the problem of student debt grew more and more substantial and threatened the university’s continued existence, a partnership was built with hedge funds and

markets to purchase student debt, convert this into bonded labor, and sell student labor, information and data to the highest bidder. Education is offered as a form of indenture—with fees paid in return for future labor. What happens to this system?

---

The third story is “challenge and transformation.” This group tells a story of what happens when current business as usual for universities (horizon 1) declines unevenly but steadily and when efforts to sustain and efforts to dismantle and rebuild are fairly evenly matched and compete for power (horizon 2). Over the long term, a completely new form of university emerges (horizon 3) that is able to harness the innovations in horizon 2 for its benefit and still retain the features of horizon 1 that should be retained.

### **Story 3**

*Headline: “International Covenant Formed among 200 Universities to Transform Prisons and Internment Camps into College Campuses”*

The changing public mood of the 2020s post-COVID-19 saw military funding redirected to college education, a debt jubilee for student debt, and universities changing their curricula. The new curricula organized around the five Es (ethical, embedded, experimental, equal, and ecological) combine local and traditional knowledge with powerhouse scientific and technological insights for the public good. How do these new curricula play out in relation to other key elements of the system?

---

The workshop participants spent the first part of this final day developing their particular storylines, and then the second half of that day comparing them. We hope to recombine these participants with other groups in another country in order to continue the process.

As the organizers, we were motivated by a gnawing sense that for universities, the hour is very late. Since World War II, universities in most countries have officially promised social mobility to their students and new knowledge to their societies, while serving unofficially as sites for struggles toward personal self-discovery and emancipation and the formation of democratic capabilities. Universities were also asked to become more inclusive and to support progressive social movements by those that they had excluded. And yet, in response to political pressures, universities have narrowed their public benefits to economic returns



and downplayed their contributions to intellectual growth and social justice. This has in turn weakened their social effects at a time when they most need them to appeal for support beyond traditional elites. Most societies are divided or uncertain about what universities are supposed to do, and support for them has become ritualistic, ambivalent, unreliable, and riven by competing self-interests. Countless individuals and programs within universities have made major contributions to addressing the ongoing crises of our age—the decline of democracy, the growth of economic inequality, the resurgence of white supremacy, the persistence of military violence, and the havoc of climate crisis. And yet this seems as much in spite as because of universities themselves.

Universities have lost their storylines and need new ones. Even their advocates are asking, what are the uses of the university in its present form? Should the shape of universities fundamentally change? Would new institutional forms do better at bringing higher learning to bear on global problems? What kinds of future universities would we like to see? The papers collected here offer specific responses to these questions. They are one part of an ongoing project to construct futures for higher education that escape the dominant forces shaping them today.

---

**KERI FACER** is professor of educational and social futures at the University of Bristol, where she works across disciplines on the relationships between education, futures, deep time, and environmental and technological change. She has just finished an edited collection, *Working with Time in Qualitative Research: Case Studies, Theory and Practice* (with Johan Siebers and Bradon Smith), is editor in chief of *Futures*, and has recently been working with UNESCO on its Futures of Education 2050 Commission. Her work is now turning toward the question of how to cultivate the “temporal imagination.”

**CHRISTOPHER NEWFIELD** is the author of a trilogy of books on higher education, the most recent being *The Great Mistake: How We Wrecked Public Universities and How We Can Fix Them*. A distinguished professor emeritus at the University of California, Santa Barbara, he is director of research at the Independent Social Research Foundation in London.

#### Notes

1. Van Lente, “Navigating Foresight.”
2. Unger, *False Necessity*; Levitas, *Utopia as Method*.
3. Andersson, *Future of the World*.
4. Appadurai, *Future as Cultural Fact*.
5. Andersson, *Future of the World*.
6. See for example UNESCO IAESLC, *Thinking Higher and Beyond*; for a critique of futures thinking in education, see Facer, “Futures in Education.”
7. Sharpe et al., “Three Horizons.”

### Works Cited

- Andersson, Jenny. *The Future of the World: Futurology, Futurists, and the Struggle for the Post-Cold War Imagination*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018.
- Appadurai, Arjun. *The Future as Cultural Fact: Essays on the Global Condition*. London: Verso, 2013.
- Facer, Keri. "Futures in Education: Towards an Ethical Practice." Paris: UNESCO, 2021. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000375792.locale=en>.
- Levitas, Ruth. *Utopia as Method: The Imaginary Reconstitution of Society*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.
- Sharpe, Bill, Anthony Hodgson, Graham Leicester, Andrew Lyon, and Ioan Fazey. "Three Horizons: A Pathways Practice for Transformation." *Ecology and Society* 21, no. 2 (2016): 47. <https://www.ecologyandsociety.org/vol21/iss2/art47/>.
- UNESCO IAESLC. *Thinking Higher and Beyond: Perspectives on the Futures of Higher Education to 2050*. Paris: UNESCO IZESLC, 2021.
- Unger, Roberto Mangabeira. *False Necessity: Anti-necessitarian Social Theory in the Service of Radical Democracy*. Vol. 1 of *Politics*. London: Verso, 2004.
- Van Lente, Harro. "Navigating Foresight in a Sea of Expectations: Lessons from the Sociology of Expectations." *Technology Analysis and Strategic Management* 24, no. 8 (2012): 769–82.