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Universities, their publics, and climate change

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Nearly 100 years ago, the American educational philosopher John Dewey wrote a book about how publics might work in a democratic society coming to grips with the implications of increasingly specialised knowledge. Publics, according to Dewey, have no pre-existence or a priori cause. Rather, they are called into being when three factors are in place: first, when the impacts of any situation or set of events are intellectually and emotionally appreciated by the various people they affect; second, when a shared interest is generated among different groups; who, third, then take action to address and regulate and attend to those impacts. "The public", Dewey wrote, "consists of all those who are affected by the indirect consequences of transactions to such an extent that it is deemed necessary to have those consequences systematically cared for." And when circumstances change, so too do those publics and their demands.[1]

In this chapter I argue that Dewey's notion of the public (or publics) might offer a way of thinking about and pressing for the purpose of universities in the context of the new historical circumstances arising from the impacts of climate change. More specifically, it might help clarify problems that universities confront, identify the public interest they share, and point to avenues for possible action. Doing so offers the possibility of renewing the public purpose underpinning the social contract, or settlement, between knowledge institutions, publics and the state.

John Dewey was not, of course, an advocate of classical social contract theory. He thought that seeing society as an aggregation of isolated individuals failed to attend to the actual historical origins of social and political institutions. There are, however, other ways of understanding the social contract as it pertains to universities, that are more compatible with Dewey's notion of society as an organism and his commitment to human beings as fundamentally social creatures constituted by and within common habits and institutions.[2] The higher education system that we have in Australia today reflects what, in Dewey's terms, might be thought of as the social arrangements for the care of knowledge that have arisen in response to the social and economic conditions of the last 40 years.

But these conditions have changed, and new arrangements are needed if the shared interest is to be served. The notion of a social contract, together with Dewey's concept of publics, pushes those who care about higher education to think more seriously about what the public purpose of universities is and who their constituencies are in these, our times. It pushes them to ask what shared interest they address, how it is perceived, and what mechanisms and agencies might be instituted to care for it.[3]

Universities are dynamic and vital institutions that across time have repeatedly adapted to changing contexts and reinvented themselves to meet the needs of new masters, new conditions and new publics.[4] How the social contract is redrawn at the start of the 21st century is of vital public importance. It is embedded in questions of power, democratic mandate and, ultimately, the ability of our societies to adapt to the profound and far-reaching challenges presented by climate change.

Universities, public good, and the social contract

As a concept in political theory the notion of a "social contract" has a deep genealogy that includes many contemporary approaches and critics.[5] But at its broadest and in the context of higher education, it might be understood, in Peter Maassen's words, as "the relationship between the state and its institutions, [which holds] that in order to form a social order there has to be a mutual understanding of, trust in, and commitment to the roles and responsibilities of all partners involved".[6] Rather than a formal treaty, a social contract in this sense is a largely unstated agreement about the distribution of obligations, benefits, content and purpose, which is negotiated and renegotiated in different eras under the pressures of new political and economic conditions: war, the ambitions of a monarch, religious rupture, technological change, nationalism, democratic society, economic imperatives.

Maassen is among the writers on higher education who, in the last two decades, have taken up this notion of the social contract as a way of redrawing the line between the university and the political realm. These scholars argue that for much of the 20th century, in return for public funding, universities created knowledge for the benefit of society. In addition, they trained new generations of scientists and professionals, most of whom would go to work in industry. Both these roles were seen as public goods, which benefited all members of society, and universities received status as well as funding in return for providing them. Industrial research, which was located outside the universities, took up the research discoveries made in the universities and translated them into the innovations on which economic growth was thought to depend. In between the two sat government science which, in Michael Gibbons' words, "fill[ed] the gap between the public good of the university science and the private good of industry".[7]

By the turn of the millennium, however, the economic, social, political and policy environment that underpinned this settlement shifted. The marketisation of higher education, the deindustrialisation of Western economies, the European Bologna integration process, and the growing biotechnology industry which saw the emergence of new sites of knowledge formation and new kinds of collaboration, all put pressure on the old arrangement. Universities, which increasingly looked like large corporations whose marketing documents emphasised the private, individual benefit of a degree, began to feel both public and political pressure to demonstrate their "impact" and value to society. Thinking in terms of a social contract that needed renewing proved attractive to many education scholars reflecting on these changes.

Two decades into the 21st century, the terms on which universities operate have shifted even more profoundly. The emergence of linked and granulated big data supercharged by digital platforms, the effects of COVID-19 and political responses to it, and above all the profound implications of climate change, have eroded the old arrangement that underlay universities' relationship to society on one hand, and the state on the other. For some time in Australia it has been evident that government higher education policy settings instituted at the end of the 1980s were no longer fit for purpose, and since the turn of the century, universities have increasingly relied on international student fees to supplement their income and fund research.[8] But both the pandemic-induced collapse of the international student market and lack of subsequent state support have significantly changed the terms on which universities in Australia operate and left many within the sector floundering.[9] The 2020 Job-ready Graduates Package (discussed in detail elsewhere in this collection) introduces a new operating environment for universities. In many ways it increases the focus on private value, whilst mapping out an even more utilitarian vision for higher education. Reduced public funding for tuition is linked more closely to government designated employment sectors, and the burden of tuition debt is carried more heavily by individuals. Research support, meanwhile, is predicated upon anticipated economic and social impact. On one view these changes reflect the former Coalition government's response to labour market pressures and the need to foster the nation's scientific and technical capacity, combined with its desire to reduce the public cost of the higher education system. But are they changes fit for purpose? Do they help address the common problems of our time?

Taking the long view on universities reveals big shifts in their relationship with the state on the one hand and their publics on the other. In Dewey's terms, it helps render the causes of their predicament intellectually and emotionally legible. When seen in the long view, universities are far from ivory towers. They are, and always have been, institutions that are intimately connected to economies and political processes, that have courted different constituencies in different contexts. This view enables those who care about universities to move beyond a defensive and oppositional position, towards acknowledgement of the need to change, and a preparedness to fight for the terms on which it will take place.

Universities in a climate changed world

Thinking about how publics are constituted helps us reckon with the societal demands of our era and points to the ways institutions like universities might help fashion a future that can meet these challenges. One set of imperatives will of course flow from the economic and social effects of COVID-19. But even more pressing for our generation and the generations that follow is climate change, the systems of social and ecological extraction that drive it, and the forms of adaptation and mitigation that it will require. Like the wars and ambitions of states and religious ruptures of the past, these processes are already fundamentally altering the conditions in which human society operates. They are reshaping what communities want and need and increasingly demand. They are making questions of distribution and access an urgent political imperative. This is not an imperative that the current policy settings for universities address, yet it is one that publics will increasingly insist is met.

Where does that leave universities? According to Dewey, governments alone do not set the terms in which institutions operate. Rather, both governments and institutions are constituted by publics to care for and meet a shared interest. If circumstances change and the arrangements put in place are no longer effective, then new arrangements will be required. Facing the implications of climate change presents universities with an opportunity (and indeed obligation) to rethink and reframe the way they understand and express their role and purpose and the source of their legitimacy. If during the 19th century, the public purpose of the university was to fashion a governing class, and during the 20th century it was, variously, to produce trusted knowledge, train professionals, fashion citizens and produce workers for a deregulated economy, then in the 21st century it might be to anchor communities in a climate changed world. Confronting the profound societal implications of the environmental crisis has the potential to open a new orientation and public purpose for the university.

What might publics demand of universities as our societies struggle to meet the consequences of the climate crisis? First, universities will be called on to become more sustainable. Where they invest their funds, who they partner with, what they consume, how they use their physical assets, and what they teach will increasingly be judged in terms of impact on the planet. Many institutions are already taking steps in this direction, with divestment action and the production of renewable energy key initiatives. But much more can and must be done when it comes to contracting and partnerships and curricula, and at a speed to match the urgency of the crisis. Moreover, teaching and research in all discipline areas must begin to engage with these imperatives.

Second, universities will be required to generate the knowledge and skills required to enable a positive societal transition to a lower emissions economy.[10] But producing expertise and technical advice will be only one aspect of this contribution, not least because university research is itself vulnerable to climate change. Expensive investments in certain infrastructure and equipment risks becoming stranded assets, as do some skills and competences.[11] Expertise that is not embedded in society – expertise that understands itself as telling people what they need or offering silver bullet solutions – is likely to fail. Serving communities confronting climate change will mean training those who care for and maintain human society. School teachers, nurses and medical professionals, social workers, biologists and librarians are just some of those who are explicitly charged with undertaking this work of caring and nurturing social as well as physical life systems. They will be key workers in a warming world: equally important, if not more, as those who strive to produce new technical solutions.

Third, universities will be asked to serve as holding environments for a society in flux.[12] They will be required to be institutions able to "handle coming contingencies and [help] . . . others do the same".[13] This means embracing their role as homes of meaning making, where stories are told and retold, uncertainty is named, and the norms of discussion, analysis and action are fostered – not only for those directly enrolled in university courses, but with and alongside the whole of society. As the effects of climate change reshape our cities and economies, support for, distribution of, and access to higher education will become political questions not only for individuals, but for the whole community.

This is not the vision for universities that is currently guiding higher education policy in Australia and universities alone cannot bring about a new settlement. But they can attend much more fully to the public that is already forming to demand a new set of arrangements that will better serve the common interest. Although governments have been slow to institute these arrangements, universities can themselves begin the work of drawing together the public who will demand them, by clearly articulating our society's shared predicament and identifying alternative pathways. As Wendy Steele and Lauren Rickards show in their recent book on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in higher education, this means recognising that universities have contributed to the systems that produce unsustainable development, and understanding that they have a crucial role to play in the maintenance, repair and regeneration required to support human society on this planet.[14] This has the capacity to renew their public purpose and help bring about a new social contract for higher education better suited to the needs of our time.

Renewing the social contract

The arrangements that were put in place to care for the consequences of late 20th century post industrial economies are no longer fit for purpose. New conditions, as Dewey wrote, "make the consequences of associated action and the knowledge of them different" in every age. New conditions demand new forms of organisation.[15] The terms on which universities will operate in the 21st century are not yet set, and that is because the most recent reforms do not acknowledge, let alone engage with, the existential challenge that is currently confronting human societies across the world.

This country is our common home. For better or for worse, we must live in it together. What kind of Australia do we want? How about a society which sustains and cares for each of us in our individual and collective joys and hardships, because together we sustain and care for it?

How about an economy that serves society and the planet rather than the other way round? Confronting the profound implications that climate change will have for all dimensions of our social and economic life has the capacity to renew the public legitimacy and purpose of universities in Australia. As these implications intensify, action is something that the many constituents of our higher education system will not just seek, but demand.

Notes

1 Dewey, John and Mervin L. Rogers (2016 [1927]). *The public and its problems: an essay in political inquiry*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 69, 77–82.

2 Dewey, John (1929). *Experience and nature*. London: George Allen & Unwin.

3 Dewey, *The public and its problems: an essay in political inquiry*, 78.

4 On publics, see Huber, Valeska and Jürgen Osterhammel, eds (2020). *Global publics: their power and their limits, 1870–1990*, *Studies of the German Historical Institute, London*. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press.

5 For an overview see D'Agostino, Fred, Gerald Gaus and John Thrasher (1996). Contemporary approaches to the social contract. *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. https://stanford.io/3AOOJM7.

6 Maassen, Peter (2014). A new social contract for higher education?. In Gaële Goastellec and France Picard eds. *Higher education in societies*. Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 36.

7 Gibbons, Michael (2005). Engagement with the community: the emergence of a new social contract between society and science. Community Engagement Workshop, Griffith University, 4 March 2005, 2.

8 Pietsch, Tamson (2020). A history of university income in the United Kingdom and Australia, 1922–2017. *History of Education Review* 49(2): 229–48.

9 Department of Education, Skills and Employment (2020). Job-ready Graduates Package Higher Education Reforms. Canberra: Department of Education, Skills and Employment. https://bit.ly/3ARyj5p.

10 Rickards, Lauren and Tamson Pietsch (2020). Climate change is the most important mission for universities of the 21st century. *The Conversation*, 4 June. https://bit.ly/3On8kGt.

11 Rickards, Lauren and James Watson (2020). Research is not immune to climate change. *Nature Climate Change* 10(3): 180–83.

12 For development of the notion of "public things" as holding environments, see Honig, Bonnie (2017). *Public things: democracy in disrepair*. New York: Fordham University Press.

13 Rickards and Pietsch, Climate change is the most important mission for universities of the 21st century.

14 Steele, Wendy and Lauren Rickards (2021). *The sustainable development goals in higher education: a transformative agenda?* Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan.

15 Dewey, *The public and its problems: an essay in political inquiry*, 80, 82.