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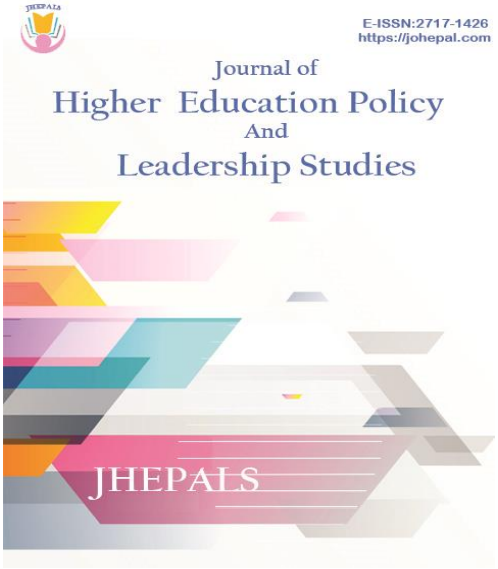


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# Towards Social Transformation: An Exploration of the Divergent Histories of Radicalism and Corporatizing Higher Education in Australia

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## Abstract

This article examines the continuing shift in higher education towards a corporate model under neoliberal policies, emphasising revenue and job readiness over social change. It highlights the historical role of students in campus activism for civil rights, Indigenous rights, and environmental issues, and how this is threatened by the corporatisation of universities. The article argues that the growing focus on corporate research partnerships, outputs, and international enrolments is leading to a more commercialised and capitalist education system, distancing universities from a role in addressing global challenges like climate change. It advocates for a renewed focus on transformative education, urging academics to work with students to develop organic intellectuals who apply knowledge to today's challenges. The article suggests that academics should support students as agents of social change, promoting transformative practices, rather than solely preparing them for the workforce. It acknowledges the challenges in shifting away from the current corporate idealism and calls for collective solidarity in reorienting higher education towards progressive social change. Ultimately, this article critically analyses the reluctance of higher education to embrace its potential as a tool for social transformation.

**Keywords:** Higher Education; Social Transformation; Neoliberalism; History of HE; Activism; Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Knowledge; Organic Intellectualism

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## Introduction

The tertiary education landscape in Australia has been subject to tectonic shifts over the last fifty years. Institutions have undergone radical shifts to the structure, funding models, value system, and purpose brought by successive generations of right wing governments and corporate vice chancellors and governance bodies (Boden & Rowlands, 2022; Bonnell, 2016; Brabazon, 2021b). Today, the workers of Australian higher education are stuck between a corporatised management structure, changing funding models which increasingly prioritise "job readiness", and a changing student body that frequently present as disengaged or "here with a purpose" (get in, get educated, get a job). While considered alone, these patterns are not new to the landscape, but the rapid rate of intensifying capitalist modalities in the higher education sector has become too much not to notice. The globalising trend in higher education is also of significance to the changing cultural landscape faced by academics and students alike. Here, we see increasing interconnectedness and interdependence of academic institutions upon economic institutions and concomitant uneven resource allocation and cultural homogenisation (Altbach, 2006; Van Der Wende, 2001; Zajda, 2020).

Moreover, with globalising institutions, we see a rise in the extractive tendency of "ivy" institutions pulling talent from the global south to the global north, and other more serious resource stripping in a movement not dissimilar to colonisation (Altbach, 2006). Under the increasingly catch-all phrase "neoliberalism", where free markets advance as *the* means to achieve human progress, higher education is also increasingly commodified (Brown, 2015; Harvey, 2005; Zajda, 2020). These high-level transformations of the last fifty years have pushed higher education globally through a range of internal structural shifts, which has weakened the hegemonic traditionalist mode reserved now for the top 10 institutions in a given nation. Instead, universities compete for the mainstream, seeking to win students from each other as a relatively lucrative modality of enhancing their research, construction and senior executive payroll budgets. Moreover, we see arbitrary divisions and disciplinary tribes drawing boundaries around their patch of theory and knowledge across environmental, digital, financial, social and legal domains which are, by and large, based on wrong stories and models (Yunkaporta, 2020) and are fundamentally extractivist, colonial and capitalist in nature (Andreucci, 2018; Fraser, 2022; Nakata et al., 2012). In a global landscape of catastrophic climate change, precarious and exploitative work, right wing radicalism, war and genocide, and ongoing neo-colonial projects, the conditions for students and faculty are looking dire (Brabazon et al., 2019; Cornelius-Bell & Bell, 2021; Fraser, 2022; Klein, 2015). As we look around the anglosphere, these catastrophes and challenges are being exacerbated by a university sector whose declared purpose is growth and student success, rather than transformation and deep thinking about the future. Our higher education systems are fundamentally broken, prone to paralysis, and closed to student and academic agency.

To understand how we arrived at this point, in this article we explore a high level history of the university sector in Australia, and take lessons from these periods to assert a resurgence of liberatory pedagogic models based on strong extant models proposed by radical educators the world over (Allman, 1994; Boomer, 1991; Connell, 2019; Freire, 1973; Giroux, 2002; hooks, 1994; Rigney, 2020; wa Thiong'o, 2000). At first, we begin with a sketch of the broad strokes of the mainstream history of Australia's higher education over the last

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fifty years. Here, we show how the institution has cyclically shifted in purpose and fundamental nature, yet still, waves of activist students and revolutionaries attempt at social transformation through the institution. We advance that this student-led activist future is what has been placed in jeopardy by contemporary intensification in the capitalist university. Then, drawing on the works of Italian theorist and Marxist, Antonio Gramsci, we explore, through juxtaposition with history, contemporary examples of the university as a site of social stasis, rather than catalyst for social change, we look to a political history of student activism to assert that we need only work in relation and solidarity with students to create a better collective future. And finally, we examine the possibility for change, and the pivotal role of decolonial theorists, such as Nakata and Yunkaporta, to create a collectively better future through education. We posit, ultimately, that we need to pay serious attention to how we are working in higher education in order to have a hope of staying relevant in what is an increasingly troubled, bourgeois, and static time – permitting conservative creep and climate change denial – however, we cannot dwell on a past "golden era" of the university, as we believe that this era was never truly realised. Now we turn to a mainstream history of the Australian university for explanatory theory of how politics keeps universities *occupied* rather than transformative.

## A Brief History of the Australian University Sector

Australian higher education is a colonial education system. From inception, the models of European, specifically British, higher education were brought to bear on unceded Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander lands, ignoring the 60,000 or more years of educational prowess that existed on the continent in strong reciprocal relation to Country. This travesty sets in motion an education system which is built on racism and the bones of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, through simultaneous processes of justifying colonialism and rationalising epistemicide (de Sousa Santos, 2014; Moreton-Robinson, 2011). While the colonial project is certainly not unique to Australia, with contemporary nations continuing colonial projects and settlers continuing to benefit from white hegemony, the recency of Australia's post-secondary education apparatus cannot be understated. The University of Sydney, Australia's oldest university, and a university which took substantial negotiation with Empire's governance to open, only formally commenced in 1852, just 171 years ago (Horne et al., 2012). From this origination point, we see universities acting as exclusive and elite spaces for bourgeois thinkers, professionals and traditional intellectuals to engage in insider knowledges and seek the continuation of the colonial capitalist project (Gramsci, 1996). This was typified until the 1970s, where changing attitudes in civil society led to political pressures to open tertiary education beyond the bourgeois and capitalist classes, enabling access to proletarian white (settler) men. From this period forward, the institutions were thrust into a maelstrom of sweeping changes, though, ultimately, settling on capitalist, extractivist, paternalist and colonial stasis rather than as sites of public discourse, social transformation, and revolutionary liberatory activity – hardly surprising given their origin (Amsler, 2016; Brabazon, 2021a; Federici, 2021; Fraser, 2022; Maddison, 2012). Over the years, the Australian academic landscape holds an observable pattern of disruption, but disruption towards complicity in capital's antihuman permutations, driven by waves of policy shifts, funding recalibrations and globalisation.

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### *Towards Social Transformation*

The 1970s heralded a new dawn for tertiary education in Australia. The Whitlam Era, emblematic of "progressive reforms" from a liberal frame, threw open the gates, enabling wider access to university education. With the abolition of university fees in 1973 came a form of democratised access to higher education for more Australians. In reducing economic barriers, the Whitlam reforms to higher education brought a "first wave" of new students, predominantly from the white male proletariat (Firth & Clark, 2022). For just 14 years, this educational freedom empowered a wave of first in family students to access education and saw a marked increase in the overall number of universities in the country. While some advance that Gough Whitlam boosted education opportunities and national confidence in government, successive transformations by Labor and Liberal/National governments have eroded much of this faith, and with it brought substantive changes which deviated from the now privileged position of participation in free education.

In the 1980s, the Dawkins Reforms landed in the country. Driven by the then education minister John Dawkins, the higher education sector was "reshaped": structurally and in educational content and model. Dawkins believed that by having universities subsume technical colleges of advanced education, a new identity could be formed for these institutions: a job ready identity (Bessant, 2002; Dawkins, 2013). Gone with these merges and model shifts was the dream of free tertiary education. The latter part of this decade saw the resurrection of "student contributions" through the introduction of the Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS) (Birch & Miller, 2006; Marks, 2009). This major shift towards paid education and student debt continues in contemporary Australian higher education and was a seismic collapse of the briefly open university. Dawkins also held the conservative view that universities should be involved in research for commercial ends, and his legacy of thinking has impacted the nature of "free inquiry" to date. Notably, Dawkins himself has commented on the contemporary use of these reforms to frame higher education, speaking disparagingly about how out of date these changes are in contemporary times, though he holds that these motions were right at the time (Croucher et al., 2013; Dodd, 2016).

The introduction of "learn now, pay later", however, did not eradicate participation in university life from the Australian populous, and across the 1980s and 1990, women began to enter tertiary education (Forsyth, 2015; Theobald, 1996). This marked the second major expansion after the end of the 1960s (Forsyth, 2014). The 1990s marked continued "dramatic expansion", as institutions began competing for students in the face of a globalising world and a rewrite of the DNA of the institutions towards competition, expansion and individualism. Australian universities, in the style of their European forebears, which were briefly insular bastions of knowledge reserved for cultural elite, began to admit international students for extremely high fees. This internationalisation transformed higher education into a "service export", inextricably connecting Australia's academic fabric with global economic shifts (Deem, 2001; Pratt & Poole, 1999; Zajda, 2020). Moreover, a concomitant surge in postgraduate coursework programs created further inexorable links between the institution and the job market, positioning the university as an "industry" intimately connected with the production of knowledge for work. This dawning of human capital development in universities remains in the contemporary institution, and while this can be harnessed for transformative activity, the economic model of the tertiary institution

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is by and large one of radical individualism and entrepreneurialism at a serious cost to humanitarianism and social consciousness (Brown, 2015).

The new millennium brought steady increases in the globalising activities of Australian universities. In 2007, the introduction of the Higher Education Endowment Fund (HEEF) cemented the one-way relationship between infrastructure and academia, building on research funding reforms of the 1970s. Alongside booming technologies across the 2000s, universities who had previously engaged in distance education pivoted to online education models (Berge, 1995; Christopher et al., 2004). Broadly, the accessibility of the bourgeois bloc to new technologies enabled a democratisation of learning through online models, distinguishable from contemporary models, but nonetheless allowing for widening participation in the regions from the middle class. Research saw further changes, and with a global proliferation of league tables and quality assessments, Australia had to follow, introducing the Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) which, supposedly, emphasised both research quality and social impact; yet, these policy changes saw this unequally applied, favouring particular research fields and male researchers (Lipton, 2020; Marginson, 1993, 1999; Welsh, 2021).

Through the 2010s, the tertiary sector saw yet more systematic shifts to funding models and a choke hold on purse strings. The demand-driven funding model (2010-2017) saw student enrolment enter the hands of universities through a markedly neoliberal policy and the result of strong pushes in government for deregulation amidst other "small government" changes (Stokes & Wright, 2012). As a result of this deregulating, in a vie for regaining some control, in 2011 the government instantiated the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA), which aimed to add a layer of "quality assurance" as an external enforcement of "academic excellence" (Gora, 2010; Grierson, 2013). While these were defined in neoliberal and capitalistic terms, they hold little actual power at the teaching and learning interface, and largely act as a governance checkbox in institutions today. The power of the "regulator" has potentially empowered more agency in the classroom, as universities abstract the quality assurance away from academics into compliance centres in administrative portfolios (Cornelius-Bell & Bell, 2021; Jayasuriya, 2020). However, with the end of the 2010s, a new global challenge emerged, and this brought significant challenges to all quarters – a global pandemic.

In the 2020s, the COVID-19 pandemic cast a long shadow, exacting a massive human toll, and disrupting traditional teaching and research models, forcing deeper focus on online learning (Adnan & Anwar, 2020; Aristovnik et al., 2020; Azorín, 2020; Cornelius-Bell & Bell, 2021). Simultaneously, in Australia, nearly a decade of right wing government saw changing federal funding models, which precipitated rising course fees across the humanities, arts, social sciences, law, and some other professional disciplines, with a pendulum swing towards "job readiness" once again – this time holding its ground as a strong neoliberal magnet demanded stasis (Brett, 2021; Norton, 2020). Ironically, given the "small government" vitriol of the Liberal/National party, the paradigm of free market decision by the universities was again evaporated in favour of federal caps on university places and strong government intervention in what kinds of education and research were valuable, alongside a purported focus on "equity of access" (Productivity Commission, 2019). With a change in government, a broader focus on the weaving of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges became "popular" in some institutions. However, with Australia's

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profoundly racist "no" vote at the recent referendum to recognise a First Nations Voice in parliament, this was but another flash in the pan without sustained activity from academics and students to acknowledge and centre the profound wisdom of Australia's First Nations peoples.

Across the last 50 years, we have seen cyclical and occasionally transformative thinking grow in Australia's universities through government and governance arms. However, this is not the centre for transformation, but rather a representation of the hegemonic views of the capitalist ruling class, and these broad changes are not dissimilar to the patterns in other colonised nations. For example, in Canada, the trajectory of higher education mirrors several of the changes to the Australian tertiary landscape. Both countries have been shaped by intersecting forces of globalisation, capitalism and national politics. Like their Australian counterparts, Canadian universities have faced waves of transformative policy interventions over the past 50 years. Beginning with the 1970s and 1980s, Canada saw an expansion of its higher education sector, driven by both provincial and federal funding. This growth, not dissimilar to Australia's tertiary expansion under the Whitlam reforms, democratised access to higher learning. However, as the turn of the millennium approached, neoliberal tendencies began to permeate Canadian higher education, echoing the corporatisation trends in Australia (Giroux, 2005, 2014; Marginson, 2016). The significant emphasis on research and international student enrolment, reminiscent of Australia's own international student boom in the 1990s, made education both a commodity and an export product (Bond & Lemasson, 1999; Zajda, 2020). Notably, Indigenous voices in both nations have increasingly sought rightful recognition and centring in academic spaces, pushing against the persistence of colonial legacies (Aikenhead & Elliott, 2010; Kennedy et al., 2023; Stein et al., 2021). These parallel developments, underscored by capitalist modalities and a globalising impulse, have shaped the contemporary higher education sectors of both Canada and Australia, raising urgent questions about the future direction, purpose and values of universities in both nations. However, this gives us a one-sided picture of the political forces present in universities, and while historians follow the "victors" in these settings, to ignore the political power of students in the university sector is to do a disservice and a mistruth to the nature and role of higher education.

## A Political History of Students in the University

Students have played a critical role in the transformation of the university and its unique positionality in the public sphere over decades. Since the opening of the higher education institution in the late 1960s, political activism has been a hallmark of the student body, and the impacts of this radicalism has been felt globally. This has occurred in spite of the cyclical and often regressive changes to higher education in the policy and governance spheres. Indeed, in many instances, students have allied together to resist the impending changes to higher education sewed by government and corporate councils (Hastings, 2003). Importantly, students' political activism, while connected with student unions and performative politics, is often entirely separate from the political machinations of would-be future politicians (Cornelius-Bell, 2021). This demonstrates a separation in the higher education context between civil and political society in the Gramscian sense, and shows higher education institutions as microcosms of broader societal milieux (Gramsci, 1996;

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Spivak, 2012). While the quantity of student activism and political movements is demanding of a book, there are several pivotal movements and events present across the past 50 years. Ranging from civil rights and equality (Collins, 2019; Marshall, 2013), through to contemporary #BlackLivesMatter and #MeToo movements (DeVitis & Sasso, 2019), and against cuts to funding for student places and human rights to safety and shelter (Bourg, 2017; Hendrickson, 2022), student activism has been a driving force of social discourse for generations. Ranging in affective level of transformation against the artifice of hegemonic thought, radicalism of students has often been overwritten across mainstream histories of universities, and thus muted the ripples of transformative thinking carried through generations. Here, we now turn to a brief exploration of some mainstream student activism in Australia over the last 50 years.

The late 1960s and early 1970s marked the emergence of strong student voices in opposition to Australia's involvement in the Vietnam War (Cornelius-Bell, 2021; Saunders, 1977). University campuses were transformed into hubs of resistance, setting the tone for subsequent decades of advocacy. Assignments and lectures gave way to sit-ins and productive organising of rallies, petitions, manifestos and ideating for social change (Hastings, 2003). Concomitant with free education in the mid 1970s, the opening of tertiary education enabled worker-student alliances (Cornelius-Bell, 2021), which fuelled new waves of protest and recognition of the oppressive forces of capitalism. The actual policy shift to free education was met with broad student acclaim and sparked vigorous advocacy for its retention. Here, students were united, following Murphy, "by their common identity as students" (Murphy, 2015, p. 257), giving rise to substantial connectivity between students who may not have held a great deal in common otherwise. This identity-forming and relationship-building remains a common trait of student collective action over generations, however the uniting power of pacifism against the Vietnam war, and the threat of another rise of global fascism, saw an allegiance of students which had, until then, been impossible.

In the 1980s, further geopolitical concerns rose, and students increasingly rallied against the Cold War backdrop. Seeing the propagandist and imperialist nature of both the United States and the then USSR pushed students towards revitalised pacifism and global peace movements. In the early 1980s, students drove a groundswell of anti-nuclear sentiment, particularly opposing the potential storage of nuclear weapons and the presence of U.S. military bases in Australia (Cornelius-Bell, 2021). By the latter half of the decade, domestic issues took centre stage as the introduction of the Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS) in 1989 faced student backlash (Hastings, 2003; Meek, 2002). This was rightfully perceived as a retreat from the brief era of free tertiary education, triggering widespread protests, particularly in relation to equity and access. Here, students built on their predecessors' activism of the previous decade, where there had been an impulse of recognising women, ethnic diversity and disability, albeit largely for paternalistic reasons, towards full scale protest for egalitarian access to education as a human right (Cornelius-Bell, 2021). Moreover, students became increasingly concerned with recognising Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and after Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander activists criticised an overwhelming interest in the South African apartheid during the late 1960 and 70s, with a lack of attention domestically, a new focus on recognising First Nations came to the fore off the back of formal recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples'

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humanity (Cornelius-Bell, 2021; Hastings, 2003; Murphy, 2019). Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, students played a pivotal role in protests aimed at raising awareness about land rights, the enduring impacts of the Stolen Generations, and rising deaths in custody.

The 1990s saw further embedding of the issues of civil society in the psyche of the student activist bloc. Early in the decade, growing advocacy for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander rights continued, particularly prominent during the lead up to the Mabo decision in 1992. Often led by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander activists, this collective consciousness-raising effort saw a landmark in acknowledging land rights (Foley, 2000). However, the assimilatory and appropriative nature of some activists showed again how far Australia needs to go to understand the rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to land, culture, self-determination and treaty (Foley, 2000; Watson, 2009). Concurrently, the decade's latter years were marked by recurring student demonstrations against escalating university fees and growing deregulation of the higher education sector, a direct conflict between the microcosm of civil society represented in student activism and the state in the form of legislature of direct reform to, what students perceived, as their right to education (Cornelius-Bell, 2021).

The 2000s, again, saw students turning their attention to global concerns. In 2003, Australian campuses were home to dissenters opposing the Iraq War and Australia's participation in it. However, the 2000s also brought new forms of activism which were less "demonstrative", and began to see rising proto-crowd funding and use of emergent internet technologies to raise awareness on key issues (Bennett, 2003; Grenfell, 2005). On the domestic front, protest erupted with the Liberal/National party driving a change to student unions in the form of "voluntary student unionism" and the death of the independent student union and the separation of "student support services" (student controlled canteens, stores and sports) to university run services (Rochford, 2006). The 2010s triggered a revitalisation of student activism after the cuts to student unions. The middle of the decade saw significant student opposition to the Abbott government's proposed higher education reforms, which threatened to deregulate university fees (Briton, 2014; Cornelius-Bell, 2021). By the decade's end, the global climate crisis served as a significant catalyst to student activism, both in the school and tertiary sectors, with tertiary students playing instrumental roles in nationwide climate strikes and advocating for climate action (Alexander et al., 2022; Thackeray et al., 2020; Verlie & Flynn, 2022).

The 2020s, however, have seen a substantial transformation to the landscape of student activism influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite changing conditions of modality in activist possibility, students continue to shed light on the vulnerabilities of international students, many grappling with financial and housing challenges as a result of policy changes (Amoah & Mok, 2022; Nguyen & Balakrishnan, 2020). Furthermore, university and governments' mishandling and countermeasures to pandemic-induced funding shortfalls saw massive course and staffing cuts and these have been met with vocal student protests – manifesting primarily online and through collective action in different modes of communication and conversation (Cornelius-Bell, 2021; Cornelius-Bell & Bell, 2021).

We can see the inextricable connection between the governmental and corporate governance of the university and student's activism therein throughout the two broad timelines presented above. Students often react to changing social conditions, and while

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some of these centre on their own education and access to resources, often their rebellion is inspired by broader moves in civil society towards recognition, equal rights and social progress. Notably, students continue to fight for recognition of LGBTQI+ rights, the centring of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices, fair and reasonable accommodations for students with disability, and a recognition of the difficulties facing students in a global climate which sees increasing right-wing extremism and economic conservatism. By depicting the university's governance and policy arms as an extension of political society, and seeing students struggles against these transformations and aggressions as manifestations of the microcosm of civil society, we can realise a Gramscian understanding of the role of social change seen in our institutions (Cornelius-Bell, 2021; Gramsci, 1996). Next, we turn to the conspicuously absent narrative around academics' agency and possibility between these "poles" of society to examine how academics can work towards building capacity amongst students, allying themselves with contemporary issues, and supporting good praxis despite the weight of corporate governance, against a static role in traditional intellectuality (Gramsci, 1996).

## Academic Agency and Social Transformation

In contemporary academia, perfected pressures from management and external pressures from government and industry position academics in a stasis (Brown, 2015; Giroux, 2014). Commonly, this is articulated as a top-down force, which emphasises reproducing the status quo: the curriculum containing history, theory and elaborations in practice informed largely by capitalist modalities (c.f. Abowitz, 2008; Freire, 2014; Udas & Stagg, 2019). If we read the two accounts above – the history and the political history – as divergent from a singular corporate narrative, one of which is much more strongly emphasised in accounts about and from the university, we can see an articulation of hegemonic narrative about the nature and purpose of the institution as a tool for (human) capital (reproduction) (Brown, 2015; Slaughter, 2021). However, we can also see divergent story, perhaps "good story", as Yunkaporta (2020) might argue, emerging as an alternative which centres social progress, transformation and education for collective liberatory ends. Of course, we can read this narrative as a victory of the corporate and culturally static, or we can take heart in seeing the continued nexus of activity in our universities as sites of constant possibility for educative models which centre activism and social change. Here, academics have a choice. Admittedly, many academics are descendants of bourgeois relations, often benefitting from Eurocentric Anglo hegemony, and so do not count themselves amongst the activists. However, from our work with academics across several institutions, we have found that the catalyst for social transformation sits just one "all-staff" meeting away. Here, we assert a necessity for those with privileged locality in the institution to take steps towards sparking radical agency, even if carefully, to emphasise the possibility of practitioner agency.

At the heart of any institutional change lies the agency of the practitioner: us, as academics. We must acknowledge and harness the power workers can hold within the academic frame to bring about transformative shifts. This agency forms the crux of our capacity to reimagine and reshape the academic institution from within, but we can only achieve this through a negotiated and meaningful solidarity. To build on this capacity, we advance that we must partner with students (Cornelius-Bell & Bell, 2020), whose direct

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connectivity with civil society lends them an authenticity towards organic intellectuality (Gramsci, 1996; Spivak, 2012). Engaging with students, who, as we have highlighted, have a profound connection to contemporary societal issues, aligns us as academics with a radical impulse. By forming an alliance with this (mostly younger) generation, we create a symbiotic relationship, bridging the traditional and contemporary, and merging the lecture theatre with real-world activism.

As bearers of knowledge, we must transcend Antonio Gramsci's notion of the "Traditional Intellectual" (Gramsci, 1996). This dangerous positionality sees us as thoughtless reproducers of (humans for) capital, a modality we must desperately depart from. Instead, we should aspire to inspire students towards organic intellectuality, where they not only consume knowledge, but also produce, challenge and reformulate it, connecting their learning with their already diverse lived experiences. At this nexus, the "job readiness" takes on a new perspective, where students become "job ready" to challenge the status quo and collectively negotiate a better world for themselves and their peers as they graduate (Cornelius-Bell & Bell, 2023). As academics, we possess troves of social and scientific theory that holds the potential to change the world. Against the current backdrop of widespread misinformation, our duty is to ensure that truth and rigorous scholarly theory are championed as essential tools to counteract falsehoods and construct a better world. However, we must also make space, holding our ideas loosely, for lived experience and learning from others, in particular learning from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge holders, whose knowledge has been extracted from, misrepresented and ignored systematically by the raced academy for decades (Nakata, 2007; Yunkaporta, 2009).

As we persistently adhere to the apolitical narrative that paints universities as mere sites of reproduction, we accelerate our march towards irrelevance. What purpose does the academy serve if it reproduces dated theory and practice which, with its locus in political society, has rendered us into a capitalist corner, facing heat death and global fascism? With younger generations increasingly disengaging from traditional intellectuals and extant frameworks, our role is to foster environments that resonate with their lived experiences and aspirations. Rather than producing "silent generations", it remains imperative that we engage with younger people; not depicting them as inactive and disengaged, but supporting them on an educative journey towards liberation (Freire, 1973, 2014; hooks, 1994). By harnessing their liberatory impulses, concerns and capacities, we can rejuvenate cultural studies, breathe life into sociological theories, and promote the application of scientific wisdom for a brighter future.

As academic staff, our unique position within the institution equips us to spearhead change. Rather than lamenting student disengagement, our mission should be to craft modes of intrigue and engagement that resonate with younger generations. By doing so, we can co-create a revolutionary vision of the academic institution and society. Moreover, without a consistent emphasis on activism, transformation and possibility, we risk succumbing to narratives that weaponise the academy against liberatory objectives – as has been the case since their colonial dawning in Australia. Historically, corporatising, neoliberal and capitalist agendas have sidelined genuine transformative efforts. However, the silver lining lies in appropriating the hollow promises of corporate slogans to fuel genuine social change, a strategy student activists have employed for generations (Cornelius-Bell & Bell, 2023; Hastings, 2003).

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We face continuous opportunity, unparalleled in history, to centre the knowledge and experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples across the curriculum. Simultaneously, partnerships with LGBTQI+ communities and organisations can pave the way for a more inclusive and egalitarian educational environment. Awaiting corporate governance to take the reins will only result in superficial progress and failed reintegration of these important movements into capitalist progress (c.f. Smialek, 2021). The onus is on us to ensure that transformative agendas are not reduced to mere taglines. The real change is rooted in genuine effort and collaboration. Through our interconnectedness, collective solidarity and collaborative efforts with students and colleagues, we have the potential to redefine academia. The solutions to our challenges do not lie in external saviours, but in our proactive efforts to shape a more inclusive and effective education system.

## Conclusion

In this article, we have shown that the tertiary education landscape in Australia has been subject to dramatic change over the last 50 years. However, we have also explored how these developments have been largely cyclical and that a "golden era" has never truly emerged in Australian higher education. The impulse to return to a glowing past has clouded our collective judgement about the possibility of liberatory change, which can be achieved through a higher education system that works to foster solidarity and collective action. Our institutions have suffered cuts, funding model changes, rewrites of the value system for teaching and research, and endured successive generations of right-wing governments and conservative vice chancellors and corporate councils (Boden & Rowlands, 2022; Bonnell, 2016; Brabazon, 2021b). However, these changes – depicting admittedly bleak contemporalities – have never truly prohibited academic agency and show us a microcosm of the broader realities of civil society.

Collectively, the world has been subject to a rising tide of conservatism and right-wing radicalism, the erosion of human rights, mounting political pressures, increasing wars and dangerous global conditions (Binder & Wood, 2013; Brabazon et al., 2019; Brabazon, 2021b; Brown, 2015; Cornelius-Bell & Bell, 2023; Giroux, 2014; Slaughter, 2021). Higher education, across the last 50 years, has largely acted as a silent bystander to this intensification of global capitalism. Rather than building on the power of collectivism, activism and social liberation we know is possible through education, we have seen an asserted continuation of "skills" education and a primacy of (capitalist) reproduction (Bunn et al., 2020; Freire, 2014). Any rebellion against this adherence to the status quo, even from would-be radical academics, is constantly forestalled by the rewritten narratives of higher education as sites of production – grist for the capitalist mill. We have argued here that working collectively, bridging student concerns and staff knowledge and capabilities, offers radical possibility for new forms of informed, relevant and necessary transformation through the higher education apparatus. Ultimately, we have advanced that academics can better partner with students to promote organic intellectualism and apply knowledge to challenges of today. There remains space for illustrations of fulsome modalities of this mode, and we develop our own praxis towards a collective solidarity in our teaching and research praxis, in the hope that we may empower students as agents of positive social change rather than just preparing them for the job market. If universities are to remain relevant in tackling global

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crises, a renewed interest in, and realisation of, engaged, transformative education is needed.

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The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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## Human Participants

Human participants were not consulted or otherwise involved in this research. The work also meets the ethical guidelines of the journal.

## Originality Note

The authors confirm that the manuscript is their original work, and if others' works are used, they are properly cited/quoted.

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