

An alternative Sustainability Charter for the University of Melbourne

Context:

Planet Earth has entered a geological period termed the “Anthropocene” in which the biggest effects on the planet’s physical and biological systems are now predominantly due to human activity.

As a global society, we are massively disrupting many fundamental life-support systems, including: the climate; movements of water, nutrients and toxins; and the integrity of landscapes, habitats, soils and biotic communities.

We are responsible for what is considered to be the 6th planetary-wide mass-extinction event since the emergence of life on Earth. This is from the combined effects of chemical pollution, ozone depletion, global warming, ocean acidification, collapse of fisheries, sea level rise, deforestation, destruction of arable land, disrupted hydrological, phosphorous and nitrogen cycles, and rising population, which alone and together profoundly challenge the capacity of all life, including human society, to be sustained.

These changes may trigger civilizational collapse within a matter of decades, or sooner.

As we humans render the planet much less habitable at an accelerating rate, we endanger our own future as a species. Hence we face an emergency of unprecedented scale.

Causes:

Much of this planetary destruction has occurred through the expansion of trade, commerce, colonialism, science, technology, industrialisation, digitisation and globalisation - paradoxically in the name of civilizational improvement or development, which has culminated in a Great Acceleration of these processes, and their associated effects. The speed and extent of this expansion and destruction has largely been fuelled by geological fossil deposits, which embody hundreds of millions of years of the sun’s stored energy which we are releasing at break-neck speed (a couple of centuries). This has enabled an arrogant belief in humanity’s superiority relative to the rest of the life-world, or “environment.” Also there is a widespread promotion of acquisitiveness and consumerism, leading to practices of overconsumption sometimes referred to as “affluenza” and generating widespread instances of waste, obesity, depression, etc. Concurrently, disparities between rich and poor have increased, as have apparent levels of generalised fear, anxiety, and vulnerability. A chilling example is the development of military capacity, including atomic, biological and drone weaponry, the resultant spread of unpredictable violence across the globe, and increasing numbers of refugees.

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Responses:

To genuinely address this massive socio-ecological challenge, a whole-of-society mobilisation and transformation is required. This requires the abandonment of many current dominant beliefs and practices that have led us to our current predicament. They include: a belief that technology alone will resolve our problems; short-sightedness; selfishness; the profit motive; economic growth; and violence (to human and non-human beings).

In their place more holistic, altruistic and compassionate principles must come to the fore; they are elaborated below.

Social systems do not last forever, and humanity now finds itself in a quandary both in terms of social justice and environmental sustainability issues which are intricately interrelated because the existing global economy permits massive inequalities to existing resources and denies they are limited.

At this critical juncture in history on a planet with over 7 billion people, it is imperative that we learn to live in harmony with each other and the planet. Aside of what we might want to call it, humanity is in desperate need for an alternative world system, one based upon social justice and parity, democratic processes, environmental sustainability, and a safe climate.

Theoretically and practically, institutions such as the University of Melbourne are very well placed to make a significant contribution to such an endeavour, but only if they are more willing to be centres of critical thinking, and not be as integrated with the current global political economy as they are today.

The role of universities:

Universities (and other educational institutions) are important places of teaching and learning that play a crucial role in understanding and shaping society's physical, social and economic practices. Through their contributions to the knowledge and skills required for the development of some technologies and intellectual and professional practices, universities have in many ways contributed to the current problems described above. But they can also contribute to the great socio-ecological turning that is now required to create a truly sustainable society.

A sustainable and just society:

A sustainable and just society strives to enable all people to meet their needs and enhance their well-being, whilst respecting and repairing the non-human world, so as to maintain

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(and where necessary regenerate), cherish and support a biodiverse, life-enhancing and resilient biosphere into the foreseeable future.

A sustainable university:

A sustainable university prioritises the development and sharing of knowledge, skills, dispositions and practices which are necessary for the creation and maintenance of a sustainable society. This includes all aspects of the university's activities, including research, teaching, engagement, operations and/or investments.

Principles:

A sustainable society, and hence university, is oriented by the following principles:

Foresight – working to long timeframes, and considering the consequences of our actions for many future generations, so as to minimise any possible future harm

Ecological solidarity – recognising our interconnectedness and interdependence with all living things, hence a moral responsibility to treat them with care and respect

Peace – rejecting violence and the threat of violence as a means to resolve conflict between people; avoiding violence towards non-human beings, landscapes, sea-scapes and the atmosphere

Justice – for all to enjoy a relatively peaceful, secure, meaningful and plentiful life: fair, egalitarian, utilitarian, distributive, and procedural

Democracy – for all to participate equally in the decisions that affect them; an active and participatory process in all spheres of life; work, leisure, local communities, and broader society

A steady state economy – one that permits economic growth for the most disadvantaged people but that requires economic de-growth for the affluent sectors of humanity

Simplicity – living simply so that others (human and non-human) may simply live; that is to meet our basic material needs, without excess, and hence with minimal negative disruption to the wider life-world

Commitments:

The University of Melbourne:

- recognises the severity of the ecological crisis we currently face;
- strives to enable all people to meet their needs and enhance their well-being, whilst respecting and repairing the non-human world, so as to maintain (and where necessary regenerate), cherish and support a biodiverse, life-enhancing and resilient biosphere;

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- applies the principles of foresight, ecological solidarity, peace, justice, democracy, steady state economics and simplicity to all its activities;
- prioritises the development and sharing of knowledge, skills, dispositions and practices which are necessary for the creation and maintenance of a sustainable society. This will include all aspects of the university's activities, including research, teaching, engagement, operations and/or investments;
- develops, adopts and models holistic measures for the accounting and allocating of resources and activities according to their environmental impacts, such as the ecological footprint calculator;
- gives highest priority to research, teaching, engagement, operations and/or investments which directly address the current ecological emergency outlined in the preamble, and is aimed at the creation of a more sustainable society;
- continues to support activities which don't directly address pressing socio-ecological challenges (but doesn't exacerbate them), for example in theoretical, documentary, analytical and artistic endeavours; and
- avoids, and if currently practiced, then will rapidly phase out, any research, teaching, engagement, operations and/or finances that worsen the current ecological emergency, such as the mining, distribution, sale and burning of fossil fuels.

Conclusion:

All places of teaching, learning and research, including the University of Melbourne, must be at the heart of the global effort to successfully address our current socio-environmental emergency, and help to create a genuinely sustainable society. Hence we might hope that there will be many future generations that may look back appreciatively on our efforts. The challenge is great, but so is our capacity. May we truly *postera crescam laude*.

- Arnaud Gallois and Hans Baer, 11 December 2015

Endorsed by the University of Melbourne branch of the NTEU

Any comments or suggestions, please email:

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