Diagnosing the Social Innovation Challenge in Universities

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Abstract

This opinion piece emerges from a talk given at the Ashoka Changemaker Education Research Forum in Halifax, Nova Scotia, in September 2022, in response to an invitation for researchers, practitioners, and students to share experiences highlighting cultural, geopolitical, and structural barriers to social innovation. Premised on the urgency of profound and cascading global social challenges, the article is a practice-informed reflection on what components universities struggle with in delivering strong social innovation learning – including interdisciplinarity, systems thinking, changemaking orientations, and deep community engagement. The evolutionary layers of the human brain are used as analogs for the evolutionary layers of the university, from monastic cloisters to modern market-oriented, research-driven institutions. Informed specifically by the Canadian public university context, this article concludes on a hopeful note, musing about how nascent efforts to decolonize and indigenize the academy potentially hold the most promise for reforming and retrofitting universities to be substantially better equipped to nurture social innovation learning.

Background and Context

I came to academia[1] after two decades working in the social impact sector, variously also referred to as the community, non-profit, or philanthropic sector. I was – and remain – excited about the potential of higher education to "transform lives, strengthen communities and find solutions to the most pressing challenges facing our world," to quote the mission of Universities Canada, the umbrella organization for universities in Canada.[2] Now, after nearly a decade of experience advocating for, implementing, and retooling social innovation programs in a university context, I have come to an unsettling conclusion: Social innovation learning happens largely *in spite of* the dominant systems, cultures, and norms of academia.

Looking out across the landscape of advanced education, the prognosis for social innovation to flourish is bleak. Where promising social innovation learning in universities does occur (and this includes research, teaching, service, and community engagement), it is mainly by accident or by outliers and mavericks. But not all is lost. I offer here a diagnosis, unpeeling decades and centuries of layers that burden current institutional norms. I do not offer a treatment or a cure other than to hint at some possible practice-informed directions that hold promise.

Context

It took me a while before I realized just how unusual I was – a non-faculty manager without a Ph.D. or decorated academic career running a university-based institute mandated to work on complex, vexing topics and challenges. Many people like me exist *outside* of academia – running NGOs, foundations, think tanks, public sector policy shops, private sector community investment and ESG portfolios, and so on. But far more rarely within academia, where university-based Institutes are almost always headed by tenured or tenure-track faculty.

This critique is written amid a background of deep appreciation for the liberal arts[3] and an acknowledgment that academia can be deeply fulfilling work. To be in a classroom with students questioning the status quo, yearning for social change, and developing tools, skills, confidence, and networks to enact change is profoundly thrilling work, unsettling and uplifting in equal measure. This critique is informed mainly by experiences within the Canadian *public university* context and glosses over much of the nuance that already exists in post-secondary education, for example, between community colleges, polytechnics, liberal arts colleges, and large research-oriented institutions.[4] I am fortunate to work at a public institution that values teaching innovation, rooted in the liberal arts, and that grew out of a community college, a place that had cultivated a civic reputation amid an ever-present public expectation to be pragmatic and community-focused. But large-scale patterns are nonetheless discernable across most of the higher education landscape, particularly within public universities (of which there are approximately 90 in Canada[5]). And the overall diagnosis is that, on balance, academic-driven higher education is frozen in the face of the current epoch that humanity finds itself in.

This contemporary period of the Anthropocene[6] is marked by wave after wave of global challenges, each of which threatens to derail or reverse social, economic, environmental, or scientific progress, if not civilization itself. Thomas Homer Dixon of the Cascade Institute refers to this as the *global polycrisis*.[7] In this time of exponential non-linear change, rapid social innovation is an existential imperative. Paraphrasing Frances Westley's definition of social innovation[8], humanity requires a countervailing cascade of initiatives (new products, processes, programs, projects, or platforms) that challenge and change the defining routines, resource flows*,* authority dynamics, and conventional assumptions and beliefs of broader social systems.

To help guide this diagnosis, I want to pose three simple questions:
- What do we need universities to be (and why)?
- Why are we falling short?
- What can we do about this?

Questions, Reflections, and Discussion: What Do We Need Universities to Be (And Why)?

The scale and complexity of our social challenges mean that virtually every kind of organization – from the smallest local retail business to the largest multinational corporation, from grassroots community groups to multilateral bodies – must adapt their priorities, capabilities, mindsets, and modalities (and often radically so). Never has there been so much recognition of "failing systems" or maladapted institutional models – long-term care, emergency care, affordable housing, and upstream and downstream food security, just to name a few.[9] But how has post-secondary learning not yet been captured in this net of deep introspection?[10] What is academia doing concretely to step up our game in this hyper-VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous) world? Are universities the engines of innovation, especially social and ecological innovation, that students and communities expect them to be? Three perspectives outlined following are worth considering, respectively, from Canadian business students, the social innovation practitioner community in Canada, and thought leaders working to advance changemaking[11] and social entrepreneurship globally:

As *Regeneration*, a coalition of 40 Canadian student and youth organizations, points out, Canadian students are not generally taught about the scale of the problems we face as a society or as a planet, or about what we can collectively do to address these problems effectively.[12] They add that higher education is failing to prepare students to work toward equitable, sustainable, and thriving communities.

A 2018 study commissioned by Social Innovation Canada, "exploring a future pathway for social innovation in Canada, based on feedback from 750 individuals," makes no mention of universities (other than the University of Waterloo's role in helping provide scholarly frameworks for some early social innovation thinking).[13] In other words, universities are not seen by practitioners as part of the "social innovation ecosystem."

This was echoed by Ashoka Founder Bill Drayton, who led the 'nay' side at an Oxford Union Debate entitled *The Role of Universities in Creating Social Impact*, arguing that "universities lack the necessary proximity to do a decent job of innovation in this century."[14] For all our vaunted praise of academic freedom, as Meagan Fallone from Barefoot College noted in the same debate, universities collectively do not take risks, and they tend toward conformity and political correctness, not deviance. Add to this a failure to nurture imagination, intuitive insight, or interaction with people at the grassroots, and universities are failing on both humanitarian *and* entrepreneurial grounds.

Why Are We Falling Short?

Imagine the university as a human brain, with its more sophisticated and evolutionary recent components layered onto more ancient mores and patterns. The proto-reptilian brain – the oldest part, evolutionarily speaking – is the abbey; the cloister; the monastic tradition. Indeed, the first professorate were monks[15], blithely insulated from the *to-and-fro* of the world. They

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were purpose-built to *not* engage the community. Universities, as adapted abbeys, have been extremely good as conservators of knowledge but also have a bias toward theory, categorization, and canonical framing of phenomena – definitions and boundaries inevitably bump up against the uncomfortable social innovation imperative to be problem-based, challenge-focused, and change-oriented.

The next oldest layer, the paleo-mammalian equivalent, is the hundreds of years of Western European and Anglosphere influence. The renaissance and enlightenment have bequeathed much of tremendous value to us, but they have also left us with Euro-centric baggage, including reductionism, particularism, and discipline path-dependence, ever-narrowing as one advances through academic degrees.[16] They have also been marked by the practice of what Indigenous scholar Marie Batiste calls cognitive imperialism[17] - learned people in the scholarly metropole conferring knowledge to the periphery. Social innovation, in contrast, demands systems thinking, transdisciplinary, and (to the extent that it includes either Indigenous-led or cross-cultural innovation) decolonization of how we collect, share, and value knowledge.[18]

The third brain layer of the modern university – the cerebrum and cerebellum – is the mainly post-war US influence on post-secondary norms.[19] The schema of this era includes the dawn of business schools advancing techno-managerial expert-driven approaches and an "innovation" agenda narrowly cast as the commodification of research and intellectual property. Jonas Salk and Frederick Banting – two paragons of 'changemaking' as inventors of the polio vaccine and insulin, respectively - would roll over in their graves at the notion of vaccine patents, common and expected practice in the modern academy, irrespective of its public funding. The latter-day awakening to sustainability and social purpose (in business schools especially, but also often university-wide centers) is marked by the propagation of solutions-driven quick fixes - business plan competitions, social venture pitches, design sprints, and hackathons.[20]

This era has also seen an explosion of paywalled, inaccessible, high-volume, often low-quality scholarship (the US and Canada have a tiny fraction of the world's diamond-rated open-access journals[21], and pale in comparison to Europe and Latin America especially). Other forces that tend to prefer hidebound economic or bureaucratic considerations over conditions under which social innovation might flourish include the dominant role of accreditation bodies, professional associations, collective agreements, and big-stick public funders[22] (all potentially conservatizing forces). Current hiring, tenure, and promotion practices – focused on publishing volume and journal status (not readership, public dissemination, or recognition of the time and value of community-engaged scholarship) – too often serve to widen the gulf between published academic research and the wisdom on the one hand, and insight and lived experience of practitioners or communities on the other. I have heard socially innovative scholars refer to the community engagement aspect of their craft as "career-limiting." Shocking but not inaccurate. Tenure – a sacred marker of the North American academy – itself tends to reinforce the status quo, historically buttressing white/male/cis privileged consensus about what is valued knowledge and acceptable scholarship.[23]

What Can We Do About This?

How might we collectively bust open the cloistered quadrangles, widen the disciplinary scope, preference open and accessible over commodified and scarce, and ultimately save academia from these and other socially maladaptive tendencies? How might we refurbish or perhaps even revolutionize post-secondary education in the service of social innovation?

The shallowest leverage point (the lowest hanging fruit) is doubling down on knowledge translation, mobilization, and sense-making efforts. This includes re-centering some of our institutes, centers, and schools away from scholar-reviewed research toward community-peer-reviewed, co-led, and co-created research made freely and publicly available. Community-facing research consortia[24] are also important, along with cross-pollinating scholars and practitioners. All institutional agents in the scholarly pipeline need to prefer open-access publication (which incidentally could happen if we give *librarians* more voice and stature within academic policy-making[25]). And academies must support public intellectuals sharing their work in community forums, popularizing scholarly knowledge generally, building on the success of *The Conversation[26],* and valuing publication in, say, industry or popular journals[27] like the *Stanford Social Innovation Review* as part of academic merit and promotion.

Universities, as well as funders and community organizations, need to incentivize and propagate much deeper and more meaningful community-academia feedback loops, well beyond service learning[28] and "community-engaged research."[29] Examples include community-hosted capstone courses, community-embedded student co-curricular and leadership development experiences, changemakers- and Elders-in-residence positions, community co-working and collaboration spaces on and off campus, campus-embedded social impact organizations, operating as affiliated institutions, and city government-partnered civic innovation programs.

Co-hosted, co-created social R&D platforms and ecosystems on and off campus are also essential, drawing inspiration from the commercial innovation realm but free of the fixation on Intellectual Property Rights (IPR) and commercialization per se.[30] This requires institutional incentives to promote, value, and reward transdisciplinary, systems-focused, community-partnered, open access, and applied scholarly activity (and student learning), as well as the creation and scaling of evidence aggregators[31] (drawing inspiration from "What Works" centers in the UK).

Reciprocally, social impact organizations – with funders leading by example – will need to nurture and value strong learning cultures. This, in turn, requires an ethos of experimentation, tolerance for 'failing forward,' and secondments, community sabbaticals or other partnerships around data science, development evaluation, social labs, and helping fill other social R&D capacity gaps. To help right the power imbalance, some quantum of social science funding (in Canada drawing from a yearly total of over $428 million in voted federal grants) could also be stewarded by social impact organizations rather than administered by academics. This has one

very attractive side-benefit for academics – not administering the funds yourself or relying on often frustrating centralized research offices to do so.

The Adjacent Possible

What Drayton avoided mentioning in the Oxford Union debate is that, although Ashoka Fellows do not generally have university affiliations or strong academic connections themselves, the vast majority of Ashoka Fellows are probably university *educated* and very likely a catalytic part of their journey was a maverick professor, an out-of-the-box class, or some other experience while in post-secondary that illuminated a new set of pathways and potentials. Universities need to discover and amplify these adjacent possibilities.

Going back to the brain analogy, there *is* another layer slowly being printed on the grey matter of academe – think of it as the neo-cortex; It is the still-infant push to decolonize and ultimately "Indigenized,"[32] a movement that could prove to be the most powerful disruption to university norms and culture in many generations, or perhaps centuries. It is still too early to predict how powerful this will be or in which directions this will move the academic leviathan. But, if successful, we will see a flourishing of whole-person, systems-focused, ecologically aware, ethically embedded, future-accountable, participatory modes of learning and knowledge production.

The pressures to remain siloed, cloistered, and self-referential remain strong within the academy. And while not all scholars need to be community-engaged, those who wish to be, or whose areas of inquiry demand it, must be far better supported. Beyond reforming tenure and promotion, maybe this requires new and different academic faculties. The new transdisciplinary Doerr School of Sustainability at Stanford might be one source of inspiration. Or maybe it requires a new type of campus or institution altogether, such as the Dechinta Centre for Research and Learning, which is the only fully land-based university-accredited program in the world.[33] Much like the social impact sector itself, academia can be too self-referential, inert, and lacking a sufficient toolkit or incentive structure to reach across the community-academy membrane. Old habits die hard, especially when those habits are where merit, advancement, and money reside. The academy, for all its faults and flaws, is also filled with liberating forces and aptitudes. Universities are awakening to the opportunities of Indigenization, equity-driven decision-making, and actioning the UN Sustainable Development Goals. But can we yet *walk the talk* of changemaking? All institutions are the product of human design. Universities may *seem* immune from disruption, but they are not. There are cracks in the edifice, and the light is beginning to trickle in.

Hopefully, just in time to avoid catastrophe.

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[1] For the purposes of this paper and recognizing that they may have different definitions and nuances, I use "academia", "higher education", "post-secondary", and "advanced education", which I interpret to be inclusive of all forms of formalized university and college-level education. The focus for most of this paper is more precisely on the university context.

[2] Universities Canada (website). https://www.univcan.ca/universities/member-universities/

[3] There are many definitions of liberal education, but I prefer the simple formulation of education in the service of liberty (education necessary to be a free person in an open, democratic society, which implies information literacy, human agency, an ability to inquire into and critically understand human history, cultural diversity, and so on). Thus framed, liberal arts may be essential to, but not necessarily sufficient for, changemaking.

[4] There is no universal standard typology of institutions of higher learning. In Canada, typologies vary from province to province are distinct from the US and elsewhere. For example, in the US it is commonly understood that liberal arts colleges are private. But in Canada, these are more commonly referred to as undergraduate teaching-focused institutions (that are often, but not always, rooted in the liberal arts). Large research universities in Canada are sometimes colloquially referred to as the U-15, as there are 15 such institutions, but even that distinction is far from universally embraced.

[5] Based on Membership in Universities Canada. The figure is approximate due to separate membership of sub-colleges within larger universities and due to the inclusion of some privately constituted and governed (yet publicly-funded) institutions.

[6] The Anthropocene Epoch is a colloquial description of contemporary geologic time, referring to the period in Earth's history when human activity has a (future) geologically significant impact on the planet's climate and ecosystems.

[7] Homer-Dixon, Thomas, Ortwin Renn, Johan Rockstrom, Jonathan F. Donges, and Scott Janzwood. "A call for an international research program on the risk of a global polycrisis." *Available at SSRN 4058592* (2021). https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=4058592

[8] Frances Westley, et al. "Tipping toward sustainability: emerging pathways of transformation", *AMBIO*, 40(7), 762–80 (2011). https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s13280-011-0186-9 The full definition is as follows: *A social innovation is any initiative (product, process, program, project, or platform) that challenges and, over time, contributes to changing the defining routines, resource and authority flows or beliefs of the broader social system in which it is introduced. Successful social innovations have durability, scale and transformative impact.*

[9] For a range of institutional introspective vignettes, see James Stauch (with contributions from Latasha Calf Robe). *Sh*ts Getting Real: 2022 Environmental Scan*. Institute for Community Prosperity, 2022. https://www.mtroyal.ca/nonprofit/InstituteforCommunityProsperity/_pdfs/2022-Environmental-Scan-Sh-ts-Getting-Real.pdf

[10] A recent UNESCO report, for example, notes that 2 years into the pandemic, most universities around the globe have returned to many business-as-usual practices, despite revelations of a widespread mental health crisis, and significant previously-under profiled inequities in access based on racial and socio-economic factors: Abdrasheva, Dana, Mauricio Escribens, Emma Sabzalieva, Daniele Vieira do Nascimento, and Clarisa Yerovi. *Resuming or reforming? Tracking the global impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on higher education after two years of disruption*. UNESCO International Institute for Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean, 2022. https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000381749

[11] For the purposes of this paper, I am using the Ashoka definition of changemaking: Taking creative action to solve a social problem.

[12] Re-Generation (website). https://www.re-generation.ca/

[13] Social Innovation Canada, *Findings from the Field: Engaging the Social Innovation Ecosystem.* 2018. https://www.sicanada.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/SI-Canada-Findings-Report_PUBLIC-1.pdf

[14] Oxford Union Debate: The Role of Universities in Creating Social Impact (web-based video). Skoll Centre for Social Entrepreneurship (2018). https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_Y9asumkZSs

[15] See, for example Lamport, Mark A. E*ncyclopedia of Christian Education*. Rowman & Littlefield. p. 484 (2015). "All the great European universities-Oxford, to Paris, to Cologne, to Prague, to Bologna—were established with close ties to the Church."

[16] This is not a new critique. See, for example, Pocklington, Thomas C., and Allan Tupper. *No place to learn: Why universities aren't working*. UBC Press, 2002. Pocklington and Tupper observe that nearly operating norm and incentive structure in the modern university conspires to advance narrow, specialized, quantitative research that avoids big questions.

[17] Battiste, Marie. "Cognitive imperialism and decolonizing research." *Surveying borders, boundaries, and contested spaces in curriculum and pedagogy* 75 (2011).

[18] As some point out, social innovation is not only not inherently de-colonizing, but as an ethos and set of practices itself requires decolonization: Jody Calahoo-Stonehouse. "Indigenizing & Decolonizing Social Innovation: Lessons for Systemic Design," Paper presented at *Relating Systems Thinking and Design Symposium*, Brighton, UK, Oct. 13-16 (2022).

[19] Marginson, Simon. "From cloister to market: the new era in higher education," *Journal of Tertiary Education Administration*, 15:1, 43-64 (1993). DOI: 10.1080/1036970930150105 https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/citedby/10.1080/1036970930150105?scroll=top&needAccess=true&role=tab One particularly stark example of this American influence not just on the Canadian academy, but on entrenching status quo social policy over social innovation, is the persistence of the "Calgary School" – a collection of social science professors at the University of Calgary who have been advancing sharply neo-classical economics blended with a strong provincial rights interpretation of the constitution. This "School" - composed mainly of US-born male, white,

![Social Innovations Journal logo]

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Anglo-Saxon academics who obtained tenure many decades ago – remains arguably the single most influential conservatizing root influence in Canadian public policy.

[20] This is covered well in Papi-Thornton, Daniela. "Tackling Heropreneurship", *Stanford Social Innovation Review*. Feb. 23 (2016). DOI: 10.48558/997w-yb97 https://ssir.org/articles/entry/tackling_heropreneurship

[21] Also called common, non-commercial, or cooperative open access, diamond open access journals are published, distributed, and archived free of fees charged either to the author(s) and the person(s) accessing the journal. Bosman, Jeroen; Jan Erik Frantsvåg, Bianca Kramer, Pierre-Carl Langlais, and Vanessa Proudman. OA Diamond Journals Study. Part 1: Exploring collaborative, community-driven publishing models for Open Access, 2021. https://scienceeurope.org/our-resources/oa-diamond-journals-study/

[22] In Canada, this is mainly provincial governments (for core instructional and operational costs), while the federal government provides the majority of research grant dollars.

[23] For a critique of tenure as a conservatizing force, see Mark Kingwell. "The Tenure Blues", *Academic Matters.* Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations, Oct-Nov (2009). https://academicmatters.ca/the-tenure-blues/

[24] Examples in Canada of community-facing research consortia include PROOF, focused on food security, and PhiLab, focused on philanthropy.

[25] Librarians quite often tend to be at the vanguard of the push for open access within their respective universities.

[26] There are now 10 regional editions over *The Conversation*, in addition to a global edition, including *The Conversation Canada*: https://theconversation.com/ca

[27] Examples of industry or popular journals in Canada include *The Walrus, The Philanthropist*, and *The Canadian Literary Review.* Internationally, such journals might also include *Nonprofit Quarterly,* or long-form journalism like *The Atlantic, Quanta, Aeon/Psyche* and the *New Yorker.*

[28] Service learning, also called community service learning (CSL) is an instructional strategy used in credit-based university courses tied to serving, in some way, one or more community organizations. There is an entire body of scholarship on service learning, and while the overall intent is laudable, there are many critiques of the dominant methods used, for example the flawed assumption that there is a conference of knowledge or expertise from the student to the community partner.

[29] Community-engaged research in truth is quite diverse, running the gamut from perfunctory academic-led research that is simply shared with a given community, through deeper forms of participatory and/or co-designed research, to community co-led research. The point is that saying that research is community-engaged is not in itself a guarantee that the research is not extractive, or merely performatively community-engaged.

[30] An example would be the Trico Changemakers Studio at MRU. https://www.tricochangemakersstudio.ca/

[31] In addition to the UK's network of What Works Centres, some of which are based at universities, others at NGOs or foundations, examples include the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness and the Washington State Institute for Public Policy.

[32] Indigenization refers to the transformation of institutions, programs, and practices to suit and reflect a local Indigenous context. It includes, but is not limited to, cultural and historical training for employees, governance changes, inclusive admissions and hiring practices, new courses, programs, and other curricular changes, language programming, and built and natural environment changes.

[33] Dechinta (website): https://www.dechinta.ca/