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The Answer Lies in Our Humanity: Research and Methodologies That Facilitate Healing and Hope

Navigating the Nine C's: Hopeful Women Advocates Remapping Neoliberal Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

This paper provides perspectives from 11 women advocates with lived experience of various issues across higher education on the ways that the sector currently meets and does not meet the needs of those it employs. We discuss how we hope to disrupt the sector so that it can do better in the future, perhaps leading to a utopia for all rather than the privileged few that neoliberalism tends to cater to. Methodologically, we use a reflexive and recursive multivocal process of reflection, both on and in our own practice, as advocates and experiences of our positionality in higher education in order to present our utopian vision of what postneoliberal higher education could be to meet the needs of all working within the sector.

1 | Introduction

Higher education can be a harsh workplace, especially for those from outside the dominant (white, male, Anglo-Saxon, English-speaking, cis, able-bodied, neoliberal) culture. This paper provides perspectives from 11 hopeful women working in higher education, who have lived experience of various issues across the sector and the world, and especially of the ways that higher education currently is and is not meeting the needs of those it employs. We have ideas for how we hope to disrupt the sector so that it can do better in the future.

Here, we tell a multivocal (Tracy 2010) literary spatial narrative about being largely at a particular Australian higher education institution in 2022, but our interwoven stories are informed by our global experiences of where we have lived, worked, and studied across Australia, the United Kingdom, and North and South America (see Figure 1). However, rather than being bound “not only to one another (past and present) but to the places and natures we shape and in turn ... that shape us” (Eanes et al. 2020, 15),

we take this opportunity to use our collective narrative as a starting point to bring us together, enabling us to turn and point hopefully in the direction that we all want higher education to evolve toward and to choose a future that values all perspectives and abilities in a truly inclusive way.

We are a broad cross-section of Australian higher education's female workforce—most are academics, ranging from professor (Marianella and Jenna) and associate professor (Janice) through senior lecturer (Shannon, Francis, and Faith) to lecturer (Nicole) and postdoctoral fellow (Sarah). We also cover the professional (administrative) staff who support the work of the university (Kathryn and Abbe) and those who are no longer staff (Katherine). We range from ongoing permanent through short-term contracted to casual employment. We cover a range of ages—from our 20s to our 50s—and ethnicities—from Scotland, Canada, Peru, and Australia, which in itself covers multiple backgrounds—from Anglo-Saxon and European descent to Torres Strait Islander, South Sea Islander, and Chinese Malaysian. We are gay, straight, cis, and autigender. We are partnered

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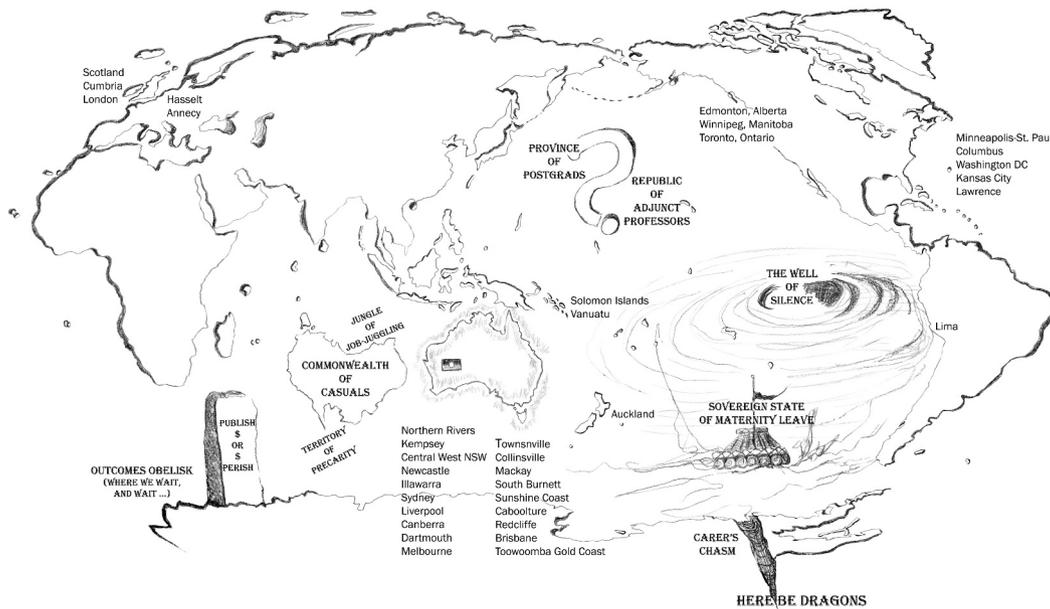


FIGURE 1 | Map of where the authors have lived, worked, and studied (drawing by Dr Shannon Satherley).

and single, with and without children, ageing parents, or other caring responsibilities. We choose to identify ourselves broadly with these descriptions rather than singling ourselves out for individual identification as women of specific races.

The university where most of us work has two main campuses in the capital city of our state. Across the state, there are eight universities with 23,000 staff supporting more than 250,000 students, within a nation of 42 universities and 1.6 million students, supported by 121,000 staff (Department of Education 2022). We are a small cog in a larger machine, a point on a map at a place in time, where the place is the “dense coil of memory, artifact, and experience that exists in a particular space, as well as in the coincidence and movements of people, goods, and ideas that have occurred across time in spaces large and small” (Bodenhamer 2015, 10).

Our perspectives come from across disciplines, age groups, employment roles, abilities, backgrounds, and countries, although we all have a shared experience of working in higher education in Australia during the early 21st century. We use Rieger’s (2016, 3) concept of ‘doing’—“the activity of exploration and reflection”—to create a projected overlay into the future of what we want higher education to look, feel, and act like; what we hope for to make it more of a place of inclusivity for all. We are exploring our embodied experiences (Rogoff 2006) as members of the higher education community to reflect on what is and what could be—as women, we are reflecting on the things that matter to us. This positioning, as Irit Rogoff (Phelan and Rogoff 2001, 34) argues, makes us “able to point our finger at the master narratives and at the dominant cartographies of the inherited cultural order”.

2 | Literature

This literature review does not aim to be exhaustive or comprehensive. Instead, it provides enough context to situate

our reflections in the third decade of the 21st century, with its concerns about gender, race, neoliberalism, and change in higher education.

2.1 | Gender in Higher Education

There has been a long conversation about gender in the workplace (Babcock et al. 2017; Mooney et al. 2017; Sweetser et al. 2013) and the role of gender within higher education. Within the pages of this journal, there have been articles about feminism and change in higher education (Parsons and Priola 2013), women leaders in higher education (Gallant 2014), the intersection of precarity and maternity leave (Davies et al. 2022), and the relationship between networking and power (Papafiliippou et al. 2022).

This aligns with other work, such as that by Tanya Fitzgerald (2018), who found that across Australian and New Zealand’s higher education landscape, leadership is still gendered, with both genders expecting women to dress similar to males but act femininely by caring for others, and Pat O’Connor (2015, 315), who found that women in leadership positions across higher education were “actually looking forward to a movement out of management in 5 years’ time”. Andrea Gallant (2014) interviewed several mid-level women in higher education who had participated in a leadership development course and who had aspirations toward senior positions. Gallant found that after the course, most did not continue to have high aspirations but were more interested in achieving roles that satisfied them, perhaps due to (at the time of the research) a lack of female role models in upper university management, and concern that those few role models who existed had tended to copy masculine management styles.

In a hopeful vision of the future, Helen Peterson (2015) discusses the shift in Swedish higher education from assumptions of managers being male to the characteristics of female

managers, such as teamwork and adaptability, being incorporated into descriptors of the ideal manager. And, although these findings may just be extensions of gender stereotyping, she found similar changes in vice chancellor position descriptions (Peterson 2018), in contrast to Lavigne and Sá's (2021) findings on increasing managerialist or charismatic leadership descriptors in similar Canadian job advertisements.

Thus, the broad literature on gender in higher education shows that women are interested in leadership roles but value job satisfaction rather than achievement (in the neoliberal sense). They also have fewer mentors and role models, which is a need that could be filled by examining utopian visions of the future.

2.2 | Utopian Visions of Higher Education

Many academic authors have called for a utopian vision of higher education, although many are still gendered. Ruth Levitas (2013) proposes the concept of utopia as a method—as a way to express “the desire for a better way of being or of living” (xii). Martin Mills (2018) calls for academics to become more realistically utopian in their expectations, returning to a mission of societal improvement. Ronald Barnett (2013) lists the utopian university as one of several possible futures for higher education, alongside the dystopian, ideological, and persuasive.

Although some focus on the student experience, others focus on the explicit effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, and some others focus on the broader learning and teaching experience (Dickey et al. 2021; Eringfeld 2021; Hammond 2017), there are also activist authors who wish to dismantle the current system of higher education and start afresh (Dickey et al. 2021; Gayá and Brydon-Miller 2017). Others accept that the current system is the one within which we must work and seek ways to improve it (Badley 2016; Suoranta and FitzSimmons 2017; Sutton 2015), which is the approach that we take within this article.

There is no consistency in these views of a utopian future for higher education, perhaps because some ignore, whereas others are embedded within, the largely neoliberal actuality of higher education.

3 | The Current Reality of Higher Education

The current reality of Australian higher education is one of increasing neoliberalism, with its attendant issues of almost-constant change, restructuring, and increasing precarity (Davies et al. 2022; Grant-Smith and Payne 2021; Grant-Smith and Winter 2022; Halfman and Radder 2015). In a neoliberal or new managerialist workplace, administrative burdens are increased because of increased regulatory measurement and auditing, which can also lead to other impacts such as the need to use different technology or to expand the market to use different technologies and a generally more complex working environment (Pryor and Henley 2018). Peterson (2015) suggests that these changes make higher education management roles less appealing to men because of the increased workload and decreased prestige, increasing the administrative burden on female staff. Similarly, Leathwood (2005) argues that the neoliberalization of higher education makes it easier to treat women, and especially women of color, poorly through restructuring, overwork, insecurity, lack of care, and a “lack of funding, pressure of work, a growth in the volume of administrative tasks ... and an economic discourse of efficiency with prioritized financial concerns over and above educational ones” (397). Even gender-positive programs such as Athena SWAN often just add another layer of neoliberal administration and reporting (Davies et al. 2022).

As Johnson et al. (2020, 7) write about research students, “to live in a state of precarity is to be vulnerable to widespread disruptions.” Precarity also applies to staff on casual and short-term contracts, who are half of the Australian higher education workforce (see Table 1) where only 36% of the 16,458 academics above senior lecturer in 2020 were female (Department of Education, Skills and Employment, 2020), illustrating that higher education leadership in Australia is still gendered. For these reasons, Davies et al. (2022) argue that the lack of maternity provisions for both academic and professional (administrative) staff in UK universities on short-term contracts is one cause for women leaving higher education at a greater rate than men, while Harris et al. (2019, 715) find that even those academics who do find their way to parenthood seem to struggle and have limited ways of coping with work and family responsibilities, as even though “academia does enable flexibility

TABLE 1 | Australian higher education workforce (Department of Education, 2022).

Workforce total	124,316 people 131,735 full-time equivalent (FTE)
Total workforce—female	73,093 people (58.8%) 64,081 FTE
Total workforce—male	51,013 people (41.0%) 46,808 FTE
Total workforce—other	210 people (0.2%) 182 FTE
Precariat total (% of total workforce)	59,370 (50.5%) 20,664 (15.7%)—casual 38,706 (34.8%)—limited term

Note: Breakdown by gender is not available.

around work times and locations, a discourse privileging flexibility as a positive was absent”. Beyond parenthood, other reasons for precarity are detailed beautifully by Shihaam Solomon and Marieta Du Plessis (2023), who reviewed literature on precarious employment in higher education from 2010 to 2021 and found that precarity is structural and global.

The need to pay attention to precarity and gender in higher education is reinforced by Gemma Hartley (2018), who discusses the economic and social advantages of including perspectives beyond the traditional (white, middle-aged, cis, male, able-bodied). As she notes, “The rules we adhere to are not ones we consciously think about. Most of us don’t spend our days pausing to think about how patriarchy dictates the way we should behave, react, and live in the world. These things are so deeply ingrained that we hardly notice them at all” (102). As Ulrich (2022) reinforces, in finding a path out of the here-and-now-where-we-are, it is critical to ask both ‘who is’ and ‘who ought to be’ questions about the boundaries wherein we work—questions around motivation, power, knowledge, and legitimacy, to ensure that all perspectives are considered. Because of what we know about women in higher education in terms of precarity and opportunities, we are motivated to move, in Levinson et al.’s (1978, 86) terminology, from “Island Past” (as represented by Bruce Macfarlane’s (2012) *Higher Education Research Archipelago*, which is named predominantly for middle-aged white men—Bourdieu, Bartlett, Habermas, Boud, and Biggs) to our “Island Future” shown in Figure 2, where the map of higher education shows representation, possibilities, and opportunities for all. Unlike most articles reviewed by Solomon and Du Plessis (2023), which took a deficit view of higher education, we look hopefully toward better ways in the future. Our



FIGURE 2 | Island Future—higher education’s nine C’s (drawing by Dr Shannon Satherley).

research question is therefore: What could a hopeful, utopian future for higher education look like?

4 | Method

Following a purposeful sampling method to try to ensure representativeness of female perspectives from multiple identifications (home country, age, race, sexuality, and professional experience) and to enable writing with diverse friends, the lead author invited about a dozen colleagues to collaborate on this coauthored article. Most agreed, but some declined, leading to additional invitations being issued. After agreeing to participate, most of the coauthors met in a 1-hour Zoom meeting where the lead author shared a brief slideshow (later shared with all coauthors), including the proposed title and accepted abstract, a map of the world (to help us think about where we have lived, learned, and worked), and then Bruce Macfarlane’s (2012) *Higher Education Research Archipelago* as an example of how the sector has already been mapped (rather than his 2022 update discussing higher education ideologies). The next three slides consisted of Rob Cross’ (2021) adaptation of Michael Henderson’s (2003) concept of “North Star” values. We used Cross’ provocations for thinking about our (1) expertise, (2) values, and (3) identity as explicit writing prompts to reflect on our positioning as women in the academy. As all data were collected from authors of the article, ethical clearance was not required—we all agreed to write, share, analyze, and publish our data together.

Our responses to these three prompts are the data that we have used to analyze in this article using this uncommon method of data collection—usually, qualitative data are collected from interviews, observations, or fieldwork and associated research journals and memos (Creswell 2018), but we wanted to be more reflective in order to explore our experiences in our own voices and through the lenses of our own interpretation, as an alternative to much research where ‘the author’ selects and interprets the words of ‘the participant’.

But, of course, this does not mean that we have all shared everything. As Jara (in Atallah et al. 2022, 686) notes when talking about the oral cultures of the Mapuche, “not all stories are always meant to be written”. Similar to any other narrative, as Eanes et al. (2020, 14) point out, we are being selective in what we “include and what [we] leave out ... to organize disparate information into something digestible—to generate order from the chaos ... [of our] collective telling and retelling, critiquing, revising, and reassembling”. In the same way, although our data collection does not include any male colleagues, this does not mean that male perspectives are excluded—indeed, the provocations for our reflective writing come from a male author’s interpretation of another male author’s conception of how to identify one’s values. However, the reflections that we wrote and shared were all based on our own female experiences and came from a non-white-male place of interrogation and interpretation.

These reflections are positioned and embodied as part of our own professional identity (Learmonth and Humphreys 2012; Xu

and Grant 2020) as female workers in Australian higher education. By including our perspectives, we make this research “multivocal” (Tracy 2010, 844) but avoid dwelling on our stories of marginalization so as not to “further negatively portray” ourselves and those similar to us (847).

Once the data were collected (as some wanted longer than the initial hour-long session to complete their reflections), we followed Braun and Clarke’s (2021) guidelines for inductive TA—although two of us did the thematic analysis, there was no codebook, and we did not seek interrater reliability. Instead, we worked alongside each other, occasionally discussing the things that spoke most strongly to us, but mostly in companionable silence. We then met at the end of the day, shared our initial codes, discussed them, and worked together to cluster them thematically in a way that made sense to both of us.

This resulted in seven initial themes—activism, community/creativity/collaboration, curiosity and learning, helpers and supporters, money, skills and experience, and higher education and change. Following further reflection, we realized that, in keeping with our desire to reimagine the existing cartographies of higher education, there was a subtle play on words that could be done with these initial themes to turn them all into C words, which could represent the seas surrounding the land of higher education as we have experienced it.

These final nine C’s (along with quotes from the reflections) were shared with all coauthors, to enable what Tracy (2010, 844) describes as “member reflections ... an opportunity for collaboration and reflexive elaboration ... [as well as] whether members find the research comprehensible and meaningful”. None of the authors disagreed with or added to the themes, although some wanted changed or shortened quotes.

5 | Findings

The most important finding of this analysis is not the individual experiences of the authors. It is that, despite coming from different backgrounds, we have so many experiences and hopes in common, as hopeful women working in and beyond higher education.

We identified seven dominant themes across our reflections, discussed here alphabetically because they are equally important and we do not wish to create hierarchies.

5.1 | Theme 1: Care

We are all supported, supportive, and helpful in different ways. There is a lot of common discussion about being caring—helping and supporting others, both students and staff members, aligned with Papafilippou et al.’s (2022) finding that female networking can be a strong positive force. Many of us felt that we needed to create a place of safety or reflected on having been cared for (often through mentoring) by others, as our examples below show.

Sarah wrote:

With more women in leadership,

we can shift the culture of workplaces,

we can reimagine what flexibility means for women in higher education, and

we can help women step out of precariousness and into security.

Jenna notes that through the support and care of others in her network, “hidden doors and opportunities that otherwise would not be known or advertised” have been revealed. Abbe notes that she uses her “research and writing skills to help other researchers”. Kathryn identifies as a “helper/provider where possible, and accepted, to others”. Francis cares about “respectful, reciprocal relationships”, and Nicole believes that “by tackling problems and issues with an optimistic, ‘every problem has a solution’ attitude, [this] helps create the supportive and collaborative environment I value”. However, as Janice reflects, “teaching is not cared about, nor are university teachers cared for. This is often because the value of teaching in universities is taken for granted or unappreciated”, a sentiment reinforced by Leathwood (2005, 400) that “caring ... goes unrecognized and unrewarded”. Therefore, care is a double-edged sword for us, something we give to others but do not always receive back in the neoliberal academy; hence, it is at the pointy north tip of our Island Future (Figure 2).

5.2 | Theme 2: Cash

The need to earn money to live in our modern Western world underpins many of the employment decisions we have made—there needs to be a value exchange where going to work earns us more than staying at home would. Francis and Jenna both made pragmatic decisions about earning money—Jenna from working several jobs while studying, where she “quickly learned that if I could save enough during non-semester time to be able to cover most or all of my semester course costs, each semester then it meant the work I was doing during semester alongside my studies was mostly to cover rent, food, petrol/transport, and start saving for the next semester. It was the only way I could see to do it without finishing university with a huge debt.” Francis notes that “I must work because money is a necessity to survival but if I am going to work, then job satisfaction is key.”

Kathryn comments that “set salary scales for non-Executive positions are great due to not having to negotiate”, whereas Shannon notes that she can donate to several NGOs focused on improving the lot of the nonhuman “because my university salary is good”.

Sarah reflects:

I am the precariat, the ‘gig worker’

I am the “pink collar workforce” (Devlin 2021, 11)

at the lower levels of the academic ladder (Devlin 2021)

I may share an office with you (if I have one at all),

but I am not 'entitled' to the same benefits

which you may take for granted.

I can't plan for the future, for a family, get a mortgage.

'Starved of funds' – the institution relies on those of us who can't say no. (Schneiders 2022)

But we all know that when funds are low, it's the casuals who are the first to go (Scott 2022)

and in higher education, this mostly affects women. (Schneiders 2022)

... But what is the cost to us and our communities, to the economy and the university?

When our institutions are expected to run like companies, (Devlin 2021)

but ignore that profits grow when there are women in leadership and gender diversity. (Devlin 2021)

Reflecting on the precarity of her part-time and casual work, as one of the approximately 50% of casual and contract workers in Australia's higher education system (Department of Education, 2022), Sarah notes that "I value freedom and flexibility, but not at the expense of job security", whereas Faith, perhaps a little more cynically, comments that "creating a sense of precarity is how they keep you in servitude". So, cash matters but is also somewhat peripheral—a small edge of our Island Future.

5.3 | Theme 3: Change

It seems that change is a constant across higher education in the 21st century—as Marianella says, she has been in the sector "for 25 years (or more) [and has] seen it change many times", whereas Kathryn reflects on ending up in a better (centralized) position as a result of "one local-faculty, one large-scale multi-faculty, [and then] one university-wide ... restructure", in contrast to some of the literature (Davies et al. 2022; Solomon and Du Plessis 2023). Jenna reflects on being impacted during her PhD by "the Faculty that I was in being dissolved, with all staff (including my PhD supervisors) made redundant ... [which meant] I had to make the decision to stay where I was and be supervised out of field, or to transfer my PhD to another university", which she ended up doing after a year of remaining, following one of her supervisors to their new location in a different part of the state. Sadly, as Leathwood (2005, 405) points out, "restructuring has not, it appears, resulted in a workplace in which the majority of women can feel confident and valued, or one which is welcoming to 'feminine' values".

From global financial crises to the COVID-19 pandemic, our workplaces now feel as if they are in almost constant flux, trying

to find ways to remain financially viable as the world shifts and changes around us. And, of course, we are all at the mercy of the university as a business—KPIs, metrics, and the rest of the neoliberal agenda mean we are all realistic about the neoliberal bureaucracy within which we have chosen to work. For example, Marianella, as an "older, non-white woman with an accent", finds student evaluations to be a "mean beast", in stark contrast to young, non-White, Australian-accented contingent academic Katherine, who actively worked to "reframe the thinking of both students and myself, to position my role in the classroom as a facilitator who is there to help students develop knowledge and skills and help them see how this would benefit them in future employment ... Feeling safe and like their opinion mattered became frequent comments I received on end-of-semester teaching surveys." In this way, Katherine does what Tanya Fitzgerald (2018, 61) calls "institutional housekeeping". Both experiences of teaching are echoed by Parsons and Priola's (2013) research subjects, who felt forced into teaching and service roles, which are often not recognized in academic promotion, as well as by Leathwood's (2005, 395) finding that "older women are written off as 'past it' in a society, and within a new managerial [i.e., neoliberal] context, which celebrates and promotes a vision of youthful and dynamic workers".

As Sarah wrote:

At the present, it seems dire, but I see the big picture

While it seems like change can't come any faster my university is the only one in Australia

to have both a female VC and chancellor (Devlin 2021)

and over half (11/20) of the executive roles are currently held by women.

So, I think it's a given that it's getting better.

"More women are helping each other up" (Devlin 2021, 154)

and as the number of women in leadership grow,

more women like me will know that they are valued

And that they are a person.

And while the university may not see that yet, my experience of working with and for women tells me

That change is evident.

Indeed, despite the neoliberal audit and measurement culture, we are still here. Marianella notes, "my heart was on doing research and teaching ... Higher education is my home, it is where I feel most comfortable" - our passion for and belief in the possibilities of higher education mean that we (mostly) keep on choosing to work here, even though two of us refer to higher education as a beast - Abbe says the bureaucracy is "a beast, but a beast with boundaries and limits, like the edge of the map". Faith suggested that neoliberalism in higher education is making it more like an ivory tower, growing more and more remote

as it ages, like the growing tusks of the ageing elephant from whence the ivory originally came. She also reflects that, upon first attending university as a student, she “found a utopic place of possibility, which, upon becoming an academic staff member, went “from Utopia to the island in *Lord of the Flies*” (Goldring 1954). Change therefore connects Care, Cash, and Competence in our Island Future.

5.4 | Theme 4: Competence

Many of us reflected on our transferable skills, although not explicitly the expertise that got us our jobs. This may have to do with our professional identities as academics and support workers in higher education versus our personal identities as hopeful women.

As Sarah wrote:

There is a hierarchy which exists within universities

which view some

as more valuable than others

And so, my experience is layered.

In the broader context,

I am a woman

but not a person.

In the institution

as a corporation,

I am a resource,

a commodity.

I am the number on my staff ID

I am the hours on a contract, signed by me

I am the part-time, sessional, temporary, discretionary,

but never

permanent,

however necessary.

Jenna reflects that her “work experience (even ‘just’ as a casual) and degree skills (especially quantitative skills, even though I haven’t really used those in over 12 years now) set me up for my subsequent academic and university employment opportunities”. Katherine notes that “during nearly 10 years working in higher education, it emerged that a skill that distinguished me from my peers was my ability to teach. Specifically, it was my ability to build meaningful connections with students and help

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5.5 | Theme 5: Community and Collaboration

If we had ordered the themes in any way other than alphabetical, this theme would likely have been the first in the list, as many of us talk about the importance of community, collaboration, mentoring, and support, both for and from others. Faith explains that she is “a great connector and networker. I put people together for their benefit”, even when it does not end up benefiting her. Katherine reflects that “building genuine connections with students ... helped them to discard that mental image of what a ‘teacher’ should be”. Nicole reflects on the multiple communities that she has been a part of, both as one of “quite a few students focused on games-related research, and together we formed a strong community”, and now believes that “a creative and supportive community is vital to research and higher education. It is essential for PhD students and undergraduate students, but also for faculty to feel there are no stupid questions and no bad ideas ... I value community and collaboration, value how teams can bring different perspectives and experiences to help solve a problem.” Abbe reflects that “What I want, in an ideal world, is to build higher education into a network of well-supported clever people, who can rely on others (like me) to help them to do what they need to do—not just the teaching, but the research and the reporting and the administration”. This is why the heart of our Island Future is community and collaboration.

5.6 | Theme 6: Crusading

There was not a prompt question explicitly around activism, but we identified it as being important to all of us, which most enact through their teaching and research work. Shannon talks about valuing “an educated society of people who can think and respond to things critically and creatively and therefore live and create for the benefit of all beings and systems forming this planet ... valuing and trying to enhance the lives of the nonhuman, the more-than-human”. Janice believes that “you can only truly have impact through care-full teaching and learning, and that this can happen in and out of the classroom”. Marianella is “hoping for my efforts to be impactful enough to guide the future technology developments so that people can really benefit from it”. Faith believes that she is “helping shape

and support the changemakers I felt the world desperately needed". Sarah's "teaching and research are rooted in advocacy for those affected by the inadequacies of our society". Nicole advocates for "community ... visibility ... [and to] 'cite local' and 'cite ladies'". Jenna believes that "university study is tricky enough as it is, even without navigating external factors and life circumstances, of which each student in each class is different", advocating for a whole-of-person approach to learning and teaching. Kathryn is a "quiet activist for equitable rights for all humans no matter gender, sexuality, belief, education-level ... [and for] environmental sustainability and climate change". Finally, Francis wants "to be known for my respectful research alongside community groups" because she feels "accountable to the people in [Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and South Sea Islander communities], so I have expertise in understanding of shifts in consultation processes and protocols between different ... groups". Crusading therefore underpins our Island Future, anchoring our connections to people and to ourselves.

5.7 | Theme 7: Curiosity and Creativity

Similar to so many of the themes, curiosity and learning came up again and again across our reflections as antidotes to neoliberalism and as drivers of our hop. Jenna notes, "that's the curse of academic work—the more you learn, the more you realize how little you know. This results in this somewhat never-ending cycle of not being able to 'switch off', no clear line between when the work ends, because much of the work we do opens up the holes of how much more work there is to do in a particular area. When the work you do is driven by something you are passionate about and believe in to your core, the work that you seems as something more than 'just' a job. It's your calling. It's what you have to do." Kathryn values "self-improvement through learning from others or self-driven". Abbe reflects on being swapped into a job where she learned about the university's corporate data because the data manager "could see how bored I was", but goes on to comment that "I am a learner, which is why I value higher education".

Creativity is also related to curiosity, with Nicole crediting her PhD supervisor with giving her "the agency to be creative, and to find my strengths as a researcher ... I love to be the ideas person, who can take an idea or a theory and bend and twist it into something new and exciting". Marianella has "always had a strong creative impetus, and I wanted to study something where I could use my creativity while doing something useful for others". As Renshaw (2002, 5) argues, "engagement, diversity and openness [are] crucial to forming a productive learning community", which is why curiosity and creativity are the southernmost points of our Island Future, curving back up toward our ethics of care at the North.

5.8 | Bringing the Themes Together: Mapping Our Vision of the Utopian Future of Higher Education

This article has presented elements of the journey that each coauthor has had through learning and working in higher education. We have examined the literature on higher education

and its visions of the future and found it lacking in terms of what we need and want, so we have used our reflections as a "process of generative and creative discovery" (Eanes et al. 2020, 10). In response, we present our alternative vision: "Island Future" for higher education—the nine C's (Figure 2).

6 | Conclusion

Our vision of Island Future and higher education's nine C's comes directly from the reflections we collected as data for this project. Our views were not filtered by others, but only analyzed by ourselves, making this method a highly personal and accurate form of response to a lived experience. In our case, that was of an increasingly-neoliberalized higher education sector, with increasing precarity, lack of (and competition for) funding, and a focus on individual outputs rather than on the care, community, and collaboration we, as hopeful women in the academy, need.

Ultimately, the future of higher education is being written every day by every decision that each of us in the sector makes. Through reflecting on our own positionality and what we want to see in the future of our organizations, our contribution adds unique perspectives to the ongoing utopian conversation by providing an achievable vision of the future, contests the prevailing neoliberal narrative by providing examples of positivity and hope, and thereby widens the possibility of positive futures for all. We have mapped our vision of the future of higher education—a multivocal representation of what we need and have been lucky to have across our own lived experiences. However, simply providing this picture of our vision of higher education's future is insufficient without at least beginning to map a few paths from where we are now to how we might make higher education a more caring, collaborative, curious, creative, and competent place.

So, how do we reach the Island Future of our utopia? We see several ways forward for reproducing and extending our hopeful methodology. The first step is by publishing this article to see whether our map could be one that others want to engage with and travel to alongside us. We invite you to take our nine C's and apply them to your experiences—higher education and beyond, Global North or South—however you identify (race, gender, and beyond). We have varying backgrounds and experiences, but our data and analysis come only from us—11 women living and working in universities in Australia in 2024. Do you also want our utopia? What is missing? We invite you to get in touch and help us continue our conceptualization and its evolution.

Next, we will each continue trying to make our workplaces more aligned with our utopia, focusing on making our nine C's a reality. As Atallah et al. (2022, 692) conclude, "our work in universities is set within a backdrop of colonial institutions. We are all deeply entangled within the very institutions we are trying to transform".

Finally, we will continue to work towards creating places of conversation about our nine C's as a way to envision and enable

a better future for higher education. Following Grimmer (2024) call to action, we provide a numbered list of ways to bring our utopia into being.

1. Care has to underpin all that we all do, regardless of our gender and other identities. We need to read and cite others who work in this space, such as Routledge's Well-being and Self-care in Higher Education series edited by Narelle Lemon.
2. Cash is essential in the society we live in, so must always be a part of our considerations around how we choose to spend our working lives. That is unlikely to change in our lifetimes, but should be a more prominent part of our conversations.
3. Change is another constant in modern higher education, but it can be done with more care and compassion (Winter 2013).
4. Competence must underpin what we do, or we cannot speak from a position of knowledge and strength in ways that others will hear.
5. Community and Collaboration are our ways of working together towards the future we want to see. If you can't find a community to join, find others who you want to work with and learn from and build your own ways to collaborate.
6. We hope that our vision of this utopian Island future will become one of the things that people in higher education Crusade for, because the future comes from the conversations of the present.
7. There is no point to any of this if we cannot approach our work in a spirit of Curiosity and Creativity. Again, the work of Narelle Lemon and others in the academic well-being space are critical to this.

Our island future of the nine C's is a hopeful place, curving the harsh edges of neoliberal higher education into a remapped place where we can flourish through care, cash, change, competence, community and collaboration, crusading, and curiosity and creativity. Please join us.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

Research data are not shared.

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