



**McCowan, T. (2025). *Universities and climate action*.
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May is my birthday month, May 9th, to the day, which in the country in which I was born—the Soviet Union and now independent Kazakhstan—is Victory Day. You might rightfully wonder, dear reader, why I am bringing up my birthday when the purpose of this review is to evaluate McCowan’s latest book, *Universities and Climate Action*. There are a few reasons.

May 1st, 2025, the UK—my new home—marked the hottest May Day on record. You might think this is a reason for alarm and large-scale public discussion of climate change. Yet despite the rising temperatures, policymakers and the public frequently choose to focus on nationalistic ideas as a cause for public celebrations. In the preparation for writing this book review, I went to the Imperial War Museum to see if one of Britain’s most honored institutions has a section on the impact of war on nature and climate. After all, I just came back from an event at the University of Chicago, which I attended at the invitation of Darya Tsymbalyuk, who published her ground breaking debut book in April, *Ecocide in Ukraine: The Environmental Cost of Russia's War*. To my dismay there was no single major display on the interrelations of war and climate change in the museum, despite US and UK militaries “owing” a combined \$111Billion in climate reparations . Hence, the importance of Professor McCowan’s book.



¹ This book is available by Open Access at <https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/id/eprint/10207460/1/Universities-and-Climate-Action.pdf>

The text is intellectually dense, timely, pedagogically engaging and innovative. The strength of the book is in highlighting the dual and contradictory role of higher education in both contributing to climate and social injustices while advancing the local, national, and global public good. Global empirical examples show the depth and the breadth of the book. I agree with Tristan that for the universities to achieve their potential to positively transform societies, they themselves need transformation, in essence, we need transformed universities.

I particularly appreciated the reflections on air pollution in the Global South; a beautiful story of the regenerative reef practices in Somanga and the “Small is beautiful,” a particularly important sub-chapter. Perhaps in future editions, McCowan could expand the section on the relationship between the climate change, public health, and the higher education sector. Also, historical analysis on which countries are the historical pollutants and which universities especially need to contribute to reparative global futures would add depth to the treatment of the subject.

I would have loved to have seen more reflections on how we can reimagine universities to become internally more socially and economically sustainable when it comes to the levels of precarity and debt higher education institutions create. I am not convinced that tired and indebted students, academics, and members of the public will advocate for lifestyle sacrifices for the global community in the long term. We live in an era in which Nigel Farage’s Reform UK party is celebrating a sweeping victory in local elections. We must research (and resist?) the relationship between nationalist, right-wing populist ideologies and climate change.

So, returning to my opening story, I hope for more research on higher education, peace, and climate catastrophe. A chapter on student anti-war movements and their potential in climate mitigation would expand McCowan’s treatment in productive directions. It’s as if we need a return to the most basic discussion of ethics and values of higher education and climate disaster prevention even before mitigation.

Tristan’s book is also hopeful. It will be a friend to activists, scholars, scholar-activists and the community. I cannot do better than conclude with the words of Ursula K. Le Guin who reminds us of the power of words.

We live in capitalism, its power seems inescapable – but then, so did the divine right of kings. Any human power can be resisted and changed by human beings. Resistance and change often begin in art. Very often in our art, the art of words. (2016, p. 115)

I sincerely congratulate Tristan on this impressive book; and I eagerly anticipate his future writings of this critically important topic, which I hope will take my feedback on board.

References

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About the Reviewer



Olga Mun

Olga Mun is an early-career researcher at the Department of Education, University of Oxford, focusing on epistemic injustice, higher education, climate change, and comparative and international education. She is a co-convenor of the Climate Change Education Reading Group and previously co-convened the Philosophy of Education Reading Group at Oxford. Her research examines climate change education, knowledge production, epistemic justice, and educational practices across national borders, with recent work

centering on scholars from Kazakhstan during the internationalization of the social sciences and humanities. She has also contributed to projects on ethical challenges in comparative education, including the impact of COVID-19 on international research practices. Before joining Oxford, Olga held research, teaching, and editorial roles in academic settings across the UK, USA, and Central Asia.

About the Book Author

Tristan McCowan is Professor of International Education at the Institute of Education, University College London. His work focuses on higher education in the international context, including issues of access, curriculum, alternative models and sustainability. His earlier books include *Higher Education for and beyond the Sustainable Development Goals* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), *Education as a Human Right* (Bloomsbury, 2013) and *Rethinking Citizenship Education* (Continuum, 2009). From 2015-2021 he was editor of *Compare – a Journal of International and Comparative Education*, and from 2020-2024 led the multi-country research project Climate-U (Transforming Universities for a Changing Climate).



Tristan McCowan

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