

The Shape of Universities to Come: *Ephemera* Special Issue Paper Development Workshop

**Critical Management Studies beyond the Academy? 30th June – 2nd July 2027,
Lancaster University**

Session Type:

This is a Paper Development Workshop (PDW) associated with a forthcoming special issue of *Ephemera*: ‘The shape of universities to come: reimagination and remaking from within’.

The PDW is designed for authors who are preparing submissions to the special issue to share work-in-progress and receive sustained developmental feedback from peers and invited discussants.

In keeping with the commitments of both *Ephemera* and the ICMS conference theme, the workshop will be run in a hybrid format to ensure participation is not restricted by financial or geographical barriers. Authors submitting to the special issue who are unable to attend the conference in person – whether due to cost, visa constraints, caring responsibilities, or other barriers – will be able to participate remotely and submit their work for collective feedback.

Organiser Information:

- Christopher Woods, University of Melbourne;
- Jack Davis, Manchester Metropolitan University;
- Fabian Maier, Université Paris Dauphine-PSL;
- Chahrazad Abdallah, École des Sciences de la Gestion, Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM).

Building on the Ekstasis workshop at the 13th International Critical Management Studies conference (Ekstasis et al., 2024), this call was inspired by those who challenge the social, gender, and racial norms of academic publishing and institutional power, to demonstrate signs of resistance and renewal (Abdallah, 2026; Colombo, 2022; Dar et al., 2021; Parker, 2018; Peredo et al., 2022; Woods et al., 2022). The purpose of this PDW is to explore how forms of organising developed through CMS are enacted, translated and reworked within, against and beyond the Academy, and what these practices reveal about the relationship between academic work and wider social worlds. Following David Graeber’s (2015) assertion that the world is something we make, and can therefore be made differently, we aim to provide a space for exploring and showcasing colleagues’ active engagements and organising practices which reimagine and thereby remake the university.

The university is at a crossroads globally, albeit with significant regional variations. In the United States, universities face culture-war pressures that cast academics as “the enemy” (Shepherd, 2025) while technology firms position themselves as alternatives to higher education (Au-Yeung, 2025). In the UK, universities have adopted corporate management

practices that prioritise metrics, performance and ‘excellence’ frameworks, privileging certain forms of knowledge production (Burrell et al., 2024; Mingers, 2017; Steinhórsdóttir et al., 2017). In Australia, institutions have announced major restructures—including job losses, school closures and programme cuts—as well as reductions to national cultural and linguistic infrastructure (Duffy, 2025; Manns and Burrige, 2025). Elsewhere, universities face an “anti-wokeness” backlash against DEI, climate and sustainability agendas, in favour of more business-centred approaches (Mampaey & Huisman, 2025; Prasad and Śliwa, 2024), and growing challenges with the proliferation of AI in both teaching and research (Barros et al., 2023; Cornelissen, 2026). Within business schools, mainstream perspectives are often taught without critical counterparts, risking the legitimisation of ‘business as usual’, harmful to the natural environment (Nyberg and Wright, 2022) and reinforcing racial and gender norms (Dar & Faria, 2025; Liu, 2022; Morgan-Thomas, 2025). These shifts have intensified precarity, workloads and the narrowing of valuable scholarship, valorising overwork and even enabling censorship of critical research (Ivancheva et al., 2019; Ratle et al., 2020; Tekeste, 2025; Burrell et al., 2024). Rather than treating the university as a bounded site of critique, we position it as entangled with broader socio-political organisation and ask how critical practices resonate across these boundaries and with what effects.

In the face of these challenges, rather than asking ‘what is to be done’, for this workshop, we ask, *‘what is being done, and what can we learn from it?’*.

The reckoning with the university’s colonial legacies (Bhambra et al., 2018; La paperson, 2017), its role in actively invisibilizing indigenous knowledges (Grande, 2015; 2018), and the need to face legacies of epistemic violence and erasure (Dotson, 2011; Sippel & Ucelo Jimenez, 2025) have also contributed to the ongoing unsettling of the university’s current functioning. This has led to the emergence of the new interdisciplinary field of critical university studies (CUS). Ranging from a classical critique of the neoliberal turn and the effects of globalisation (Bousquet & Nelson, 2008; Collini, 2012) to a radical refusal of capture through the fugitive praxis of the undercommons (Harney & Moten, 2013), CUS has offered several possible reconfigurations of thinking in and about universities. Such research has also culminated more recently in decolonial and abolitionist approaches that condemn the exclusionary and predatory nature of the university and its perpetuation of colonial and carceral logics (Ferguson, 2012; Singh & Vora, 2023).

In the wake of these theoretical engagements, scholars are developing new practices of solidarity and collective action, from independent union organising to forming alternative academic spaces beyond traditional institutions, including this journal (McGregor and Knox, 2017; Ekstasis et al., 2024). For instance, Carreira et al. (2025) provide a compelling account of how business schools in Brazil are engaging their students in activism to address pressing socio-environmental issues, shifting students, practitioners and academics from alienation to active engagement. Martinez-Dy et al. (2025) reflect on the complexities of anti-racist scholar-activist organising in UK universities and the possibilities of organising communities within the university from the ground up to build capacity for anti-racist knowledge and practice. Ekstasis et al (2024) highlight the importance of affective solidarities in response to the precarity of the university, which operates to channel collective anger or rage. These dynamics have also been explored as an ‘undercommons’ and understood as a persistent space of antagonism (Abdallah, 2026). These recent examples not only demonstrate the potential for *academic communities* to confront systemic inequalities but also highlight the importance of

documenting such efforts to inspire and inform others. This growing body of work exemplifies the kind of collective struggle and critical engagement we wish to highlight in this special issue. As such, we aim to build on previous efforts to theorise radical forms of criticality, incorporating social, political and organisational action and strengthening the ties between critical research and activism (Bristow, 2021; Murphy et al., 2013).

The special issue that we are compiling and developing through this workshop aims to provide a resource for those who are already organising differently in 21st-century universities and beyond, as well as for those who wish to do so, across a wide range of contexts. We recognise that experiences in the global north are not universal, and we are interested in understanding how these dynamics play out in other parts of the world and across disciplines where the academic landscape may be shaped by different historical, cultural, political and economic factors. Therefore, we invite contributions that explore how these questions play out across different institutional and geographical landscapes. In short, we seek contributions that examine how such practices are imagined, enacted and translated across institutional boundaries, offering tactical and practical insights for reimagining organising both within and beyond the university.

We particularly encourage submissions that push the boundaries of academic writing and engage with the affective dimensions of the current crisis. This might include autoethnographic accounts, collective writing experiments, photo essays, visual contributions, poetry and music that capture the lived experiences of scholars navigating these challenges. In doing so, we try engaging with alternative modes of epistemic production, experimenting with forms of knowledge that may be more collective, affective and generative for practice beyond conventional academic dissemination. We also recognise that experiences in the global north are not universal, and we are interested in understanding how these dynamics play out in other parts of the world and across disciplines where the academic landscape may be shaped by different historical, cultural, political and economic factors.

Submission

Participants (in-person and remote) should submit a 500 word abstract or sketch of their ideas and an indication of whether they intend to participate in person or online to christopher.woods@unimelb.edu.au & j.davis@mmu.ac.uk by the conference deadline: 01/12/2026

Participants will later circulate work-in-progress that contributors are happy to share and discuss (max. 2,000–3,000 words if applicable) no later than four weeks before the conference: 28/05/2026. These will be shared with all workshop participants in advance.

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