

# Distinguished Scholars Seminar Series 2023



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## Biography

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 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. He is currently leading the multi-country GCRF project Climate-U (Transforming Universities for a Changing Climate).

## ABSTRACT

### What is a university? Critical reflections on the nature and future of higher education

This seminar addresses a critical question in contemporary times: what exactly is a university? And could it look very different and still achieve the aims that we set for it? Despite some superficial heterogeneity, higher education institutions around the world share core structures. According to critics such as Ivan Illich, the ossification of these institutional forms has ended up impoverishing the practices they were originally intended to support. The seminar will consider three significant features of the institution: gates – the controls on admissions to the university; roles – the distinctions drawn between students, lecturers and other actors; and badges – the processes and artefacts of validation of student learning and scholarship. These three features are seen to have varying forms, levels of rigidity and loci of control, and have ambiguous impacts on equality and fairness, and on the core purpose of the university to promote human understanding. Implications are drawn out for the future of the university, and for current initiatives that are attempting to subvert these structures and create alternative models. In particular, the seminar reflects on whether different forms might be better suited to addressing some of the critical challenges facing humanity, including climate change, epistemic injustice and conflict.