Academic workers in crisis
organisation in the post-pandemic university

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ABSTRACT
Introducing this special issue, this article summarises the contributions and reflects on the conditions in which the labour processes of their authors reflect the increasingly stressful working conditions of academic workers in the post-pandemic context.

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed a disturbing intersection in the multiple layers of precarity surrounding academic labour and the potential of digital technology and technologies of evaluation, ranking and calculation to exacerbate exploitation and exclusion. Mass layoffs and increased insecurity of employment in the academic sector reflect the deepening of a series of interrelated crises of capitalist production, social reproduction and governance (Cooper, 2020; The Marxist Feminist Collective, 2020), and their impact on the education and creative industries. New forms of organising how the university functions as an institution have quickly been rolled out through the extensive use of video conferencing and online education platforms, through changes

in the tasks workers are expected to perform and through the real threat of layoffs and reduced wages. Mariya Ivancheva and Brian Garvey (2022) argue that the increased reliance on digital platforms for teaching, which was ramped up during the lockdowns, has significant implications for the changing relations between labour and management in the academy.

The 'uberisation' of higher education (Collins, Glover & Myers, 2020) changes the structures of control, introducing into the university forms of algorithmic management that have long existed in other industries. It also limits the possibilities for solidarity, support and organising among workers. However, beyond the uberisation metaphor, the ways digital technology and technologies of ranking influence the organisation of labour, capital and power within the university point to larger issues in the relationship between organisation and technology (Orlikowski, 2007) and organisation and logistical media (Beverungen, Beyes & Conrad, 2019). University rankings and the quantification of knowledge production and cognitive labour through measures of impact and research excellence frameworks (REF) have had wide-ranging repercussions that magnify hierarchies in the internal division of academic labour (Ivancheva & Courtois, this issue) and aggravate the dynamics of power abuse and bullying (Anonymous & Huws, this issue).

These technological platforms, protocols and algorithms have largely served the purpose of standardising the pedagogical experience (sometimes through scraping and replicating materials produced by academic workers), imposing blank criteria for productivity and profitability on workers and imposing technological replicability. These can be the result of the universities' reliance on key performance indicators (KPIs) for international ranking, which create disproportionate pressures to ramp up productivity in institutions deprived of international students (O'Connell, 2021). They can take the form of new administrative protocols (Galloway, 2004) and guidelines for conducting teaching and research, undertaking fieldwork or travel. Or they can constitute new forms of interdependence between large technological platforms, universities and algorithms (Perrotta, Gulson, Williamson & Witzenberger, 2021).

The experiences of deepening precarity and exploitation have proved to be vastly different along class/gender/race and employment status lines. This reality defies the attempts of technological standardisation and subsumption and, paradoxically, creates the conditions for both fragmentation and stronger political solidarity and resistance. Women, in particular, have carried the double burden of reproductive labour in the home and the new work-from-home practices during the pandemic (Docka-Filipek & Stone, 2021). Although this has been neglected in the context of academic labour, people of colour and migrant communities have also been disproportionately exposed to vulnerabilities, both in terms of losing their jobs and in being more likely to be infected and become seriously sick (Laster, Pirtle & Wright, 2021). University workers and students in the Global South have also faced unique challenges during the pandemic (Husain, 2021) and had a qualitatively different experience of mobility, internationalisation and precarity.

The articles in this special issue take a critical look at the extent to which the pandemic period has changed the organisation of the university: as an educational institution, as an industry and as a particular kind of labour. As their authors show, the

initial responses to COVID-19, which emphasised the need for protection, care and containment of the virus, served as a vehicle for technological measures and institutional policies that aggravate the condition of the academic worker in multiple ways. Aside from increased precarity and heavier workload, academics have had to grapple with unresponsive management that shifts the burden of sustained learning outcomes and personal protection onto the workers. Educators have also borne the psychic toll of the continued encroachments of work into their personal lives, through the conditions of remote work but also through the intrusive and highly personal dynamics of bullying and algorithmic violence faced by workers as a result of the quantification and precarisation of the academy.

The issue opens with an analysis by Richard Hall of how UK policymakers sought to re-engineer Higher Education in England during and after the pandemic, creating an 'entanglement of precarity and privilege' and raising new challenges for solidarity.

Emiliana Armano, Andrea Cavazzini and Rosanna Maccarone, in their article 'Enhancement or impoverishment? Algorithmic management and "distance" education during the pandemic. Theoretical and interpretive hypotheses', take a critical look at the technological and political measures taken during the pandemic in the Italian education system, analysing them as part of a long process of hyper-industrialisation (Alquati, 2021). This drive to hyper-industrialisation is defined by the logic of standardisation, serialisation and quantification intrinsic to both classical Taylorism and digital Taylorism (Altenried, 2020). In the field of education, the authors see the effects of hyper-industrialisation in the experiences of educators and students alike, both of whom are coerced to conform to rigid forms of knowledge production and expression and become integrated within the extractivist economies of educational platforms. At the same time, technologically enabled processes of intensification of labour, introduced widely during the pandemic, have led to the encroachment of capitalist work relations and working-day structures on leisure time and the privacy of the home. Armano, Cavazzini and Maccarone argue that Italy, which was the first European country to be hit by the COVID-19 outbreak, served as a laboratory for the introduction and further solidification of many of these measures of hyper-industrialisation.

Mara De Giusti Bordignon, Melody Viczko and Renata Matsumoto analyse the swift shift from pastoral policies to measures of securitisation at university institutions in the course of the COVID-19 pandemic in Canada. By offering an overview of the official guidelines and communication issued by the management of three Canadian universities, the authors highlight the need to critically interrogate the assumptions behind the impulse of labelling the 2020 pandemic as a global moment of crisis. Instead, the chronological analysis of consecutive measures reveals an evolving process of re-evaluation of priorities and political messages and a shift in the discourse from focus on protection to focus on surveillance and the management of student and staff behaviour. This diachronic study of organisational responses to the pandemic reveals a context in which educational labour and students had to respond to contradictory demands while academic institutions were leveraging a shift from pastoral care to neoliberal responsibilisation, which places the onus of prevention on the students and staff.

Mariya Ivancheva and Aline Courtois' article 'EdTech-mediated outsourcing and casualisation of academic labour: toward a research agenda' discusses the processes of re-organisation of academic labour through technology-mediated outsourcing. The authors argue that the tendencies of precarisation of academic labour in UK higher education that were already in place before the COVID-19 pandemic have been significantly exacerbated through the push to online learning, which allowed online programme management (OPM) companies to get an even stronger foothold in the industry. Largely relying on precarious outsourced labour, these companies further deepen the processes of real subsumption of academic labour and the divide between high-valued research and what the authors see as reproductive labour in the academy: teaching and pastoral labour. Ivancheva and Courtois insist on the interdependencies between such processes of division and hierarchisation of labour and the wider use of EdTech OPMs, which make the recruitment and disposal of precarious teaching workers ever more convenient for universities.

Heather Connolly and Paul Stewart's 'Employment regulation as the warm house for neoliberalism? Comparing higher education in France and the UK' offers an anatomy of the response of academic labour representative bodies to the remote teaching measures imposed by universities. Connolly and Stewart analyse these responses in the historical context of different dynamics of neoliberalisation of higher education in the two countries, which have led to distinctively different forms of labour regulation and organising. They argue that, despite its stronger tradition in militant unionising, France offers a paradoxically weak example of resistance to management demands during the pandemic, because of the inability of unions to form and articulate a response. In contrast, the UK union, UCU, was part of the processes of decision-making, albeit in the form of what the authors call 'inclusionary subordination'.

'Algorithmic violence: towards an interdisciplinary understanding of bullying in academia' by three anonymous authors and Ursula Huws, draws a connection between the increasing intensification of labour, driven, in part, by processes of quantification and algorithmic management at universities, and the growing reports and personal accounts of bullying. The authors argue that the blend of bureaucratic violence and algorithmic organisation of academic labour creates the structural conditions for the exercise of forms of power in which personal intimidation and the resulting pressure and pain are rendered invisible but nevertheless allowed to flourish.

The articles in this volume responded to our call for papers with analyses and case studies that emphasise the oppressive conjuncture of digital technologies, precarisation and stressful working conditions in higher education. It is perhaps not surprising that this is the conclusion that emerges from the diagnosis of the current condition of academia. These trends, as our authors point out, have been exacerbated by the organisational and technological changes implemented in the majority of educational institutions during the COVID-19 pandemic, in the form of remote learning measures and procedures aimed at containing the virus and streamlining productivity. While this bleak picture of academia is undoubtedly disheartening to all of us who invest our labour in the machinery of knowledge production and social reproduction at centres for higher education, we want to emphasise, in our introduction, the continuing acts and gestures of solidarity that sustain the important

intellectual and political work of the university and give meaning to our involvement in it. During the long months of preparation of this special issue, our authors, reviewers and the editorial board of the journal were led by a deliberate focus on care and support for each other. The process of writing, revising and putting this issue into production was accompanied by email exchanges sharing the toll of multiple deadlines, personal and career life changes, and health problems that so many of us have to navigate as an invisible but tangible part of the research process in academia. Often, the imperative for intense productivity and quantifiable outputs renders these personal circumstances behind academic labour invisible and even undesirable. In contrast, we adopted a care-focused approach in our preparation this issue, in ways that extended the timeline of its production but have, hopefully, managed to accommodate the conflicting demands and circumstances that we all experienced during these months. We are grateful for the time, labour and patience that each of the people involved in the making of this special issue generously contributed to us, including the authors whose articles did not find their way into the final publication. These small gestures and acts of solidarity, the patience and support among authors, editors and reviewers give us the hope and strength to fight against the corroding pain of despair and seek, in the words of the late Mike Davis, 'the miracles of ordinary people doing heroic things' (Beckett & Davis, 2022).

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