Beyond the limits of solidarity in the post-pandemic university

Richard Hall

Richard Hall is Professor of Education and Technology in the School of Applied Social Sciences at De Montfort University, Leicester, United Kingdom.

COPYRIGHT
© 2024, Richard Hall. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution Licence (CC BY) 4.0 https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/, which permits unrestricted use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

ABSTRACT
This article challenges a liberal analysis of higher education (HE) inside an integrated system of economic production, and instead critiques: first, how UK policymakers sought to re-engineer English HE during and after the pandemic, through governance, regulation and funding changes predicated upon accelerating a discourse of value-for-money; second, the institutional labour reorganisation that followed, and which placed complete class fractions of academic labour in a permanent state of being at risk; and third, how in continually demonstrating that it cannot fulfil the desires of those who labour within it for a meaningful work-life, the university must be transcended. In addressing the entanglement of precarity and privilege, it argues that, if the university is unable to contribute to ways of knowing, being and doing that address socio-economic, socio-environmental or intersectional ruptures, then it must go.

KEY WORDS
Crisis; labour conditions; precarity; proletarianisation; restructuring; university labour; value-for-money
Introduction: precarity and competition inside higher education (HE)

The university is viewed in relation to global responses to crisis in two ways. First, it is viewed in relation to specific historical events like the financial shock of 2007/08 or the epidemiological shock of COVID-19. And second, it is examined in relation to material changes in ecosystems, such as climate forcing, ocean acidification or collapse in nitrogen cycles. However, these responses sit inside worldviews that see capitalism as a transhistorical, systemic reality that can be finessed or reformed, but never abolished and transcended. They do not analyse capitalism itself as the ongoing crisis of life.

This is reflected globally in hegemonic responses to disruption. For the OECD (2021), systemic responses to the pandemic pivot around the acceleration of digitalisation in higher education (HE), which then shapes the possibility for new modes of credentialisation alongside an increasing push for personalisation of learning. This includes new support systems connecting academic and professional services’ functions, designed to reduce attrition and promote retention. A connected element in this new learning ecosystem is the need to incentivise staff career structures. Thus, at the start of the pandemic, the OECD (2020) highlighted the need to renew institutional management and organisation of ‘human resources’, both to incentivise engagement with digital tools, and to encourage the specialisation of roles, which might themselves be reimagined as ‘non-standard’ (flexible or casual).

Here, there was a clear acceleration of processes that fragment university labour (in terms of the experiences of students, professional services staff and academics). A reimagining of how such labour might be organised through universities and in society, for-value or for economic growth, was increasingly the key arbiter for investment. Rather than focusing upon a collectively reimagined HE, the impetus remains for universities to drive innovation around heavily individualised experiences that can be accredited in relation to a world of work.

Writing for the World Bank, Arnhold & Bassett (2021) also focus upon tertiary education systems that are resilient, and through which a focus upon skills development, fluid knowledge production networks and talent management will address (as a secondary gain) critical global issues that ensure green and equitable economic growth. Thus, Arnold and Bassett (ibid.) structured their argument around building diversified systems, and situating tertiary education against flexible, lifelong learning that supports and is adaptable to the labour market. In this argument, such flexibility will generate green skills, alongside research and development that addresses climate emergencies. Here, social and ecological justice emerge through personal adaptability and resilience, inside a system renewed against such individuated values.

Such narratives cannot escape the logic of global markets and transnational desires that shape the commodification of education, in order to bounce back from crises and overcome the economic scarring or hysteresis that ensues (Hall, 2021). Thus, rather than rethinking resource allocation around collective needs, the pandemic foregrounded renewal based on (in)efficiency. Thus, for instance, in reviewing the funding and governance of lifelong learning, post-pandemic, the original consultation on the proposed United Kingdom Lifelong Loan Entitlement (Department for
Education (DfE), 2022:4) argued that it ‘will be instrumental in delivering our ambitious pathway to build a more flexible, efficient and streamlined funding system across higher education levels’.

For Arnhold and Bassett (2022), new technologies underpin this process, where investment in them is smart, enabling agile service development and building capacity across a digital ecosystem, catalysing economic growth and job creation. Moreover, the resilience of this ecosystem is insupportable inside standard, historical institutions, and instead the development of the system should follow the needs of individuals working through markets and the economy. In this narrative, equity in access to those ecosystems, through appropriate (micro-)financing, enables social justice. However, this aim pivots around efficiencies that build value into global flows of tertiary education. Thus, both the OECD focus upon human resources and the World Bank focus upon resilience link post-pandemic value creation in HE to the realities of digital divides, weak infrastructure and allegedly weak public finances (for underpinning educational innovation).

In relation to public finances, labour restructuring in HE in the Global North, both before and during the pandemic, tended to be analysed to reflect the vulnerabilities of sectors and economies that are over-leveraged, and in which profitability and investment is assumed under low interest rates with precarious or surplus employment (Kose, Nagle, Ohnsorge & Sugawara, 2019; Badia, Medas, Gupta & Xiang, 2020). Through such analyses, universities come under pressure to generalise ‘innovations and emergency processes, [so that] systems can adapt and scale up the more effective solutions’ (World Bank Group Education, 2020:7), and turn ‘recovery into real growth’ (Munevar, 2020). These pressures work to reshape post-pandemic HE, through dynamic changes (technological, demographic, climate-related), the need to support a green transition, the automation of work, the operational change of the global and interconnected level, and the demand for highly adaptable workers.

At a transnational level, this actualises deeply interconnected desires that use the pandemic as a means of accelerating the reproduction of education for-value. Such actualisation stitches HE into demands for economic growth, and a renewal of the financial structures, cultures and practices that surround everyday life (Salmi, 2021). In the modelling of McKibbin and Vines (2020), there is a core role for bodies like the International Monetary Fund and G20 in this, in supporting global cooperation through a new financial roadmap. This aligns with the belief of Arnhold and Bassett (2022:3) that finance, educational innovation and the public good require policy that works with investment, to create ‘a virtuous circle where investments in tertiary education go along with labor market needs, and a properly skilled workforce attracts the right investments that can create more and better jobs’.

For some commentators, this demonstrates an idealised view of the national and geopolitical realities that condition HE in a post-pandemic world (Welch, 2022), or it denies the need to look for integrated solutions beyond Eurocentrism (Marginson & Xu, 2021). Others stress the need for the university to demonstrate new modes of cultural leadership (Barnett, Bengtsen & Nørgård, 2022). Yet, such responses do not reimagine intellectual work, rather they seek simply to upgrade the established activity and organisation of the university, as a force for redistribution and social mobility.
For example, environmental warnings, like that of the Inter-Governmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC, 2023) Sixth Assessment Report (6AR) Synthesis Report, tend not to question how hegemonic ideas of education from the North enable the reproduction of the biosphere as-is, by reproducing capitalist social relations. They might seek to analyse ‘the evolution of the world on an integrated basis’ (Marginson & Xu, 2021:8), but they tend to give high confidence to mitigation and adaptation within a system that can be finessed and never abolished. 

*Increasing education including capacity building, climate literacy, and information provided through climate services and community approaches can facilitate heightened risk perception and accelerate behavioural changes and planning.* (IPCC, 2023:32)

Questioning the basis of integration enables issues of diversity, inclusivity and inequality to be raised, but does not challenge the underpinning logic of a world-economic system, which drives exploitation, expropriation and extraction for-value (Fraser, 2016; Mignolo & Walsh, 2018). It is exactly the evolution of the world on an integrated basis that capitalism seeks, in order to reproduce its alienating logics, and the university sits hopelessly at the heart of this (Hall, 2021). Operating inside hegemonic institutional structures, and reproducing cultures and practices for-value, or predicated upon the generation of surpluses, university labourers are denied modes of releasing or reimagining the collective wealth of their/our social skills, knowledge, capacities and capabilities. By contrast, this collective wealth, or general intellect of society (Marx, 1857/1993), is co-opted through mediations like the market, the division of labour, private property and commodity exchange, which seem to form an impregnable realm or kingdom.

Instead, in relation to crises of finance, epidemiology or environment, this collective wealth is put to work in order to generate surpluses, for instance, of time or value, which can be realised as money. Moreover, crises are used to accelerate competition between institutions and individuals over enforced scarcities of privilege, status and power. In response to this, the reproduction of the university must be analysed immanent to a totalising system that demands expansion, but which is itself also in permanent crisis. Such an examination does not simply look to analyses of HE that centre around the digital, new modes of accreditation, or labour restructuring. Rather it seeks to understand how those symptomatic responses to a notional, economic-epidemiological crisis are in fact classic responses to a crisis of value-production and accumulation. These catalyse the restructuring and reshaping of university labour, in order that such work/labour is able to generate value.

Thus, this article moves beyond a liberal analysis of HE inside an integrated system of economic production, and instead critiques: first, how UK policymakers sought to re-engineer English HE¹ during and after the pandemic, through governance,

---

¹ This article deliberately takes English higher education as its unit of analysis. Whilst there is an overarching Government for the United Kingdom, which sets a legal framework for education, there are four higher education sectors in the UK (England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales). They have significant overlap and commonalities, but they differ in relation to how they are regulated and funded, on behalf of their different governments.
A policy of value-for-money

University labour is deeply stratified, with a complex composition impacted intersectionally and intergenerationally, encompassing a range of academics and professional services’ staff with differential privilege and status, alongside students. It is increasingly defined against a policy terrain that stresses the responsibility of individuals, rather than the community, in overcoming the realities of being at risk and in creating value, both as surplus and as social relation (Jappe, 2014).

Being at risk is heightened in the university because of the increasing roles of commercial capital and money capital, which work to dissolve existing forms and content of production, in order to reproduce new terrains for value-production. Following the financial crisis of 2007/08, and the transnational generalisation of austerity governance, such capital justified its insinuation inside the logics of HE with a focus upon agility, innovation, productivity and value-for-money (Bevins, Bryant, Krishnan & Law, 2020). The systemic inability to catalyse new forms of accumulation, coupled with both the need to generate surpluses of time, labour, value and money, and the demand to find new outlets for a mass of inactive, financial surpluses generated the following:

- New waves of student and institutional debt, based upon fees and bonds.
- A focus upon productivity and investment in infrastructure projects that would increase the organic composition of capital (this is the value-composition of the

---

2 In Chapter 16 of Capital, Volume 1, Marx identifies two forms of what he calls merchants capital, namely commercial capital and money-dealing capital. These have different, political economic characteristics and social implications. Commercial capital meets the needs of industrial capital in enabling the circulation of commodities. For instance, open education vendors mediate the flows of educational products like course content, or services that are commodified from harvested user/student data, in a global market. This tends to enable vendors to buy commodities at a cheaper price than that at which it then sells them. Money capital, made manifest in education through the role of private equity and venture capitalists, does not care about the sale of concrete commodities, beyond their ability to offer a monetary return. The key is that a fixed sum of money begets its initial outlay plus an increment. In this, it seeks partnership with commercial capital that can drive innovation and value, in order that money capital can dissolve commodity-capital into further surplus, realised as money. This is witnessed, for instance, in terms of the finance required to commodify student and institutional debt. Thus, commercial and money capital tend to work in tandem, with corporate vendors and finance creating an ecosystem for educational commodities. In the analysis of higher education as a social activity, the role of each enables us to understand how they work differentially to dissolve previous forms of educational consumption and production.
specific capital, effectively its labour-intensity, governed by the ratio between the value of the elements of constant capital in production (raw materials, infrastructure) and the value of the labour employed).

- Hoarding surpluses for investment in fixed capital, rather than on academic labour.
- Subversion of collective bargaining, and an impetus for utilising casualised workers rather than for recruiting employees.
- Policy focused upon entrepreneurship and commercialisation.
- Data-based monitoring of staff and student performance.
- Ongoing separation of institutional governance and sector regulation from the production of knowledge.

This financialised re-engineering was recalibrated during the pandemic, because previous monetary options, for instance access to finance and new fee-based income, were no longer available. Instead, the validity of operating models for universities in England demanded increased competition over home and international student numbers. It also led to questions over the effective deployment of technology, which justified the bleeding of work into home life and caring responsibilities. Moreover, it halted infrastructure projects, and increased instances of institutions threatening significant (departmental or functional) redundancies.

Responding to the 2020 lockdown, sector leaders linked government-backed support to their commitment to ‘reduce costs, increase efficiency and moderate certain behaviours to increase stability and sustainability’ (Universities UK (UUK), 2020). In these statements, new modes of performance were promised, although it is clear that institutions were impacted differentially, based upon their access to liquidity. Thus, differential revenues impacted institutions with high debt or other fixed costs that needed to be serviced, or those with strict debt or bond covenants. This was more extreme for those with high exposure to particular, vulnerable income streams like international student fees, those with low levels of liquidity, and those arts-based institutions vulnerable to funding settlements that prioritise Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths (STEM) subjects (McGettigan, 2022).

In England, the focus of both government policy and ministerial statements demanded that HE providers focus upon generating value within a competitive structure ‘designed to ensure those providers make changes that will enable them to make a strong contribution to the nation’s future’ (DfE, 2020a:3). This was explicitly reinforced within short-term, regulatory consultations about quality and standards, which would be determined by competition, performance data, efficiency and measurements of specific student outcomes (Office for Students (OfS), 2022a). Here, the reproduction of the university was calibrated against both the social need to reinstate a dominant model of economic growth based upon the common sense of capitalist work and individual responsibility for generating human capital, within a system deemed meritocratic.

Pandemic-driven, English HE policy and guidelines explicitly connected economic renewal and labour restructuring through efficiencies. The foreword to the Establishment of a Higher Education Restructuring Regime in Response to COVID-19
argued that, *in extremis*, institutions requiring financial support would have conditions imposed, in order to ensure the delivery of high-quality courses with strong employment outcomes, having a demonstrable regional demand and impact (DfE, 2020a). Thus, the pandemic would be used to make future funding conditional upon guarantees of outcomes for students, the economy and the taxpayer, with ‘a clear and sustainable model for future provision as a result of restructuring’ (ibid.:6).

Access to restructuring funds was conditional on meeting legal requirements for freedom of speech, and in this way academic labour could be recalibrated against hegemonic norms of financialised whiteness. Explicit opposition to minoritarian citizenship, for instance, in efforts to decolonise curricula, were therefore centred in policy that re-prioritised hegemonic value-production and social relations (Hall, Gill & Gamsu, 2022). Thus, amendments to the governing principles of the chief regulator, the OfS, for example, in its *Value-for-money strategy 2019–21* (OfS, 2019), situated individual choice, taxpayer protection, competition, fee limits, employment outcomes, funding transparency and improving teaching quality inside an economistic HE system with a key focus upon value-for-money, as a leveller ‘[f]or all students, from all backgrounds’ (ibid.:3).

The DfE (2020b:4) focused upon ensuring ‘our world-class HE system delivers for all students and the wider economy’, with a focus on post-pandemic value (Hewitt, 2021). In order to deliver this, regulation would push back against courses responsible for ‘dumbing down and spoon-feeding students rather than pursuing high standards and embedding the subject knowledge and intellectual skills needed to succeed in the modern workplace’ (DfE, 2020c). At its heart, policy-based governance and regulation were required to encourage institutional investment in human capital development, and thereby to deliver value, in part through the reduction of alleged bureaucratic burdens. Such investment links the notional autonomy of universities to the reproduction of economistic narratives that prioritise growth and student (employment) outcomes (Williamson, 2021;OfS, 2022b).

In her response to the *Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities* report, the then Minister of State for Equalities, Kemi Badenoch MP (2022), reinforced these narratives of human capital development. She argued for institutions that enable ‘the agency, resilience and mutual support of and among individuals, families and communities [and] that ultimately drives success and achievement’. The plan that supports the idea of *Inclusive Britain* announced by Badenoch (2022), highlighted specific actions (43–46, 53) on universities that articulate the pandemic responses of the national Conservative Government. These include a commitment to teaching quality and standards that protect the choice-based consumer rights of students, alongside setting new access and participation targets, and driving up employment outcomes. Linked to a new Lifelong Loan Entitlement (DfE, 2023), a renewed, flexible and adaptable education would enable social mobility as a solution to inequality.

Here, universities are expected to ‘clamp down on low quality courses, which hurt people from disadvantaged backgrounds the most’ (Badenoch, 2022), reframing university labour and intellectual work in relation to equality of opportunity, robust data and individual resilience. This was echoed by the incoming Minister of State for Skills, Apprenticeships and Higher Education, Robert Halfon MP (2022), who noted ‘it
is not all about serving employment and the economy. It must be about value-for-money too. Universities have a contract with students to provide quality teaching.

Linking value-for-money to quality, as an act of ‘social justice’, especially for disadvantaged students, is set inside both a restricted financial settlement for universities, and an increasingly competitive environment. Reinforcing this tightening context in which university labour is organised, claims were also made about financial contraction, in relation to pensions exposure for some groups in specific sub-sectors of HE (Reeve, 2020). Although contested by others (Otsuka, 2021), claims about the valuations of pensions and related financial management plans also opened up divisions among university workers about strategy and tactics (Otsuka, 2022), for instance, where pension struggles are coupled with issues of intergenerational labour solidarity, ongoing casualisation and pay (in)equality. As a result, counter-narratives that resist and refuse the immanent restructuring of the relations of production, through the normalisation of zero-hours contracts, outsourcing, redundancies and so on, tend to be marginalised in labour disputes, because they are not generalised.

Thus, policy calibrates institutions for-value, and, without an increase in unit funding for students, this challenges those institutions to become competing capitals searching for growth. As a result, universities are forced to compete: first, for student numbers (as student number controls are removed and fee income per student remains static/impacted by inflation) and research income; second, in commercialisation and knowledge transfer; and third, over indicators of prestige, like league table position. Whilst the complexities of the political economy of HE tend to be reduced to fetishised ideas of money via cost savings, or emancipation based on learning for a life of capitalist work, the pandemic demonstrates how exogenous crises re-establish the limits and conditions existing in the system as a totality. This political economy is reproduced through the circuits of productive, money and commodity capital, which materially impact university labour organisation.

Labour reorganisation in the pandemic university

Government policy encourages financial and commercial capital to synchronise educational production with their own circuits, imposing new labour relations, for instance, in new workload and absence management policies, and conditions of work (Williamson & Komljenovic, 2022). Intellectual forces and relations of production are made increasingly competitive, governed by the demands of institutional efficiency or recovery plans (Connolly, 2020). As Engels (1845/2009:111) articulated, ‘Competition is the completest expression of the battle of all against all’, and enforced competition has implications for university labourers, in reinforcing the neglect of health and safety, and a raft of accounts of ill-being, estrangement and suffering through work (#coronacontract, 2021).

This underscores Marx’s (1857/1993) argument that the hegemony of the bourgeois mode of production rests on the expansion of a global system of valorisation, built upon both commodification for exchange and the labourers’ neglect of themselves.
Exchange demands the spatial transformation of productive forces, including in workplaces and modes of communication, and in human capacities and capabilities. As capital drives beyond its spatial barriers and demands the ‘annihilation of space by time’ (ibid.:525), circulation and labour time are revolutionised. In this expansionary ecosystem, and being permanently at risk of becoming surplus to requirements, labourers must become self-exploiting.

These issues are exacerbated intergenerationally and intersectionally, with negative manifestations for those who do not reflect dominant racial-patriarchal and settler-colonial norms (Megoran & Mason, 2020; Rollock, 2019; Henderson & Bhopal, 2021). Crucially, they also reveal deep layers of wounding and scarring where they intersect with the institutional, post-pandemic re-engineering of academic labour, as the desire for surplus everything, and especially surplus value.

Inside this competitive terrain, university labour is reorganised against the need of universities for relative surplus value, as a homogenising desire (Marx, 1867/2004; Hall & Bowles, 2016). The distinctions between absolute and relative surplus value are central to analyses of the forms and content of university labour. Increasingly, universities strive to increase the absolute amounts of surplus value that can be produced and accumulated, by extending the working day, or by locating new international or corporate markets from which to accumulate. This generates overwork, but it reaches limits, in terms of the length of the working day or limited academic skillsets.

These limits, alongside the underdeveloped market/financial mechanisms and higher levels of collective bargaining, mean that there is limited innovation that can reduce socially necessary labour time. This is the labour time required by a worker of average productivity, working with tools of the average productive potential, to produce a given commodity. In the HE context, staff with proprietary skills reduce the average time for assessment, or generating new commodities or services through impact or commercialisation, and as a result tend to increase productivity. Workers with commodity or leverage skills contribute less social value, where they are reduced to managing administrative or back-office processes, or hold skills that are widespread, (for instance, in relation to programming, librarianship or network administration). As a result, competing universities drive the application of more productive technologies or techniques that restore competitive advantage, and increase their relative access to social surpluses.

In responding to crises of value, competition shapes and is shaped by the desire for relative surplus value, which attempts to make superfluous any labour (teaching, assessment, scholarship, administration, research) that is unproductive, and to speed up operations. By revolutionising the forces and relations of production, new labour relations and working conditions generate efficiencies and lower socially necessary labour time. New process-based capabilities and capacities (generated by efficiency savings) impose further work reorganisation. As a result, university labour becomes more fragmented and/or casualised, forcing individuals into acute disciplinary and teaching/research/assessment specialisms, or obliging them to chase the next precarious contract. As innovations are generalised and relative surpluses reduced, further labour-related transformations and self-exploitation are normalised.
As noted by Hall (2021:61), ‘The result is a particular terrain of super-exploitation grounded in the concentration and rationalisation of production through new technocratic assemblages’. In the pandemic university, this amplifies self-exploitation through the tendency to increase its technical composition, as a response to the need to generate surpluses. The impacts of this university labour were witnessed in new modes of technological and organisational innovation, which drove down the labour time for activities like assessing and publishing compared to competitor institutions. This was an attempt to maintain a competitive advantage. However, it also stimulated rises in casualised or precarious employment, because by driving down labour costs senior managers could either deploy a greater mass of labour power, or replace skilled labourers with those with less experience or expertise (Marx, 1867/2004).

Self-exploitation is also an outcome of the creation of transformation offices inside universities, designed to re-engineer the technical conditions of academic production (through digital innovation, new workload agreements and so on). Such innovation is designed to enable new accumulations of surplus academic products to become additional means of production that can drive new markets, internationalisation or digital learning strategies. It also generates the possibility of throwing academic labourers from one sphere of production (the university) into new ones (private or alternative service providers). One outcome of this is the requirement for university labour to work longer and to set in motion more means of production (more content or courses with more students) in order to reduce the relative size of its labour costs. Finally, activity labelled as transformational exists inside a sector-wide tendency to centralise and monopolise the production, circulation and accumulation of academic value (through league tables, enabling market exit, reducing funding beyond STEM subjects, and so on).

During the pandemic, university labour was increasingly confronted with new risks. For instance, Durham University proposed a move to fully online degrees, whilst the University of Sheffield proposed salary cuts and promotion freezes for staff. There were also reports of significant lay-offs for fixed-term contract staff across the sector. In the post-pandemic university, placing workers at risk or potentially surplus to requirements has become an explicit management weapon in the class conflict now normalised across academia (Grove, 2022). Thus, during 2022–23, redundancies were proposed at a range of institutions, including Birkbeck (University of London), De Montfort University, and the Universities of Kent, Roehampton and Wolverhampton, whilst the University of East Anglia’s financial distress led to threats of compulsory redundancies.

This is a non-exhaustive list, but demonstrates a range of targeted and generalised cuts being proposed within institutions, reinforced by the ongoing use of casualised and precarious contracts for staff. In response, this gave energy to long-standing campaigns.

---

3 Increasingly, UK universities are appointing chief transformation officers, with a responsibility to design and deliver co-ordinated approaches to core activities, at a strategic level. This is programme, rather than project-based innovation, which aims to transform the institution in relation to value-for-money and efficiency, through the planning of capital projects that ensure the integration of physical and digital infrastructures, and in relation to labour.
against casualisation (#coronacontract, 2021), and significant local organising, which led to anti-casualisation agreements at the University of Bath, the Open University and Sheffield Hallam University, among others. However, this is still a contested terrain of struggle, and the reality is of a disconnection between struggles over, first, the restructuring of permanent staff, and, second, the reproduction of casualisation. A similar disconnect erupts from the inability of university labour to generate significant solidarity in relation to continual labour outsourcing. In particular, this impacts professional service functions, both for digital services (Cuthbert, 2022) and estate functions, like cleaning and security (see the references at Outsourcing@Surrey, 2022). The deep divisions within academic trade unions over the idea of the worker and the employee, over tactics in disputes and over what constitutes ‘winning’ demonstrate the hold of class fractions over the promise of mutual benefits through solidarity-in-struggle.

Restructuring, casualisation and outsourcing reflect the movement of absolute and relative surplus value, in response to crises like the pandemic. Through this movement, the relations and forces of production are conditioned by both the university’s need to reduce the costs of the academic labour power that drives commodity production and exchange-value (socially necessary labour time), and the social need for new, entrepreneurial and creative labour. Here, the increased availability of money capital through private equity and debt financing (as noted in footnote 2) enables: bottlenecks to be overcome (through precarious employment); a quicker turnover of production (through accelerated degrees or rapid prototyping); intensified labour processes (through capital-intensive use of classroom technologies); increased academic entropy (through internationalisation strategies predicated upon commodity-dumping); and the ability to create new forms of organisational development (through new workload models).

One outcome relates to working identities, as individuals are forced to operate as sub-contractors of the university, whether they are casualised, on fixed-term or permanent contracts. In the post-pandemic university, this culture is reproduced immanent to the generation of a relative surplus population or reserve army of labour (Marx, 1867/2004). For instance, increasing numbers of potential workers hold PhDs, some of whom have eked out their existence on a succession of precarious teaching contracts. In the face of this surplus population, and also threats of restructuring, notionally tenured staff must reinvent themselves repeatedly. They must compete to undertake, or be ready to undertake, the teaching, preparation, assessing, feedback, knowledge transfer, curriculum design, scholarship and so on, of multiple academic workers. Thus, there is an increased tendency for these workers to generate and offer up their own surplus labour time, in a desperate attempt to remain onside. The university-as-business, or as competing capital, makes this central to its model for grounding growth and competitive edge, through workers’ (self-) exploitation.

As Marx (1847) noted:

*The labourer seeks to maintain the total of his wages for a given time by performing more labour, either by working a great number of hours, or by accomplishing more in the same number of hours. Thus, urged on by want, he*
himself multiplies the disastrous effects of division of labour. The result is: the more he works, the less wages he receives. And for this simple reason: the more he works, the more he competes against his fellow workmen, the more he compels them to compete against him, and to offer themselves on the same wretched conditions as he does; so that, in the last analysis, he competes against himself as a member of the working class.

This critique of political economy reminds us how the lived experiences of university workers, defined against policy and financial settlements and accelerated in the post-pandemic realities of competition, are increasingly connected to ongoing processes of proletarianisation that are immanent to those of valorisation. As those with privilege are brought into relation with precarious relations of production, and as the forces of production are revolutionised, they are also forced to face the question: what is to be done? This asks us to question how precarity as a metaphor might enable other worlds to be imagined. It asks us to question how the realities of precarity condition the potential for solidarity within universities that are mediated for value by divisions of labour, private property, commodity exchange and the market.

Conclusion: labour organising beyond HE

The reality for university workers of being at risk, is reproduced against a post-pandemic financial terrain that threatens institutional long-term sustainability and short-term liquidity (Weston, 2023). At the same time, policy conditions drive practice around value-for-money, employability and the economy and teaching quality, which subsequently drives efficiency. This was amplified during the pandemic, such that the working conditions of university labourers are increasingly managed by a tenured bureaucracy that diminishes the value of intellectual work, and instead inserts low-cost practices built upon a culture of estrangement from peers, generalised overwork and casualised attention to self-care. This is easier to weather for those with access to networks of privilege and resources, who tend to occupy particular positions in the academic division of labour. However, it is much harder for those on precarious contracts, or for whom the post-pandemic university reproduces intersectional, intergenerational and intercommunal injustices.

During the pandemic, and in response to claims that management was disregarding health and safety in a rush to reopen (Chitty, Callard & Pearce, 2020; The Independent Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE), 2020), Kornbluh (2020) examined whether the pandemic needed to be interpreted as academia’s new shock doctrine. This metaphor reinforces the symbolism of the university as a space inside which individual lives, hopes, histories and relationships must be sacrificed. It is a space inside which disorientation and perceived risk enable transnational activist

---

4 The argument here is that these workers have tended to be inoculated from having to consider the radical transformation of their conditions of labour, whilst those struggling against casualisation and precarious work have led struggles over labour relations. As the sector is increasingly restructured, and precarity appears more generalised, these more privileged workers are brought into relation with such struggles more concretely.
networks (of policymakers, Vice-Chancellors, educational technology vendors, consultancies, private equity and so on) to revolutionise structures, cultures and practices, in order to leverage value.

Against this shock doctrine, struggles in the post-pandemic institution, like the Universities and Colleges Union (UCU) strike of 2022/23 (Lewis, 2023), demonstrated that it is almost impossible for university labour to develop a counter-hegemonic project that pushes back against such transnational activist networks. Whilst core issues in this struggle, related to pay uplifts and equality, workload and casualisation, are critical terrains that demand reform, they tend to obscure: first, the divisions between fractions of that labour working in a prestige economy and looking to accrue intellectual capital; second, the lack of class solidarity between academics, and both professional service staff and students; third, the defence of privilege that underpins this prestige economy; and fourth, the fetishisation of the university as a unique sector, which tends to deny solidarity with other branches of the economy. Marx (1867/2004:96) was clear that ‘while the class struggle remains latent or manifests itself only in isolated and sporadic phenomena’, capital will maintain its power. This is particularly the case where capital acts as a joint-stock company or association of capitals, able to mobilise significant, cross-sector resources in any class conflict.

Thus, in the 2022–23 UCU strike, academic workers manifested the redundancy of ‘isolated and sporadic phenomena’. At a national level, the union maintained a financial analysis that neglected the restricted and limiting financial health of individual institutions in any pay claim, and instead made claims about the reserves of the sector as a whole. Moreover, there was a disengagement from the funding, governance and regulatory terrain upon which academic labour is forced to compete. This meant that without any renewed funding settlement, and without any commitment for cross-sector bailouts, individual institutions were at risk from unfunded pay claims. This was compounded by a lack of national organising and strategy that could resist the demands of transnational capital, reinforced by a disconnect between national organising and horizontal, branch-based organising. With factionalised, national decision-making exacerbating problems in the aggregation of separate demands (like pay equality, workload and pensions), employers were able to set class fractions of university labour in opposition to each other. Finally, a focus upon the form in which decision-making could be operationalised, rather than on the content of demands, dissipated energy.

These issues tend to reinforce Marx’s (1875, emphasis in original) position that ‘Every step of real movement is more important than a dozen programmes’. Such real movements might be for concrete reforms, but they must emerge from lived experiences, rather than being imposed top-down or from vanguardist positions. Real movements refuse co-option for programmatic ends, and consist of concrete, social and immanent struggles for material reforms enacted horizontally. They are witnessed in autonomous struggles that continue to erupt from within the university, demonstrating the deep antagonism between university labourers and their institutions and sectors. These include three examples from across the complex terrain of university work: first, solidarity actions between academic and professional services unions at the University of East Anglia in England, fighting widespread cuts in 2023 (McIntyre, 2023); second, student occupations at the University of Manchester in 2023 protesting rent increases,
and demanding cost-of-living support for students and staff (Vinter, 2023); and, third, movements against sexual violence on campuses, including the work of the 1752 Group based in the UK, which catalysed regulatory changes (Bull & Shannon, 2023).

The struggle for such reforms is an important moment in the wider struggle to break workers’ non-existence inside these alienating capitalist institutions. Yet, rather than a reliance upon historic and formal labour organisations, these specific actions point towards the validity of organising both as a social movement and as a means for generating networks that reinforce relations of mutuality and dignity between plural individuals and groups, engaged in struggles within the same terrain. This process thereby generates dialogue around shared, collective aims, predicated upon an authentic acceptance of difference. Erupting from this is the potential to open debate around the impossibility of reforming the university, and whether, instead, it needs negation, abolition and to be transcended, as a form of sublation (Meyerhoff, 2019; Hall, 2021).

Nurturing such networks, connected to organised labour rather than situated inside its structures, enables counter-narratives to emerge. These might challenge the bureaucratic hegemony and privilege both of the university itself, and the trade unions that claim to oppose it. Such counter-narratives emerge from individuals and groups increasingly proletarianised and required to sub-contract their services, and for whom mutual modes of struggle are central to their ability to survive. They help to define the limits of precarity as a structuring term, but also help university activists to understand the gravitational pull of that term for organising. For instance, organising gains energy where it is explicitly connected to the struggles of students-as-workers inside universities.

_Student mobilisations increasingly appear to be happening outside, and often against, the formal institutions of student representation … From often highly-successful rent strike campaigns to networks organising in support of the UCU strikes, students nonetheless remain a politically active, if marginal and disparate, political force. The increasing reliance of students on either part-time or full-time work to fund their university studies has also opened up new windows of opportunity … whilst fracturing the political composition of students, the itinerant nature of student populations also presents the opportunity for struggles on centralised campuses to spread to a variety of workplaces through these student workers. (Notes from Below, 2023)_

In response to the pandemic, the precariousness of university labour demonstrates the increased urgency of shaping communal, intellectual responses to crises. Yet, inside the competing institutions of the Global North, this is almost impossible to imagine, notwithstanding the narrative power of workers’ enquiries into individual resistances to particular capitalist institutions (Workers Inquiry Network (WIN), 2020). A starting point is to extend the mutuality of organising across campaigns against sexual and gendered violence, against rent hikes, for cost-of-living support, for access to social goods, and so on, to identify ‘how individual resistances coalesce to become collective and how collective resistance plays out, whether covert or overt’ (Hudis, 2012:216).
This needs a politics and organising within and beyond the university, which maps and makes concrete the contours and connections of exploitation, expropriation and extraction, and that focuses upon non-homogenising and anti-vanguardist social movements. It helps voice the range of collective, lived experiences, which push against the capitalist notion that we are at the end of history, and that enforces particular forms of work that are limited, indirect or one-sided ways of knowing and experiencing the world. This shines a light upon our collective abilities to sit with trauma and to grieve and transcend it, as a refusal of the hegemonic political economic demand that workers should suture or cauterise their wounds by accruing privilege in the name of business-as-usual. In the post-pandemic university, the work of being against exploitation is that of moving beyond symptomatic responses, inside a toxic system that cannot be reformed. This has to be the definition of precarity as it is entangled with privilege and entitlement. And it has to be the mutuality of precarity as it seeks to transcend such privilege and entitlement.

REFERENCES
#coronacontract. (2021) 'Join the fight for a #coronacontract'. Accessed October 5, 2023 from https://coronacontract.org/


