



Putting the university to work:

technology-mediated
extraction of land and labour
from UK universities



Mariya Ivancheva
University of Liverpool
Brian Garvey
University of Strathclyde

Introduction: background, questions, concerns

Background

Immediate: UCU Strike 2019-2020 ending with COVID-19 pandemic & push for online/hybrid teaching

Previous Research: labour relations, social reproduction, unbundled HE, academic precarity

Ongoing research on HE's digital turn: teaching & learning, research & metrics, capital, **not** labour

Research questions

- **RQ1:** how are academic workplaces and relations of production reorganised to facilitate the entry of new technologically-driven public-private partnerships towards the streamlining of the university? How are universities being 'put to work' by public-private arrangements
- **RQ2:** what ways do the division of labour in academia and real subsumption of teaching with the entry of digital technologies, affect the organisation, security, quality and experience of academic labour; and how is resistance being engendered or suppressed in the digital university?

Theory: subsumption of labour under capital

[M]achinery sweeps away every moral and natural restriction on the length of the working day. ...the most powerful instrument for reducing labour-time suffers a dialectical inversion and becomes the most unfailing means for turning the whole lifetime of a worker and his family into labour-time at capital's disposal for its own valorisation (Marx, 1867).

Formal Subsumption

pre- or non-capitalist modes of production are attributed a value; the worker's labour becomes subject to a wage relation, but the very material form of the labour process does not change other than the subordination of the worker's activity to capital logic \Leftrightarrow **academic labour: valorisation of research**

Real Subsumption

The real subsumption is predicated upon new divisions & hierarchies, transformed class relations, resetting social conditions for the reproduction of wage labour & consumption towards realisation of value (Harvey'17) **YET:** "At no point... does Marx recognise that the reproduction of labour-power entails women's unpaid domestic work" (Federici'19) \Leftrightarrow **academic labour: focus on teaching as care**

Context: UK public higher education

Post-WWII massification: through the introduction of polytechnics & open education

Since 1980: gradual introduction of new public management, quality control, fees

- **Dissolution of block grant** to institutions teaching from fees, research competitive cyclic funding
- **Polytechnics into 'post-1992' universities** with Further and HE Act 1992
- **'Quality assessment'** Research Selectivity Exercise, RAE, REF, TEF/KEF/WEF
- **Introduction of fees** : Teaching and HE Act - **£1000** p/y ('98); HE Act **£3000** top-up for UK/EU ('06) Browne Review 2010 - full-cost fee up to **£9000** p/y ('12); TEF gold medal fee increase ('18)

New frames: 'value-for-money' (Tomlinson'18), 'employability' (Boden & Nedeva '10), etc.

Entry of private providers:

- **University / city/ industry** - interface: anchored on university real estate & intellectual property
- **University core business** - teaching, supervision, curriculum design, student support (OPMs)

Surplus vs deficits: £44bn HE surplus BUT pension cuts, £121bn student debt & 58% faculty casual

By 2018 HEIs expected to finance up to 75% of capital expenditure from own cash (was 31% in 2015)

Formal subsumption: Extraction of rent

Tech-'enhanced' burden of the public behind the 'public' university:

- **Student loans: fees & costs 'sponsored' by the state, but paid by the public**
fees support core faculty to teach 'vocational' employability skills instead of companies
indebted student-workers trained & fed bite-size content: dependent, profitable & compliant
public bears risk of student loans repackaged as debt and sold on to private investors
- **Research sponsored still predominantly by taxation money, but commodified as**
metrics-driven competitive cyclic funding, huge expense & privileges selected 'elite' HEIs
patents & knowledge & 'impact' at low cost & for high profit for companies (Uber, AI)
publishing corp's extract free labour, and sell subscription & Golden Open Access to HEIs
- **University-anchored 'innovation districts' using:**
university real estate for businesses & start-ups to 'incubate' knowledge - staff space scarcer
university staff, facilities, and investment 'credit' to fundraise & coordinate such extraction
university staff & student 'user data' to predict consumption & increase surveillance

Real subsumption: Extraction of labour

Tech-'enhanced' new divisions and alienation of academic labour

- **Polarisation of research and teaching work**

research increasingly relies on fundraising: time & human resource management

the 'ideal' academic: available 24/7, transnationally mobile, care-less, manager

research as 'data collection' done by PhDs & postdocs not eligible to be PIs on big grants

teaching as 'buy-out' of faculty time from projects while students still lured by research rank

- **Casualisation & feminisation of teaching-only work**

70,000+ 'atypical' contract staff at UK universities, 6,500 on zero hour contracts: reserve army

women & BAME faculty: care for increasingly anxious students + child & elderly care at home

- **'Unbundled' outsourcing & deprofessionalisation & modularisation of teaching**

online program management providers (OPMs) - 65+ firms, \$3+ bln annual revenue

take 50-70% of all revenue from+platform rent+data access from online classes

use 1) unpaid teaching of university-hired workers; 2) outsourced uni-educated OPM staff

Transgressing the real and the formal

Academic (and cognitive) labour's challenge to commodification: Inspiration, mental creativity & innovation not effectively captured via Taylorist strategies (i.e. value/per unit)

Organisational strategies: subjective performance of the worker is important

Digitalisation and lockdown: emphasises the role of the computer/machine and its interaction with labour.

The performance of the work: and the capture of value via technology transgresses the boundaries between real and formal subsumption; between economic / domestic spheres

Struggles over performance rights crystallise corporate strategies: to own and commodify new knowledge: it becomes property of the employer via online platform classes

Discussion: Resistance?

Effects & lessons of the COVID-19-facilitated push online

- **Exposed and accelerated public-private extraction for private benefit**
accelerated the proliferation of HE platforms due to changed teaching & learning experience
shed light on university capital investment (dorms, construction) vs. staff & student security
elevated questions of labour rights and appropriation of workers' resources, spaces and work
- **Exposed workers and trade unions as ill prepared for negotiating these changes**
remote access & absence from campus facilitated employers avoiding formal bargaining
permanent faculty H&S prioritised to deeper job losses feeding casualisation & outsourcing
not unique to HE, but manifest in particular ways given HEI commodification/assetisation
- **Unions CAN take back power.**
struggle to provide licensing agreements that are lawful to retain members' rights
demand full audit of procurement of platforms & data use & investments by digital providers
prioritise casual workers & attempt insourcing & reprofessionalisation of OPM-hired staff



**Thank you for
your attention!**



m.ivancheva@liverpool.ac.uk
brian.garvey@strath.ac.uk