Unbundling: A new gendered frontier of exclusion and exploitation in the neoliberal university

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Unbundling is the process of disaggregating educational provision into its component parts likely for delivery by multiple stakeholders, often through public-private partnerships and the use of digital approaches (Swinnerton et al., 2018). A neutral definition, it relates to a process that is all but neutral to higher education. Having done research on unbundling South African and English universities, on a project focused on teaching and learning processes, I could not help but realise the extent to which this process affects much more than student learning and online teaching material curation patterns. Under the premise of widening access, it contributes to a potentially profoundly gendered casualisation, automation, deprofessionalisation, and fragmentation of academic labour to new unforeseen degrees. In this, unbundling reveals a new frontier of exploitation and exclusion at universities that we need to be aware of and organise against.

Initially unbundling followed a commons- rather than market-led imaginary (Mansell, 2017). Radical educators saw digital technologies' potential to democratise education and widen access. Shorter, low-cost, flexible unbundled curricular units could be made available online and used by atypical students still at a disadvantage in education: women, people with caring responsibilities and disabilities, mature full-time working students. Employers could support job-tailored workers' education, and communities could become more involved with universities, demanding need-based content. Such a radical "digital disruption" of the original elite "bundle" of residential university degrees could challenge elite distinctions and transform university education through technologically innovative pedagogies.

Yet, unbundling did not happen in vacuum. It happens in the era of neoliberal globalisation that sees rampant commercialisation of the higher education marked by quantified competition for excellence and success measured by metrics of individual performance and world rankings. This homogenising vision of the global field of

higher education (Marginson, 2008) gives an upper hand to research over teaching, makes English-language publications the only valid academic currency, introduces new governance systems into academic work and services, and raises student fees, debt, and anxiety. It makes research dependent on external funding and research-only precarious staff, and teaching – on a growing number of teaching-only staff bought out to replace fundraising core academics.

To understand to what extent workers and students carry out the burden of this system: in the UK alone (a public-mostly system of higher education with over 160 universities) there was a record £44 billion surplus in higher education (Bennett, 2018). Yet in the same year academic pensions fund USS was to be put on the market and individual contributions raised (Povey, 2018). And while universities try to compete for "teaching excellence" to allow them to uncap already exorbitant student fees (Hale & Vina, 2016), students are taught by over 50% precarious faculty (UCU 2013; 2016) and student debt has risen to £1 billion (CBDU, 2018). In this scenario, it is rather cynical that online learning, rather than better investment in faculty recruitment and stability and student stipends, is considered a panacea by managers. The way this argument looks, taken to its logical consequences: content can be automated, put online, and facilitated by workers often trained to a post-graduate or post-PhD level with ever more precarious deprofessionalised contracts: content curators, forum managers, online support officers – their job descriptions proliferate and they are invisible, fragmented and isolated. Meanwhile universities use public-private partnerships with billion-revenue corporations to provide technology and online platforms where these courses "take place". Such corporations – around 60 world players on a market currently estimated at over 3 billion (out of a 30+ billion edtech market worldwide) and predicted to reach 7.7 billion by 2025 (HolonIQ, 2019) – are increasingly endowed with the financial and the symbolic capital of universities to run online short-courses and programs on their behalf. They reap the benefits from online learning on two levels – first by being paid hefty sums for content to be disposed on their platforms, and a second time – for the "learning analytics" big data they collect from the growing student population joining

online courses worldwide and sell it to big businesses to hone their local and global marketing strategies.

This process is paralleled by a growing casualization of higher education – a process that affects not only contractual relations, but also means a broader "existential and structural uncertainty" of academics and workers in general (Butler, 2009). It allows university workers to be contracted with ever shorter, more flexible fixed-term conditions, in which basic justice (Frazer, 2016) redistribution (rights and benefits), recognition (visibility and career development options), and representation (in decision-making and union contestation) is increasingly curtailed. In academia this process happened since the 1970s through the erosion of tenure that leaves many at jeopardy of lack of security to plan ahead personally and professionally. In this, precarity becomes more than contractual insecurity and starts being the lack of (self-)care and access to practices of love, care, and solidarity, of control of one's own time and space, and enclosure of academic freedom from the market pressures exposing workers to such arrangements (Ivancheva et al., 2019). The careless lives of monastic scholars is now extended onto a very diverse post-PhD population doomed to the Hobson's choice of (hyper)mobility vs (hyper)flexibility (Ivancheva et al., 2019).

Academics are pushed to constantly look for employment outside their area of residency making a return to their original place of origin impossible (Stalford, 2008). With public systems of welfare, child- and elderly-care curtailed by privatisation and austerity in Eastern and Western Europe alike, and not even available in many contexts beyond Europe, moving becomes a taxing effort of losing immediate kinship networks providing such services out of necessity. Women are at a double disadvantage. Partnered women, who have to make decisions around childbirth and childcare within certain age limits (ESF, 2009; Ivancheva et al., 2019) are discriminated against by recruitment panels based on being mothers (González et al., 2019) or the improbability of male partners moving location to stay with female spouses (Rivera, 2017). The latter scenario makes single women with(out) children the only mobile female academics, but as they are often doing more emotional and

admin work, they often are at disadvantage of ever forming a family (Ivancheva et al., 2019). Black and Minority Ethnic faculty and even less so Black faculty's (Joseph, 2019) probability of women being hired in permanent academic position at all is in times lower than female white or any male candidates (Advance HE, 2018).

Thus, women and members of ethnic minorities are pushed into the raising teaching-only contracts, made invisible for research positions, and career development (Courtois & O'Keefe, 2015). In this, they are made perfect hyper-relational workers for online platforms, where emotional labour is ever more needed as students lack the support of peer-groups and university support staff, unlike in residential degrees. This produces a gendered new frontier of exclusion and exploitation that the academic profession needs to be aware of and resist. It presents one of the biggest challenges to feminist and progressive scholarship and activism in the next decades.

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