

# Disruptive force or Trojan horse?

David Ridley looks at the political economy of online H.E.\*

**H**ow should we feel about online higher education? Is it the final blow to the public university, or its realisation in digital form? There are no simple answers to these questions, and it's easy to feel overwhelmed by the complexity and rapidity of technological change, as well as by the contradictory emotions elicited by the desire to offer the best education to students on the one hand, and on the need to stay safe, sane and healthy during a global pandemic on the other.

This article approaches these questions by analysing how the recent changes brought by the coronavirus pandemic, specifically the rapid shift to online teaching and learning, are informed by deeper, structural changes to higher education, mirrored across the world. The key point is that technology is not some autonomous 'disruptive' force - like the pandemic - that appears out of nowhere, that we have no control over. Technology is always a tool, created by someone, wielded for some purpose.

While there are many examples of how online technology is being used for good, to improve learning and the student experience, and to widen access to higher education (see below), applying the theory of marketisation as monopolisation that I have developed over the last few years, I argue that, in the UK, online technology is being used by entrepreneurial vice-chancellors to squeeze more surplus out of university operations, to drive expansion and win the zero-sum (global) game of marketisation.

## A brief history of marketisation

Once upon a time, the money that went into a university covered the costs of teaching and learning and nothing more. In what many consider to be a golden age of public HE, British universities in the

post-war period received taxpayer-funded 'block grants' via the University Grants Committee, an advisory committee of the UK government made up of academics, which asked few questions about how this money was spent. This is still the standard *modus operandi* of most European higher education systems, albeit in many cases now supplemented by additional, usually means-tested, fees.

Money was tight in those days, so if a university wanted to have fancy new buildings, attract famous professors or build statues dedicated to questionable historical figures, it had to raise extra funding from charitable trusts and wealthy philanthropists, often with conditions attached. And, of course, the whole system, which included maintenance grants to students, was based on limited access: overall participation in higher education was 3.4 per cent in 1950 and had only risen to 8.4 per cent by 1970.

With the introduction of market reform in the late 1980s and early 1990s, a new generation of vice-chancellors became obsessed with growing the former polytechnics in the style of private-sector corporations. This meant generating a surplus. How? By increasing workloads via New Public Management techniques. By pushing teaching-focused academics into research and bringing in a new generation of academics on casual contracts to pick up the slack. By creating subsidiary companies to pursue speculative profit-making activities to supplement grant income. By exploiting more international students, building campuses in foreign countries and creating an elaborate system of foundation courses to milk as much money as possible from these students.

These structural changes, introduced by Margaret Thatcher's Tory government and continued under New Labour, were set in motion well before 2010. And then, it was not the £9000 tuition fee hike that

drove surplus generation. This merely replaced the income lost from brutal cuts to public funding. It was the removal of the student numbers cap that did it. This was the point at which students became consumers of higher education, and universities raced to grab as much market share as they could in the new higher education market. All the techniques of the previous years - mostly invented in the post-92 laboratories of corporatisation - were put to work in achieving this goal.

### Coventry University Ltd

At Coventry University, where I worked as an hourly paid lecturer for six years, we saw first-hand how wholly owned subsidiaries, originally used for non-educational purposes, started to be used to rationalise academic labour. For example, in 2011, Coventry University created its first 'no frills' university subsidiary: 'A creative re-working of the university offering, Coventry University College will provide "life-shaped learning", running seven days a week (7am-10pm weekdays; 7am-4pm weekends), providing the same university-standard teaching and learning in flexible bursts and at a lower cost (a maximum of £4,800 for full-time students studying for a degree).'

As lecturers and whole courses began to be moved into these subsidiaries, we as the Coventry University UCU branch began to campaign and learn the truth behind these questionable practices. UCU explained it well: 'The attractions of doing this are that it allows staff to be employed off national agreed pay scales and working conditions and in many cases, it makes staff ineligible to access the Teachers' Pension Scheme. These companies also, unsurprisingly, operate with higher levels of casualised and precarious employment. Crucially, also, these staff are outside of existing recognition agreements, meaning that UCU cannot collectively bargain for or adequately represent a fast-growing section of the workforce.'

And this venture was highly profitable as well. In 2016 Coventry University College - rebranded as CU College - registered a post-tax profit of £3.8 million, which it then gift-aided to its sole shareholder, Coventry University. These subsidiaries, alongside the other mechanisms of exploitation mentioned before, enabled the University to grow its surplus by 67 per cent that year to £28.6 million. Coventry University's growth model has proved so effective and there are now so many of these for-profit subsidiaries, including separate campuses in London and Scarborough, that it has had to

consolidate them into a super-subsiidiary called the CU Group.

### The new imperialism

So, what's all this got to do with the coronavirus and online higher education? Well, online technology allows for an even more efficient rationalisation of university production. Expert knowledge produced in the centre - in the university 'parent charity' corporation with degree-awarding powers - can be captured in discrete 'learning objects' and delivered by deprofessionalised, outsourced and casualised tutors in the periphery, in the for-profit subsidiary companies. Research becomes almost entirely about providing research-funding income, while teaching becomes a separate and entirely routine activity, like brewing Costa Coffee. All of this is then more easily micro-managed through metrics and surveillance by an increasingly powerful administrative class. Welcome to Frederick Winslow Taylor's sausage factory.

This model can be easily scaled up too: educational corporations such as Edexcel can offer MOOCs with material supplied through open access research, as well as face-to-face support provided either in-house or in partnership with existing institutions. Thus, digitalisation is just another stage in the process of marketisation. As I have argued elsewhere, the real purpose of all this is not really 'competition', but to create British mega universities that can compete on the world stage, or, more importantly, help the UK retain its status as an imperial power. The UK government makes no bones about the role of HE in exercising its 'soft power' across the globe.

With the above in mind, the coronavirus pandemic can be understood as presenting a unique opportunity for the Government to further its agenda and for universities to drive rationalisation and expansion. Of course, both interests must be careful to balance their desire for consolidation with the all-hallowed student experience, which is why there has been a push to get students back to campus and into classrooms, despite the dangers. But in the long run, if uncontested, the pandemic and the expediency of online learning will accelerate marketisation, consolidation and, ultimately, British imperialism

### Towards a university of the Earth

But it is important to understand that online is not the enemy here, but rather the ends to which it is

used. There are countless examples of how online technology is used to enhance the educational experience and widen access for those traditionally excluded from higher education. For example: at the University of Patras, Greece; the University of Pavia, Italy; Hame University of Applied Sciences, Finland; and, of course, our very own Open University. Common to all these positive models is a combination of lifelong learning with 'blended' models of pedagogy, which bring together online learning with face-to-face teaching, often in the form of small-group seminars.

Open education resources (OERs) are another example of positive online HE. Challenging the academic publishing industry's monopoly over the supply of teaching resources, OER creators use open access licenses - for example, Creative Commons - to ensure that OERs are retained, reused, revised, remixed and redistributed only for non-commercial purposes. As well as teaching materials, research itself is also increasingly being shared in this way. For example, Radical OA - a network of publishers, theorists, scholars, librarians, technology specialists and activists - have been publishing open access books and journals via the Open Humanities Press for over a decade.

While all the above provide a counterpoint to the rather depressing vision of online HE presented in this article, the reality is that they will not in themselves halt the march of marketisation. In the immediate term, we must insist on the *rootedness* of universities in their physical communities, and, given the devastating impact that universities closing would have on those communities, insist that they continue to play a crucial role as local and regional 'anchor institutions'. In the long-term, we must start thinking about universities as institutions with a natural and social ecology, and a crucial role to play in repairing the ecology of planet Earth.

Currently, corporate universities are resolutely anti-social and are mostly failing to take climate change seriously. Universities of the future should begin with an ecological audit, discovering through co-inquiry with communities how they can contribute to creating sustainable and socially just local and regional economies. As I've suggested elsewhere, historical examples like the Lucas Plan show how academics can link campaigns against marketisation with the real social needs of local communities, building strong foundations of solidarity that can sustain the kind of broad-based, working-class-driven movements that are needed to refuse austerity, defeat an entrenched neoliberalism and avert climate destruction.

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The original version, which was fully referenced through hyperlinks, can be viewed at: <https://medium.com/ussbriefs/disruptive-force-or-trojan-horse-the-political-economy-of-online-higher-education-179913d50a48>

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