

Life for university lecturers now

Lisa Taylor looks at a new study.

Alpesh Maisuria and Svenja Helmes, *Life for the Academic in the Neoliberal University*, Taylor and Francis / Routledge, 2019, 90pp.

This is a well-written, innovative and thought-provoking book. It arouses indignation at the neoliberal marketisation and commodification of HE. It may also prompt readers who are themselves HE lecturers to consider whether they are complicit in reproducing neoliberal values even as they attempt to teach critical thinking skills.

Chapter 1 compares historical and contemporary capitalist interventions in education, presenting a Marxist account of HE privatisation, and linking this to globalisation, understood as one form of 'imperialism and empire-building' (p2). This chapter also discusses moves by provider institutions to cut costs by introducing online study, for example via the pre-recording of lectures, while levying charges that are very similar to those for on-campus students. Thus academics' jobs are rendered more precarious, and forms of alienation are generated amongst them which can impact on students as well.

Chapter 2 examines in greater detail the extent to which neoliberalism, by turning HE into a competitive, target-driven arena, is abolishing the secure, valued and trusted position of academics which has hitherto allowed them to function as autonomous research agents. At the same time, collegial support mechanisms that previously operated amongst them are being marginalised as radical, thereby eroding their mental well-being and that of students. The authors also document here the reconstruction of students as consumers. They note the inequality in funding between Russell Group and post-1992 universities, which is pushing the latter to privatise campus space, recruit more and more overseas

students, and increasingly enter into international partnerships.

In chapter 3, Maisuria and Helmes evidence the often perilous trajectories of early career academics, as also those of their more established colleagues, in the competitive environment that is now normal in HE, and at the beginning of chapter 4 they explore the casualisation of skilled workers in the HE sector, giving an insight into the instability faced by all academics that is created by the competitive morality embedded in neoliberal ideals.

In the final chapter, the authors draw on ideas from Gramsci (p53) to discuss a possible way forward. Writing before the 2019 General Election, they note that Labour's model of a National Education Service (NES) includes the idea of 'trust, professionalism and democracy - all in the service of the university as a public entity for the many' (p55). While clear that resistance to this on the part of those indoctrinated in the status quo would prevent it from providing a quick fix, they argue that over time it could begin to reverse some of the inequality in the present system, including the demands placed on academics and other university staff. (The election result will of course make progress in such a direction, already a distant dream for many academics, even more difficult.)

This book is an important read for students, early career academics and their more established counterparts, and is highly recommended for academic libraries and bookshops everywhere.

