

COULD THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ACCELERATE THE UBERIFICATION OF THE UNIVERSITY?

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has radically changed our world. All spheres of social life have been affected by the pandemic. Lockdown and other restriction measures have grinded contact tuition to a hold and we are seeing universities pivot to online learning/teaching. Although authentic online teaching/learning may not be realised in this moment of crisis, online teaching/learning is likely to be expanded post-COVID-19. In this article, I explore the possibility that the COVID-19 pandemic could accelerate the uberification of the university. The concept of “uberification of the university” was first mooted by Gary Hall (2016). I argue that although uberification of the university (or its acceleration) is not preordained, the potential for its actualisation is already embedded in our present social, educational and technological situation. Although the possibility exists that the present situation can also be a carrier of alternatives to uberification, vectors of escape from the latter will depend on the active construction of counter narratives to uberification. The article thus sounds a cautionary note to universities.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic, neoliberal university, platform capitalism, uberification, online learning/teaching

INTRODUCTION

Since first detected in Wuhan City (China), the global spread of SARS-CoV-2¹ and the resultant COVID-19 pandemic have caused mayhem in the world, affecting all spheres of social life. Lives have been put at greater risk (those who have tested positive for the virus and frontline workers), economies have spiraled into recession, personal freedoms have been curtailed, many sport and related activities have grinded to a halt, and so forth. Schools and post-school institutions have been closed during lockdown periods, making contact tuition impossible. The upshot of the latter has been a migration to what is referred to as online learning/teaching.

When it comes to universities, online learning/teaching is not entirely new as many universities, including South African ones have experimented with hybrid models of provision

that combine face-to-face contact with online teaching/learning in what is known as blended learning. Even in predominantly contact learning/teaching contexts, many lecturers use learning management systems (LMSs) even though these systems might only be used to upload readings and PowerPoint presentations. Therefore, many students and academics are familiar with LMSs and would be able to navigate such platforms at a basic skill level. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has demanded full migration to remote learning/teaching in which online learning/teaching would be expanded from its earlier use (prior to the COVID-19 pandemic). Such migration would require advanced skills on the part of lecturers of both a technical and pedagogical nature (Le Grange 2004) and require support from information technology (IT) divisions as well as teaching and learning centres within universities. The advanced skills needed by lecturers cannot be acquired overnight and universities' support services would necessarily be strained at this time because they are not staffed and geared up to cope with the now increased number of online offerings. Moreover, during lockdown or restricted risk adjustment periods, lecturers and support staff would be working from home, which for many such environments would not match the facilities they have access to on university campuses. On the students' side the pivot to online learning/teaching during COVID-19 has laid bare the digital divide as poor students struggle with access to devices and/or connectivity and those who have returned home from university residences might not have conducive environments to study in (see Davids 2020; Du Preez and Le Grange 2020). Given the challenges mentioned, it has been argued that authentic online learning/teaching is not possible in times of crisis (such as COVID-19) and that what might at best be achieved is "emergency remote teaching" (Hodges, Moore, Lockee, Trust and Bond 2020, n.p.).

There are two responses concerning the migration to remote learning/teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic that I wish to note. The first is the fervour with which some universities in South Africa responded to challenges presented by the pandemic in endeavours to save the academic year. There have been several media reports on the efforts of some universities (mainly historically advantaged institutions) to support staff and students in the migration to online learning, how many devices have been made available on loan to students, the efforts that universities have made in partnership with telecommunication companies to have access to online platforms zero-rated, etc. My colleague Chris Reddy, has insightfully observed, that we might be witnessing the emergence of a new ranking game as to which institution or institutions are the best positioned to offer online learning/teaching. The second response that I have observed is the flurry of private companies now offering courses/programmes/webinars on how to effectively offer online learning. Over the past few months my e-mail inbox has been flooded with messages from private entities advertising their services in relation to online

learning. Many of these private companies might end up being fly-by-nights, but some could grow into profitable companies, rendering services to universities and schools in the future.

The two responses noted are important in advancing my thoughts in relation to the question of whether the COVID-19 pandemic could accelerate the uberfication of the university. Post the COVID-19 pandemic, universities are likely to increase investments in their online learning/teaching capacities and historically advantaged universities will lead the race. The others would have to catch up. Moreover, private companies are likely to gear themselves up to offer support to universities through new partnerships that are forged or existing ones being expanded. All of this could hasten the university's path to uberfication. To understand what uberfication entails it is first important to understand the notions "sharing economy" and "platform capitalism".

SHARING ECONOMY AND PLATFORM CAPITALISM

In his book, the *Uberfication of the University*, Gary Hall (2016) discusses the sharing economy and platform capitalism as key ideas to understanding uberfication. The sharing economy as an alternative economic model started in the early 2000s and is, "defined as a peer-to-peer (P2P) based activity of acquiring, providing, or sharing access to goods and services that is often facilitated by a community-based on-line platform" (Chappelow 2020, n.p.). Hall (2016) argues that the sharing economy is touted as a distinct alternative to those provided through private, state, or public channels. Due to the fact that goods and services are shared, they are cheaper for the user and in the case of services such as rides that are shared, participation in the sharing economy reduces the carbon footprint of transport. Many who participate in the sharing economy would, for example, not own a car or would use a personal car less frequently. So, the sharing economy seemingly has benefits to both people and environment. However, Hall (2016) argues that the sharing economy needs to be understood as part of a much larger socioeconomic ecosystem that entails the use of computing and satellite technology in coordinating workforces and creating transnational supply chains that make possible just-in-time manufacturing through the production of low-wage labour and the exploitation of outsourced workers.

Associated with the sharing economy is platform capitalism. Platform capitalism refers to a range of platform-based based companies that make hardware and software infrastructure available for anyone to operate on. In his book, *Platform Capitalism*, Nick Srnicek (2017) traces the origins of a number of platform-based businesses, how they grow and morph rapidly into a small group of businesses that are monopolising the global economy. He identifies five types of platform-based businesses: advertising platforms (e.g. Google and Facebook), cloud platforms (e.g. Salesforce), industrial platforms (e.g. GE and Siemens), product platforms (e.g.

Rolly Royce and Spotify) and lean platforms (e.g. Uber and Airbnb) (Koh 2017). Lean platforms are the ones associated with the sharing economy and operate on a business model of minimal asset ownership.

Hall (2016) argues that the sharing economy gives the appearance of a return to community values, but has little to do with the sharing of access to goods, activities and services. It is all about selling access to these. In this for-profit sharing economy we are all encouraged to become microentrepreneurs of the self² or as Caraher (2017, 1) puts it:

“Uberfication describes a larger trend in capitalism that promotes the creation of free-lance, microentrepreneurs for whom the surveillance society of late capitalism has enforced a kind of the self-subjectification. This is largely done through the ubiquitous collection of data which has shaped our behaviours through the reinforcement of certain economically productive forms of self-discipline.”

In the for-profit part of the sharing economy, sharing of goods and services do not equate with what is done in community-based voluntary organisations where people share these among themselves. They are instead shared with huge platform-based corporations such as Amazon, Uber or Airbnb. The platform, software, algorithm, data and associated ecosystem are centrally controlled and the few that own these decide on pricing and wage levels, work allocation and conditions (Hall 2016). Moreover, Hall (2016) points out that the owners of the platform businesses also decide on preferred user and labourer profiles. He argues that in the for-profit part of the sharing economy, a certain “homophily” occurs where those who provide the service are from a similar class, education and race. In South Africa, for example, Uber drivers are mainly male foreign nationals from African countries. Some of these providers may not have citizen or permanent residency rights and therefore are unable to make demands about wages and working conditions. In general, such workers do not have the rights of workers in state-regulated transport businesses, rights to be able to join a union, regulated work hours, and so forth.

As I have, many of you as the reader would have used Uber on occasion. Using Uber is appealing, it is cheaper than using a taxi, it is convenient because you are collected at a particular starting point and dropped off at a specific destination. Moreover, Uber is available on demand and some people might even enjoy the conversation initiated by the “friendly” Uber driver. For the user, the Uber service is attractive, but from the perspective of the provider of the service, the for-profit part of the sharing economy has a dark side. Many may say that in South Africa Uber drivers are better off than many other workers given that intermediaries such labour brokers continue to exist and that there are so many people in the country who are

unemployed. This certainly is true. The point, however, is that the sharing economy and attendant platform capitalism has done little to ameliorate economic inequalities and injustices.

Many hoped that the financial crisis of 2008/2009 would have resulted in the weakening of neoliberal capitalism. It did not. In fact, post-2009 neoliberal capitalism has morphed into an ideal form, a for-profit sharing economy linked to platform capitalism. Rather than producing a crisis for neoliberalism, in wake the 2008/2009 financial crisis, we have seen the buttressing of neoliberalism through increased privatisation, deregulation, the reduction of the state and further erosion of welfare systems. Hall (2016) opines that it is significant that both Uber and Airbnb were founded during the financial crisis, respectively in 2008 and 2009. It is the sharing economy and platform capitalism that characterises the global economy in late capitalism and the emergence of a “condition we can describe as postwelfare capitalism” (Hall 2016, xi).

But, how does all of this relate to the migration to online learning/teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. I shall argue in the next section that the pivot towards greater online learning/teaching during COVID-19 could accelerate the uberfication of the university. Because online learning/teaching happens through online platforms I shall refer to this mode of provision as platform pedagogy.

PLATFORM PEDAGOGY TO UBERFICATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION

According to Keengwe and Kidd (2010), online learning comprises web-based instruction, distributed learning, internet-based learning, cyber learning, virtual learning or net-based learning. They point out that online learning is a subset of distance education that embraces a wide range of information technology applications in designing courses with access to content for “just-in-time” learning. In many online teaching and learning programmes, universities use the open-source learning platform moodle, to design their unique version of the moodle learning management system. Due to the prevalence of the use of platforms such as moodle, I suggest that we might think of online teaching/learning as platform pedagogy.

As is the case with any form of teaching/learning, online teaching/learning should be viewed dialectically – in other words, both its constraining effects and productive potentialities should be recognised. I therefore do not dismiss the idea that the affordances of online learning/teaching can bring about education that realises democratic ideals. However, the issue I wish to draw attention to in this article is the context in which we are witnessing the migration to online learning/teaching in the contemporary university. And the “forced” acceleration of its growth during the COVID-19 pandemic, even if online learning is only partially realised in what is called emergency remote teaching/learning. The context I refer to is that of the neoliberal university.

Peters (2013) argues that without much philosophical self-reflection, neoliberal universities have been put in service of the “new global economy” under conditions of knowledge capitalism, which has had at least four effects. First, is the diminished public status of the university. Particularly after the financial crisis of 2008/2009 we have witnessed alternative funding models in higher education requiring students to pay more fees, leading to greater student debt and the privatisation of higher education. The #FeesMustFall protests of 2015/2016 drew attention to this issue in the South African context. Second, local fee-paying students have been bolstered by the global competition for international students, cross border offerings and off-shore profit-making campuses and centres. Third, is the focus on issues of intellectual capital and the ownership of the means of production, the growth of private-partnerships in the commercialisation of research and online teaching initiatives. Fourth, is that the latter has led to huge growth of administration in relation to teaching and research in universities. Those of us who have worked in universities over the past two decades have witnessed first-hand increasing bureaucratisation vis-à-vis teaching and research in the university. And more recently also in relation to community engagement.

It is important to understand the growth of online learning/teaching in the context of the neoliberal university, so as to gain a sense of its role in the uberfication of the university and why increased migration to online learning/teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic could accelerate this development. Platform pedagogy is often only referred to as online learning (leaving out the teacher part), placing emphasis on the learner who is viewed at the customer in the educational transaction. The learning that happens in this transaction is “just-in-time” learning in a similar manner to which the Uber service is a “just-in-time” one. Like the Uber driver, the lecturer becomes an on-demand worker. And if the lecturer is to receive positive reviews from students in order to do well in the neoliberal university’s performance review system then he/she should display friendliness to students akin to the friendly chatting with which the Uber driver engages customers.

As funding to universities shrink, universities are forging partnerships with private partners to generate additional income. For example, the company GetSmarter has partnered with some of the world’s leading universities to select, design and deliver premium online short courses. In South Africa the University of Cape Town has partnered with GetSmarter in offering short courses in areas such project management, digital marketing, property development, etc. (<https://www.getsmarter.com/universities/university-of-cape-town>). It is not inconceivable for partnerships of this kind to be expanded into intermediaries offering online learning/teaching programmes in higher education more broadly. Such a developments could lead to further casualisation of the academic workforce in the university. According to the American

Federation of Teachers, 76 per cent of the total academic workforce already find themselves in non-permanent posts and of these 70 per cent are in part-time employment (Hall 2016).

On a larger scale we could see platform companies such LinkedIn and Academia.edu become key role players in the development of an intermediary business for higher education. Again, this is not inconceivable. Hall (2016) argues that LinkedIn's transition into being both a social network and a provider of education places it in a good position to become such an intermediary business for higher education. Its position has been strengthened after purchasing California based supplier on online consumer-focused courses, Lynda.com in April 2015. Hall (2016, 16) points out that even before the purchase of Lynda.com, LinkedIn already had sufficient data, "to provide the kind of detailed analysis of which institutions and courses are launching graduates into which jobs and long-term career trajectories that no single traditional university can hope to match". Academia.edu is another for-profit platform based company that could develop into an intermediary business for higher education and as academics we are providing privatised companies such as Academia.edu with free information by uploading our scholarly writing and information onto its platform without the company being transparent about what it will do with such data in the future. As Bond (2017, n.p.) writes:

"At first glance, Academia.edu looks like a win-win situation. The platform allows users to create a profile, upload their work, tag certain interests and then to tap into large networks of people with like research interests among the almost 47 million users from around the globe. But looks-and names aren't always what they seem."

As mentioned earlier, platform capitalism is about a small group of platform companies monopolising the global economy, affecting all spheres of social life, including higher education. In 2016, Microsoft purchased LinkedIn for \$26.2 billion, evidence of such monopolising.

We are also already seeing developments afoot that could change the nature of qualifications offered at universities and by so doing disrupting the traditional university. The expansion of online capacities are seeing the emergence of the following:

- Stackable credentials (online qualifications that are stacked into degrees);
- micro-credentials (completing smaller modules online rather than attaining a degree);
- nanodegrees (non-accredited qualifications are typically completed in less than 12 months and are often designed in partnership with industry);
- competency-based degrees and education (qualifications for adults focused on adults' practical skills and knowledge applicable in the workplace);

- achievement tracking instead of relying on credit hours;
- learning academies, for example, IT companies, Transnet, telecommunications companies (Hanover Research 2020, 6).

All of the developments discussed above have potentially dire consequences for the traditional university and those who inhabit it.

SOME PARTING THOUGHTS

The context in which the possibility of the uberfication of the university and its acceleration due to the COVID-19 pandemic is the neoliberal university. In the late twentieth century through to the twentieth century we have witnessed the becoming of the neoliberal university as a consequence of the reascendancy of neoliberal politics in the 1980s. In South Africa and across the world the contemporary university is characterized by increased marketisation and bureaucratisation. Managerialism has crept into all forms of scholarship, teaching, research and community engagement. In my own university, community engagement is referred to a “social impact” so that this activity can be translated into a performance indicator. We have seen creeping managerialism extend as far as the domain of ethics, making Haggerty (2004) coin the term “ethics creep”. We have witnessed the public university become a state-aided university as subsidy revenue from the state declines. The state subsidy for my own university currently comprises less than one third of its revenue. In the neoliberal university academic staff members are increasingly subjected to forms of surveillance, including through performance management systems. During the COVID-19 lockdown and level 4 risk adjustment periods academic staff have been forced to remain at home, yet my university instructed us to apply for leave online, e-mailed to us an amended disciplinary code, revised regulations for performance management and extended powers have been given to departmental chairpersons (constructed as “line managers”). These are worrying signs in uncertain times.

In relation to research we have already observed the role of platform capitalism in the transformation of science into global scientific networks. Le Grange (2019) points out that in contemporary higher education we are seeing the relocation of power (in the production of knowledge) away from the academy to the marketplace. The upshot of this are knowledge assemblages comprising multimillion dollar platform-based companies such as Thomas Reuters (owner of the Web of Science) and Elsevier Reeds (owner of Scopus), large commercial publishing houses such as Taylor and Francis, SpringerNature, and Elsevier, and governments who measure return on research and development spend by the number of articles published in journals indexed on master lists of the Web of Science and Scopus. For the individual academic

in the neoliberal university his/her value is determined by how metrically adequate they are.

It is in this context that I register the possibility that the uberfication of the university might be accelerated as a consequence of COVID-19 pandemic. Post-COVID-19, it is likely that universities will expand the pivot toward online teaching/learning. An expansion of platform pedagogy within the neoliberal university and the migration of the for-profit sharing economy and platform capitalism into the arena of education, makes the uberfication of the university probable, if unchecked. Just as Uber has benefits for the customer, so to the uberfication of the university may have benefits for the student (client/customer). However, when uberfication is looked at from the perspective of the academic (as is the case with the Uber driver) then it means deprofessionalisation, diminished rights and benefits, insecurity of tenure, and so forth.

I am not suggesting uberfication (or its acceleration due to the COVID-19 pandemic) is inevitable, but I am saying that the potential for uberfication is already embedded in our actual social, educational and technological situation. Lines of escape from uberfication is possible – the current situation can be an alternative bearer of constellations of universes. But, vectors of escape need to be invigorated through active construction of counter narratives to uberfication.

NOTES

1. Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) is the official name given by the international body that names viruses (Lai, Shih, Ko, Tang and Hsueh 2020). Earlier it was named 2019-nCoV and many commonly refer to the virus as novel coronavirus.
2. Gary Hall (2016) coins the term “microentrepreneur of the self”, based on Foucault (2008, 226), who writes about the neoliberal “*homo oeconomicus*” as an entrepreneur of himself (sic) and is also a play on Foucault’s (1988) concept of “technologies of the self”.

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