

## Rethinking the neoliberal university and its impact on students

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One of the most thought-provoking presentations at the 2019 Academic Language and Learning Conference was De Maio and Desierto's paper about neoliberalism and its impact on higher education. The topic certainly sparked much interest amongst delegates; the presentation was well attended, and audience comments about the need to resist neoliberalism were met with almost unanimous applause. Appeals for resistance are also certainly well established in the current literature (van der Walt, 2017; Rustin, 2016; Berg, Huijbens & Larsen, 2016; Mountz et al., 2015). Saunders (2007), for instance, suggested that academics must 'confront' and 'remedy problems' that stem from neoliberal policies in order to regain control of educational institutions, whereas Giroux (2017) went a step further and described the tension between neoliberalism and higher education as a 'war'. In no uncertain terms, these arguments read like a call to arms for educational revolution.

While these descriptions of the modern university certainly hold some merit and touch upon serious challenges, very few of these types of analyses also consider how neoliberal policies might benefit institutions, its respective students, and society more broadly. They also rarely question whether characterising universities as inherently neoliberal is an appropriate reflection of how they function in practice or how this characterisation fits alongside widespread institutional commitments to social justice. This article discusses these aspects in an Australian context and proposes three alternative conclusions: neoliberalism is not an appropriate lens to understand how Australian public universities operate, neoliberal-like policies can benefit students, and any negative neoliberal-like policies tend to adversely impact staff more sharply than students.

At its core, neoliberalism refers to market-driven government policies that promote deregulation, free trade and privatisation. It became especially popular in the Western world during the 1980s when then U.S. President Ronald Regan and British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher enacted neoliberal-based reforms in their respective countries. In Australia, conservative governments under John Howard (1996-2007) as well as Tony Abbott, Malcolm Turnbull and Scott Morrison (2013-present) largely followed in these ideological footsteps through privatisation and budget cuts to key public organisations such as universities. Proposed fee deregulation during the mid-2010s and reduced tertiary funding announced in the 2017 federal budget led to great uncertainty across the sector, prompting public universities to seek additional sources of revenue in order to remain financially sustainable. One additional revenue source was an expansion of international student enrolments, although the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent government restrictions on student mobility exposed the fragility of institutions relying too heavily on overseas income (Horne, 2020).

To be sure, financial uncertainty at the institutional level can have a significant impact on staff employment. The Australian tertiary workforce, for example, has a high proportion of staff on

casual contracts. While these contracts offer an institution greater flexibility at a lower cost, it does not always provide secure employment. Insecure employment, in turn, can impact the extent to which teaching staff are afforded sufficient time to prepare classes, engage with students outside of class, and provide feedback on student work. Over and above any negative impact on casually employed staff that would prefer secure ongoing work, insufficient time for these tasks can all adversely affect student learning and their experience at university. This was shrewdly pointed out by De Maio and Desierto (2019) in their recent conference paper.

Casualisation of the academic workforce, however, is largely symptomatic of insufficient and uncertain public funding rather than an overarching neoliberal agenda. Australia's higher education system, for instance, is still quite highly regulated. TEQSA, the Australian tertiary regulatory body established in 2011, regularly reviews all universities and other higher education providers against key minimum quality assurance indicators outlined in the 2015 Higher Education Standards Framework (TEQSA, n.d.). As part of the framework, TEQSA only evaluates the financial sustainability of higher education institutions, not the profitability. Most importantly for the student experience, TEQSA auditors examine factors such as whether an institution employs sufficiently qualified staff to meet the needs of its student cohort, actively monitors student progress and intervenes with students at-risk of unsatisfactory progression, adopts inclusive strategies to support diverse students, and possesses learning support resources that are up-to-date and accessible. If an institution does not meet these requirements it risks deregistration. This form of regulation has a positive impact on students and is not a strong example of neoliberalism in action.

Other changes to typical academic work – such as an increased focus on course reviews, teaching reports and speedy marking turnaround times – are also often attributed to a neoliberal approach to university operations. The worst-case consequences of these changes include increased staff rates of depression (and in extreme cases suicide) when faced with large administrative workloads. While staff mental health is an undoubtedly serious issue, work intensification does not necessarily stem from neoliberalism. As Marinetto (2019) pointed out when discussing increased university administrative workloads, 'if the high priests of this economic theory visited a UK or US university, they would not recognise it as something made in their image.' Aside from a small number of private institutions, Australian universities are non-profit organisations that do not have shareholders. Directly or otherwise, university revenue is ultimately reinvested back into its respective staff and students. This type of operation is more analogous to a sports club than a business (Oliver, 2020).

There are legitimate purposes for substantial administrative work outside the classroom. Taking an evidence-based approach, rigorous course reviews are effective tools for evaluating the impact of a program on student achievement. Providing feedback on student work is similarly crucial and time consuming, yet these demands can often prompt innovative approaches to assessment redesign. An increasingly common example in the current literature is enabling greater peer-to-peer feedback practices, that can provide a way in which to manage large student enrolments (Huisman et al., 2019; Nicol, 2010). In short, university staff can certainly face challenges with an increased workload, but that does not necessarily mean it equates to neoliberalism or that it will always lead to a negative impact on student learning.

In many Western countries, the introduction of performance-based funding is an example of a market-like mechanism that aims to incentivise universities to compete for additional revenue based on certain metrics. In the Australian context, the federal government announced the four areas which will dictate the total amount of funding each institution may receive from 2020 onwards: student success (measured by the attrition rate), equity group participation, graduate employment outcomes, and the student experience. Some studies worldwide suggest performance-based funding can lead to higher rates of research productivity and improvements to student learning, although findings from this area of scholarship are not conclusive (Natow & Dougherty, 2019; Dougherty & Reddy, 2011). Incentivising institutions to prioritise these areas can, however,

benefit students, as all eligible institutions will seek to adapt or improve current learning and support practices in order to secure the largest amount of funding. It is a good example of effective market incentivisation, even if a total amount of performance-based funding available and the ways in which it is administered can be questioned.

Competition between institutions to retain its students can also drive innovative new practices. While considering students as customers is a controversial concept and there are obvious problems with equating these terms, students ultimately have the right to choose their education provider. It is also reasonable for students to expect that such an education will be transformational, cost-effective and relevant to employment, all through using a teaching delivery method that suits them. Universities and other higher education providers, then, need to respond by providing accessible and impactful course options without compromising academic integrity standards. An innovative Australian example is the block model at Victoria University (VU), in which students complete one unit at a time in an intensive block as opposed to a traditional four-unit semester. VU was the first university to introduce a block model of learning in Australia and this model has led to improvements in retention and success rates (Victoria University, n.d.). Another innovative example is CQUniversity's Master of Business Administration (Leadership), whereby suitably experienced students that are already employed full-time can complete the course online, without traditional assessment deadlines, and at approximately half the cost of a traditional MBA program. Without the market demand for alternative and cost-effective study options, it is unlikely that programs such as these would exist.

Another often overlooked consideration when debating the neoliberal university is that a robust tertiary sector contributes substantially to national socioeconomic development. Much of the critical discourse on neoliberal universities positions higher education as a private rather than public good. In short, a university primarily serves the interests of an individual consumer rather than a local community. Yet almost all industrialized countries rely on a large number of highly educated university graduates in order to grow its economy and remain globally competitive. This is an undeniable public good, even if such a positive impact extends beyond a typical institutional ethos of quality research and teaching. It is no coincidence that almost all major world powers with highly developed and reputable tertiary sectors also boast a high gross domestic product per capita and high quality of life indicators.

Australia is a good example, as it offers its citizens near universal access to higher education. In other words, Australian universities are effectively open to everyone who meets the entry criteria. Its universities also contribute substantially to the national economy through the recruitment of international students. In 2018, for instance, almost 700,000 enrolled international students contributed \$34 billion to the local economy (Department of Education, 2019). Critics might argue that an incessant university focus on growing student enrolments, retaining them as 'customers', and contributing to the national economy are inherently neoliberal policies, but it is equally valid to view these focal points through a lens that serves both the students who attend and the community in which institutions are situated. For example, active marketing campaigns to increase university enrollment rates can lead to significant benefits. On average, more Australians that decide to attend university are then more likely to find work at a higher salary (Bolton, 2019). Australian society then also subsequently benefits from having a highly developed knowledge economy that can meet the key global challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, including climate change and the digital revolution.

To some extent, arguing that neoliberalism is the dominant ideology of global higher education ultimately depends on the lens in which the system is viewed. Van der Walt (2017, p. 1), for instance, critiques neoliberal education models within the broader rise of 'the neoliberal approach to life in general'. Others point more specifically to increased managerialism and a shift away from open intellectual inquiry to performativity and outputs (Berg, Huijbens, & Larsen, 2016; Olssen & Peters, 2005). Such characterisations hold merit when considering the operational

framework of some institutions. An institution's financial position is certainly a critical consideration as universities operate in an increasingly globalised and competitive environment. Put another way, it is reasonable to suggest that the operation of an educational institution will broadly reflect the values and policies of the socioeconomic landscape in which it functions. This does not always lead to positive outcomes in highly capitalist societies, for example when financial outputs (such as income generated from a total number of graduates) are repeatedly prioritised over learning (such as whether those who graduate have actually developed the requisite skills and knowledge to excel when employed).

That said, some of the key values that many universities and respective staff openly uphold are at odds with neoliberal ideas. In almost direct opposition to neoliberalism, there is a growing body of academics and commentators suggesting instead that social justice is the current ideology dominating Western higher education institutions and those who work therein (Labaree, 2020; Peterson, 2018; Shapiro, 2004). This position is not surprising when more than two-thirds of academics working in the United States and the United Kingdom identify politically as 'on the left', to the point where it would be unusual to find intellectual conservatives that espouse neoliberal ideas on university campuses (Scruton, 2014). Furthermore, consistent with social justice values, it is certainly true that university commitments to diversity and inclusion are ubiquitous in Western countries (LePeau, Hurtado, & Davis, 2018). As of September 2020, a review I conducted of the websites of all 40 institutions listed as a TEQSA registered "Australian University" (National Register, n.d.) revealed all these universities' websites had a clear public commitment to advancing diversity and social inclusion (e.g. Curtin University, n.d.; Griffith University, n.d.). Actioning this commitment in practice means providing equitable resources and support for disadvantaged groups so that students can achieve the same outcomes as advantaged students. For some students and staff, it also means increasing participation and representation in particular disciplines, such as women in science and engineering fields.

Active efforts to ensure greater equality of outcome for students and staff, however, contradicts the free-market and non-interventionist principles underpinning neoliberalism. If universities were truly neoliberal, there would be no equity focused programs. Universities do not invest in diversity, equity and inclusion programs primarily to maximise profit; they generally commit to such programs due to a belief that it is a fair and just approach to education. In the Australian context, these programs have historically grown out of 'widespread support for equity policy directions' (Gale & Parker, 2017, p. 83). Nonetheless, academics arguing that universities are dominated by neoliberalism have not sufficiently explained how this claim remains valid alongside the popularity of social justice as a common university value. Thus I argue that these two ideologies are *both* observable in the Australian higher education system to varying degrees, even though their core ideological principles fundamentally do not align at all.

Like many developed countries, Australia's higher education system certainly contains some neoliberal-like elements. This is almost inevitable when the government that regulates such a system adopts free market-style policies in its management of the national economy and its public services. Nevertheless, at least in the Australian context, the characterisation of a public university system as neoliberal misrepresents the way in which it operates and the values espoused by its respective institutions. Positioning a neoliberal university as inherently negative, particularly in relation to students, also overlooks the benefits that can be derived from market-driven policies. Intensified and uncertain staff working conditions that partially stem from inadequate public funding, however, are clear concerns. In my estimation, this is a core reason why De Maio and Desierto's (2019) presentation at the recent Academic Language and Learning Conference sparked such interest and passion from the audience.

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