The neoliberal university is dead. What if this is something worse?

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In this preliminary reflection on a reimagined university – and specifically, on a reimagined University of Pretoria – I consider some aspects that precede reimagining. Inevitably, some important aspects fall outside of the scope of this current reflection, such as the place of the university within the city (e.g. J. Goddard and Paul Vallance (2013)), and specifically within Tshwane, and the publicness and accessibility of spaces such as Future Africa.

Memes to inform us

The memes shown in Figures 2 and 3 below appeared on social media (specifically Twitter) during the first six months of 2021.[1] These memes point to several related concerns that constrain a reimagining of educational institutions, and encapsulate the amplification of online teaching and learning, as well as the inflated significance of university rankings. In the first instance, the Twitter account University Wankings retweeted the following meme. While the meme speaks to a British context, the important take-away here is the mismatch between pandemic *lived lives* and pandemic *imaginaries*. In academia, and in considering the 'necessary changes' required by pandemic conditions, it is indeed important to identify the realities and parameters of lived lives, and not imaginaries.

The second Figure 3, a popular meme format ubiquitous in the early months of 2021, points to a double consciousness in how universities may consider the world rankings as a necessary, if troublesome, part of contemporary academic life.[2] The frames are taken from *Star Wars: Attack of the Clones*, and show the morally conflicted Anakin Skywalker in conversation with his paramour, Padme Amidala. Skywalker, as we know, will eventually become the major arch-antagonist of

1 Attempts to identify the authors of these memes have been fruitless.

2 Scholars such as Stefan Collini have written extensively about rankings and other concerns of academic life, and I will not rehearse those arguments here. Please see *What Are Universities For?* (2012) and *Speaking of Universities* (2018), which should be read in tandem with Franco 'Bifo' Berardi's (2009) *The Soul at Work,* with its focus on capital, labor and estrangement.

the *Star Wars* fictions, Darth Vader, whose use of 'necessary evils' allows the Empire to expand in territory and influence. This image captures, then, Anakin Skywalker's understanding that university rankings are 'deeply problematic', yet he persists in using them, as Padme suggests, in 'marketing materials'. (One of the risks of university rankings is that universities who rank higher on these lists than in the past might take these rankings more seriously than previously).

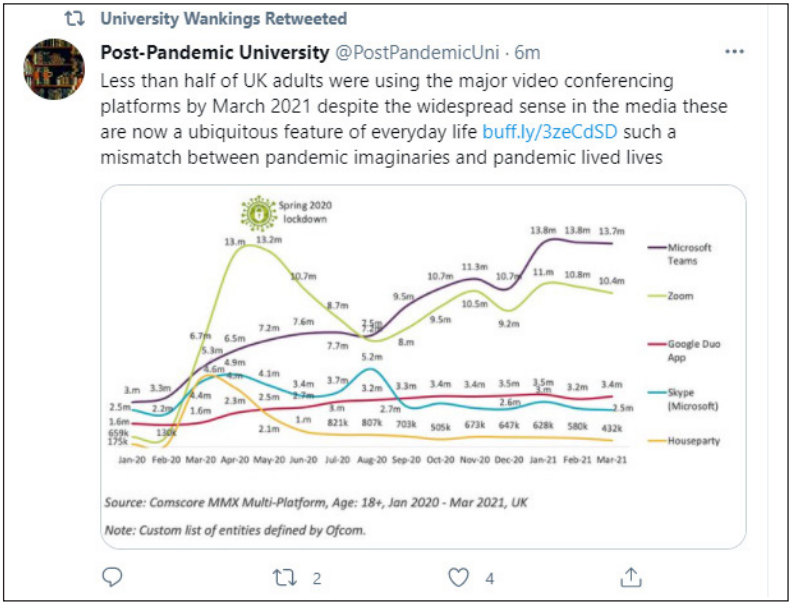

Figure 2. Perceptions of online activity, Source: Ofcom Online Nation 2021 report

Figure 3. For the better? Ranking meme

A preliminary reimagining

The memes in Figures 2 and 3 set the tone for a tentative engagement with key issues inhibiting a process of institutional reimagining.

It is likely that the Covid-19 pandemic killed the dominant model of the neoliberal university that existed prior to the pandemic. Even if this model had been on its way out, the pandemic sounded its death knell. In the period ahead, in which the transmission of the virus will gradually slow down before the virus reconstitutes itself yet again, universities will continue to think of ways to sustain the academic project, comprising (mostly, but not exclusively) teaching, learning and research. For the title of my paper I have taken my cue from the work of cultural theorist McKenzie Wark. The title cautions those of us who have grappled with the neoliberal university model (or its neoliberal character), that we should anticipate more challenging long- and short-term shifts and changes in the times ahead. Such changes have to do with how the University of Pretoria positions itself, and how it conceives of, and relates to, its staff and students. In this relationship, it is often academic staff who operate as a missing centre, as they have to maintain pedagogic and research productivity and, like students,

had to (and possibly still have to) occupy primary caretaking responsibilities at home.

To say that the neoliberal university is dead is not to say that it has vanished. There is no way we can predict the duration of its rigor mortis and the manner of its decomposition. There is no sure way to anticipate the means in which this dead entity facilitates, through the fruit of its passing, a vital new organism which seeks to *entangle* the world in sometimes similar, and sometimes different and more problematic, ways. This new entity may be more optimally suited to an environment which threatens to outpace it, or it could be even more of an alien in this world as it struggles with the non-negotiable, undeniably sheer humanity of those who populate the institution's hallways and classrooms.

Reimagining an institution is a considerable institutional and institution-wide activity and responsibility. Reimagining cannot occur outside of specific parameters, for instance the inevitable limitations on available funding due to social realities, and the less-inevitable encroachment of bureaucracy on daily academic life. *Bureaucracy delineates many of these parameters.* Bureaucracy is anathema to the building of trust. Bureaucracy ensures an unproductive slowness, which runs counter to the productive slowness that often characterises thinking and reflection in the humanities and in the arts. *At other times, bureaucracy paradoxically hastens certain processes and decisions that require more time for thoughtful consideration.* Often slowness is an indicator of depth, and not a mark of failure. Slowness is a necessary component of academic work, with academic work understood to include the creation of art or works of art. According to the late French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy, art is linked to transcendence. Art is value within 'not needing ... something without a use' (2019, 15). Such art is the result of, and is part of labour – hence 'art *work*', as Nancy emphasises. If the neoliberal university *and its particular bureaucracy* struggled with productive slowness as an aspect of its constitutive humanity, a re-imagined university should embrace this mode of productivity.[3] It is with great concern, for instance, that we see reports about universities in the United Kingdom shutting down academic departments that have art and humanity as their focus (e.g. Archaeology and Anthropology),

3 There must be *evidence-based* accountability for performance, but there the performance management system itself, from its interface to its pre-populated content, *is likely due for a reimagining*.

with little or no discourse or stakeholder engagement.

For the purposes of this paper, my focus is on the possibility of reimagining the university outside of some conceptual misnomers, which include empty cope-speak such as the phrase 'the new normal'. Here, reimagining is not yet a proposal of concrete short-term and longitudinal changes to the status quo. Instead, as a crucial first step, this paper proposes a *de-anchoring* from selected ideas that currently weigh down what and how we think about the University of Pretoria. Reimagining is here best conceived as the university and its staff operating within the parameters of the possible. When Aimée Lê and Jordan Osserman (2021:63) wonder, '*Who will survive the university?*' they identify workers' transitional demand as 'a "reasonable" goal that workers can agree on, yet which is unlikely to be accommodated by the existing constraints of the situation, pointing towards structural flaws around which a transformative movement can be built'. What can change within the University of Pretoria should be reasonable; a reimagining is a reasonable activity that should, in this context, result in a reasonable proposal for change. With this in mind, the clichéd instruction to 'think outside of the box' can paralyse the thinker as there is always 'a box' in some shape of form – e.g. a global pandemic; limited resources – whose affordances must be taken into account. To reimagine, then, is to understand these parameters not only as limitations on the possible but as the shapes and contours in which tangible institutional change could occur.

The (death of the) neo-liberal university and what comes after

Although traditional universities in South Africa are public institutions, they are often neoliberal in culture and character. Rafael Winkler (2018), who has taught in South Africa as well as the United Kingdom, writes that the effect of neoliberalism is '[the commodification of] higher education and [the production of] a new kind of social identity. This is the identity of the self as entrepreneur'. With this conceiving of the student as entrepreneur, Winkler says, '[n]eoliberalism has converted education from a public good to a personal investment in the future, a future conceived in terms of earning capacity'. Within this identity, there is little emphasis on the creation of new knowledges and on ways, for instance, to challenge current business models and policies on national levels. Alex Usher (2017) recommends that analysis of the neoliberal university should address four key aspects requiring critical reflection, and are worth quoting at length:

> the role of markets, the role of competitions (in higher education at least, a broader notion than markets), the role of performance data and the role of management. And with respect to each, the analysis would ask: have universities changed very much over time, or have they always been this way? Are there now or have there ever been models of universities which operate in a different way? And to what extent are the effects of these four things beneficial or detrimental?

In critically and honestly evaluating the beneficial or detrimental effects of 'the way things are', we turn to the humanity that underscores all academic activity.

The university, the student, and the academic staff member

Labourers in the knowledge economy are often told to 'work smarter, not harder'. This advice is similar to 'if you love what you're doing, you'll never work a day in your life', in that both aphorisms place any labour discontent at the feet of the worker by suggesting that any dissatisfaction with work is because these individuals do not work smartly enough, or because they are not sufficiently invested in the work they do. The structures within which the labourer performs their work are not considered in these *demoralising* statements. If academic staff buy into those statements as accurate approaches to work-life, '[we] convince ourselves that our excessive working hours are either a result of personal insufficiency/inexpediency, or in the service of personal development and therefore uncompensatable' (Lê & Osserman 2021:65). Academics may find themselves 'driven to narcissism in order to self-promote and make ourselves employable' while also 'inhibited in our ability to work, ridden with guilt and anxiety' (ibid). To quote Patrick Stokes (2014): The belief that our work-lives should fulfil us also opens the door to a particularly damaging psychological phenomenon', a particular despair related to 'a fundamental desire not to be oneself'. Reflecting on this advice to 'work smarter, not harder' in the enduring and delimiting presence of Covid-19 (the virus and its variants; the regulations; the protocols), it is increasingly clear that this recommendation leaves a crucial part unspoken: work smarter, not harder, with fewer resources under constraining circumstances *that have further destabilised the already precarious work-home binary*.

Reflecting on Bill Reading's (1996) pivotal *The University in Ruins*, John Higgins (2007:121) sees the 'state-centered view of higher education promoted by the Afrikaans establishment' sustained (possibly intensified) in post-apartheid South Africa. This neoliberal approach demands that 'education and higher education need to be carefully controlled and directed, and tailored (sic) ... to the dynamics of the economy'. This approach echoes the institutional advancement of the student as entrepreneur. Later, Higgins (2014) also foregrounds the importance – and need for greater institutional and public salience of – NAIL disciplines. NAIL here stands for Narrative, Analysis, and Interpretation, and (visual-digital) Literacy (2014:78-80). *NAIL disciplines require time for thought*.

As Maggie Berg and Barbara K Seeber (2016) argue in *The Slow Professor: Challenging the Culture of Speed in the Academy*, '[c]orporatization has compromised academic life and sped up the clock. The administrative university is concerned above all with efficiency, resulting in a time crunch and making those of us subjected to it feel powerless'. In transnational cinema, a movement known as slow cinema allows viewers sufficient time to hone in on objects and focus on aspects of the image in a way not dictated by the camera shot or duration of the shot. This deliberate slowness results in a rich engagement with the many formal qualities of a film (such as its composition and texture). Similarly, slow academia facilitates a cerebral yet embodied encounter with knowledges and the materials of intellectual life that inform the creation of new knowledges. (In her review of Berg and Seeber's slow manifesto, Colleen Flaherty (2016) notes that the authors do not only value rigorous intellectual practice of a certain duration, but also emphasise the necessity of students' physical shared class presence).

Berg and Seeber '[argue] that teaching is an undeniably emotional activity for which one should be physically present, and that students also benefit from working face-to-face with their peers' (Flaherty 2016). Presence and pleasure, then, are an important part of the humanity that drives the academic project and the institution's aims. While the cope-speak of a 'new normal' engages with a particular pandemic imaginary, Berg and Seeber remind us that presence and pleasure constellate where students share a physical space with their peers and their lecturers.

Reflections

To reimagine the university is to rethink and then envision systemic and structural change, as well as the content of these structures. In this instance, the university is first reimagined as relieved of its immediate tangible fixedness and associations, and secondly reimagined within an alternative framework (conceptual and tangible) in which the creation of new knowledges can be reconceived and facilitated. As Philomena Essed once remarked at a Flexible Futures conference when commenting on the call to decolonise, processes such as decolonisation can only meaningfully happen when the systems and structure in which these processes take place are rethought and reconstituted.[4]

Where does this leave the post-neoliberal (or whatever it might be labelled) university and its relationship with staff and students? In reimagining the university, we need to think of an institution that offers the conditions for *knowledge originality* beyond the *replication of knowledge*. The former allows domain-and-discipline autonomy; the latter, monotony. With this distinction in mind, a reimagined UP acknowledges the contexts and diversities of the ever-rising, exponentially multiplying university rankings and sub-rankings without accepting university rankings as master signifier. World rankings make for numerous opinion pieces and *double-edged* marketing materials, and as many others have noted, these rankings are relentlessly oblivious to access to resources. One of the problems with university rankings is that the better an institution performs in a ranking, the more seriously one might begin to take the rankings exercise.

We need to retire some of our most popular phrases and expressions related to university life. The idea of the ivory tower is, at least in South Africa, surely a term that must be put out to pasture, especially since the Fallism of 2015 and beyond, as events have demonstrated that universities (its spaces, management, and staff) are deeply affected by socio-political events such as #FeesMustFall. The ivory tower has been replaced, maybe, by a sphere of precarity. This sphere is a possibly exciting, likely vulnerable, space. In this sphere, academics labour to maintain academic processes and integrity while dealing with a profound increase in student mental health issues, political upheaval, and a global pandemic. Whereas the ivory tower suggests an image of power in and of isolation from

4 How decolonised, for instance, is the current performance management system?

the non-ivory (the 'real world'), the image of the sphere of precarity emphasises the 'confinedness' of the contemporary academic space. Here, precarity is more constant than any 'protection' or distance an ivory tower might provide.

It is in further consideration of the above that we subsequently retire the phrase, 'the new normal'. Often employed in popular media to indicate the scope and depth of the ramifications of Covid-19 on the world, this phrase suggests (a 'new') sustained shift in operational standards and procedures, when the evidence proposes the absence of such predictably. Something is new, yes, but it is not 'normal', and it is not a sustained standard in and along which academic activity can predictably take place. In the world of research-intensive tertiary education, we were already cautious about the connotations of 'the normal'. There is now a double-speak (or maybe a double-bind, psychologically speaking) in how the university communicates with its stakeholders: teaching modalities must necessarily adapt to this 'new normal' in which all kinds of distance (not only physical or social) are foregrounded and ostensibly collapsed. This signals to staff and students that necessary change is at hand. At the same time, and against these profound tangible changes in teaching and learning, the 'new normal' is not very new after all: students must pass, staff must publish, and rankings matter.

There have been notable shifts in how the university sees and positions its students. Broadly, this positional shift occurred across three categories. The first category is the student-as-client, as captured in the renaming of Client Service Centre (CSC). This category followed the neoliberal logic of student as capital-delivering subject, a subject endowed with the privileges of claiming the right to 'speak to the manager', as it were, if dissatisfied with decisions made by lecturing staff about assessments, grades, or course content. Here, the idea of the academic-as-expert suffered a further decline as the client-centered approach inevitably eroded the barrier between pretend-curiosity-about-a-subject and academic expertise in a specific domain and discipline.

The second category followed a return to the student-as-student, as a subject pursuing knowledge creation within a tertiary training and education context (hence the return to the Student Services Centre, or SSC). This repositioning did not cross over into institutional discussions of the student-at-work, as demonstrated by increasing reports and feedback required on student throughput rates, and the increase in administration that academic staff are responsible for, from identifying at-risk students at different stages of presenting

a module, to recording and uploading additional audio-visual material to orient students on how to approach the content of a specific module. The third shift – where we are now, although this is not a publicised, marketable shift – is a (latent) repositioning of *the student as palliative subject*. As a colleague at the University of Cape Town commented in 2019, students have become profoundly uninterested in the content of the work they are studying. At the same time, these students are increasingly anxious about the mechanics of course content delivery (e.g. if the TurnItIn link could be made available a bit earlier than initially arranged; how much to despair if the similarity index is 3%). The palliative subject is regularly reminded that they are fragile and vulnerable. Their conditions-of-life are streamlined and optimised for them in an institutional version of helicopter-parenting. This image of the student stands in contrast to the multiple demonstrations of agency, capability, and ownership that students perform in their public and private lives. Against the dynamic agency exhibited by most students, institutions often imagine students to have become subjects to be soothed and to be consistently monitored for risk. If UP emphasises a ready-for-work institutional environment which prepares the student for work conditions that can radically change at short notice, this position must be reconsidered.

If we are sincerely invested in embracing crises as opportunities for a positive intervention in moving away from the dehumanising (or at least, humanity-denying) aspects of neoliberal university practices, reimagining UP means reimagining how the institution itself conceives of its students and, as pointed out earlier, how the institution conceives of the academic staff, their labour, and the parameters (institutional ranking requirements; pandemic conditions) in which such labour is, and ought to be, delivered.

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