

ON THE ROAD TO HIGH
PARTICIPATION AND
DEMOCRACY? THROUGH A
GLASS DARKLY OF THE
CORPORATE UNIVERSITY

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In higher education contexts, where the corporate university has become a dominant model, academic oligarchies collude to promote managerial rule that deprives faculty of autonomy and represses freedom of teaching, learning and inquiry (Ginsberg 2011; Holligan 2011). Some researchers point to a growing phenomenon of “feudalism” (Wieczorek et al., 2017; Yudkevich 2014). Holligan (2011) depicts this development as lord-vassal dependencies, fostering tribal thinking, hierarchical allegiances, and corporate compliance (Keashly 2021; Oleksiyenko 2018). In pursuit of the hegemonic powers revered by the global marketplace, the academic oligarchies have largely marginalized the humanistic and humanitarian purposes of higher education, while also transforming academic work into metrics-driven performativity (Macfarlane 2021; Oleksiyenko and Jackson 2020). The corporate university has colonised academic stories and imaginaries, and enhanced human vulnerability – the professoriate and students feel increasingly precarious, as they succumb to senseless labour demands and feudal loyalty

(Oleksiyenko and Tierney 2018). At the same time, the discourse of civic duty has shrunk significantly, with many campuses being in the grip of an obsession with managerially-steered performance targets (Macfarlane 2021). The corporate university propels a competition fetish (Naidoo 2016), depreciates “introversion, quietness, lack of self-promotion, and listening” (Jackson 2021); ignores vulnerability (Jackson 2018); and celebrates secrecy (Hong and Walsh 2009). The “leaderists” of the corporate university stifle the voices of those who dare to speak freely and resist their abuse (Oleksiyenko 2018).

The “neo-feudal” academia (Reitz 2017) also puts significant emphasis on the “values of positionality,” rather than on the “values of learning” (Macfarlane 2019). The corporate university objectifies students, while using them as cash-cows and presenting them with misguided notions of the future (Lomer 2014). Over-inflating the symbolic value of prestigious degrees and experiences (Choi and Nieminen 2013), universities often overcharge students on the basis of the forecasted market value of their prospective

jobs. Yet, these universities control neither the labor markets, nor the credential values.

Notwithstanding, enraptured by the corporate imaginaries of their career prospects, students typically see no other alternative, but to comply with the dominant agendas and expectations of the marketeers. For most “degree-hunters” (especially those who are affected by the emoscapes of global rankings, as explained by Shahjahan et al. 2020), what matters most is competing for status goods, in spite of the nagging suspicion that these status goods are less likely to produce a happy and sustainable future, than they are to perpetuate more competition and resentment (Naidoo 2016). The corporate university tends to discriminate against international students, not just by charging higher tuition fees, but by using them as agents of “internationalization at home” – thus, extracting double value from them as “economic objects” (Lomer 2014; Oleksiyenko 2019). Corporate managers often appear to care more about utilitarian targets than about equity and ethics of internationalisation (Clifford and Montgomery 2017; Schartner and Cho 2017). Corporatizing faculties and

departments are urged to make strategic choices about international students on the basis of the hierarchy of markets and the purchasing power of elites, who increasingly yield to international status anxiety. Meanwhile, the commercial internationalisers fail to mitigate the lingering problems of inequality, prejudice, xenophobia and racism (Oleksiyenko 2018, 2021).

While the early 2000s discourse of higher education projected high hopes about a more democratic world resulting from wider access to higher learning, doubts about this outcome have grown significantly over the last few years. The following questions have been looming larger in academic communities: Can the corporate university be a meaningful and effective contributor to building a democratic future? Can it create constructive learning environments, where students and new generations of professors can freely exercise their agency for democracy? And if not, as the researchers cited above argue, what should intellectuals do to reorient the trends and re-shape the aims of the university?

These questions will remain unanswered, if the academic community is unable to uphold a critical conversation about the roles and responsibilities of the professoriate (Macfarlane, 2013; Oleksiyenko and Ruan, 2019). Democratic processes are unlikely to unfold in a corporatized environment, if professors fail to rigorously pursue the reconceptualization of the idea of university; reshape governance to challenge neoliberal emoscapes and imaginaries of 'wellbeing'; and de-legitimize and disempower feudal allegiances and fiefdoms. To sustain a democratic environment, the academic community, and not the self-promoting oligarchs alone, should actively discuss the emergence of corporate university vices. This discussion should focus on liberating academics and students from the managerialist discourse, in addition to empowering intellectuals to criticize the neoliberal logic. Intellectuals should rethink their engagement with markets, which were conceptualised by neoliberals as a base for democracy, and instead focus more on community service and civic engagement (Macfarlane, 2013). The new ethical construct of global higher education must result in universities hiring

and retaining intellectuals who do not fear to speak openly about bullying, despotism, and the leadership failures of the corporate university.

Benchmarking democracy necessitates consciously rethinking the university aims, governance, and imaginaries of intellectual life, academic activism, and the scholarly community. A democratic university should place academics and students into the power sharing space, where openness, inclusivity, and mutual respect are valued. This requires that university leaders encourage the redesign of curricula to enable participatory engagement and critical inquiry, granting students freedom to learn (Macfarlane, 2016; Jackson, 2019). In practical terms, meaningful higher learning should go beyond competence development (Peters et al, 2020).

Furthermore, for citizenship to be embraced, the curricula should provide sufficient focus on social responsibilities, including the care of vulnerable and marginalized learners (e.g., orphans, low-income children, ethnic and racial minorities, etc.). Direct engagement with those who turn the corporate bureaucracy's stomachs (Nisar

and Masood, 2020) can provide universities with a moral lens through which the learners can better see, or reimagine, the human face of poverty, despair, and resistance. Such focus may instil a greater sense of self-esteem among students, as well as generate more sensitivity toward addressing the social misapprehensions that deprive refugees, migrants, and the poor of dignity and voice. Ultimately, this kind of learning provides the foundation for building campuses that “recognise, (re)consider and (re)introduce often marginalised, little known, side-lined cultural knowledges” (Tesar and Arndt 2017). As our commitment to these learning strategies grows, we may expect that the influences of the corporate university shrink, giving way to a more holistic, purposeful life, grounded in charity, dignity, benevolence, and desire for democracy.

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