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The Uberfication of the Doctorate: Higher Degrees in End Times

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Abstract

Ideological expectations from the right and the left saturate higher education. With public controversies detailing historic sexual abuse, research misconduct and plagiarism, how is the PhD positioned in a university sector losing its purpose, meaning and momentum? The doctorate is not only indicative, illustrative or representative of wider societal concerns, but also requires nuanced recognition of its distinctiveness from undergraduate degrees. This article activates a thought experiment to consider what is happening in international higher education, and how this history has been shaped and creased through the (post) pandemic environment. Uberfication is a provocative trope that enables the development of a generational modelling of our universities, spanning the baby boomers, Generation X, and millennials. With three generations circulating in higher education, can the assumptions and expectations be managed and aligned?

Keywords: Higher Education Studies, Doctoral Studies, Uberfication, End times, Generation X, Baby Boomers, Millennials

Introduction

Doctoral degrees are a small and frequently invisible part of universities. Occasionally, media attention sensationalizes the supposed (un)employability of the doctoral qualification, or the 'oversupply' of PhD graduates in a higher education sector that (supposedly) neither wants nor needs them (Cuthbert & Molla, 2015). The doctoral slice of the neoliberal university torte is not only indicative, illustrative or representative of wider concerns, but also requires nuanced recognition of the profound differences from undergraduate degrees. Through the lens of doctoral education, my article summons an alternative way of thinking about universities, academics, and the nature of research and knowledge. I summon a thought experiment to consider what has happened in the last fifty years of higher education, and how this history has been shaped and cragged through the (post) pandemic environment. Uberfication is a provocative trope that enables the development of a generational history of our universities, spanning baby boomers, Generation X, and millennials.

Commentary and critique buffets universities, detailing in granular detail their

failures, errors, missteps and inadequacies. Importantly, a strong and burgeoning literature in Critical University Studies tracks and theorizes this decline of purpose, vision, and meaning (Williams, 2012; Jaschik, 2015; Steffen, 2011; Loughead, 2017; Williams, 2016a; Walker & Mangrum, 2014; Slaughter & Leslie, 1997; Noble, 2001; Bousquet, 2006; Johnson, Kavanagh, & Mattson, 2003; Newfield, 2008; Newfield, 2016; Ginsberg, 2011; Steffen, 2017; McGettigan, 2012; Williams, 2016b; Wiscomb, 2017; Petrina, 2014; Palgrave Critical University Studies, 2016). The calibre of scholarship in this field is high, and the research is incisive and interrogative. The inelegances are also clear. There is a domination of North American and British case studies, examples, policy environments and histories. A further challenge is a lack of focus on the doctorate, doctoral studies, and international higher degrees.

The Doctor of Philosophy, as the highest degree awarded at the University, must maintain international standards. Rigour and transparency are verified through professional development and examination. Institutional failures weather the qualification, spanning from sexual assault and harassment of students (Leisure, 2007; Aguilar & Baek, 2020; Cohen & Baruch, 2022; Young & Wiley, 2021), to bullying (Keashly, 2021; Hodgins & Mannix-McNamara, 2021; Tuma, 2021), conflicts over authorship, and research integrity and academic integrity breaches (Huybers, Greene, & Rohr, 2020; Hofmann and Holm, 2019; Abdi, Fieuws, Nemery, & Dierickx, 2021). These acts of misconduct are increasingly public and accountable. Yet how does the doctorate transform in a university sector losing its purpose, meaning and momentum?

There is an immediate trigger for my article. We have a generation of under-prepared students entering our higher degree programmes (Bishop-Monroe et al., 2021; Kheswa et al., 2022). As I have travelled around the world for work, colleagues spanning from the hard sciences to the high humanities have expressed their worry – their deep concern - about the lack of learning enacted by the COVID-generation of undergraduate students. Have these undergraduates spent enough time at the bench conducting experiments? Have they read enough? How many lectures were missed through the pandemic? How many online lectures were never viewed? What was the scale of participation from students in those online seminars, tutorials and workshops. They were 'present,' but their camera and microphone remained resolutely darkened and muted.

This darkened camera is a metaphor. It may be a proxy. How can this group of students operate multimillion dollar / pound / Euro equipment and be expected to read at the highest theoretical levels, when they did not fully participate in their undergraduate degrees? This is another manifestation of long COVID. To frame this moment requires a much larger discussion about the three generations of scholars currently circulating in our universities, alongside the impact of uberfication on our universities and our doctoral degrees.

That word – uberfication – is controversial and meaningful. It has been chosen and

deployed in this article with intent. It is a resonant frame for the analytical agitations of doctoral education research. A strong scholar and research project has propelled the theoretical rigour and clarity of this concept. From this provocative theoretical foundation, I questioned what is happening in our doctoral programmes, with regard to supervision and advising, and professional development and examination.

Uberfication

As is common in the contemporary humanities, a powerful concept has been developed by a courageous scholar, living, researching and writing outside of the Ivy League, Russell Group, Group of Eight and the top 100 institutions listed in the *Times Higher Education* University Ranking. As bell hooks confirmed through her career, everything of interest develops from – and occupies – the margins (2000). Gary Hall is a scholar who has built a radical and important intellectual terrain: postdigital studies (Hall, 2013; Hall, 2023). Many of his intellectual innovations have emerged from his role and position at the University of Coventry. One of these post-disciplinary innovations in his research career is *The Uberfication of the University*, published by the University of Minnesota Press in 2016.

This monograph from the University of Minnesota Press is part of their Forerunners series, which the publishers describe as "written between fresh ideas and finished books" (Forerunners, 2023) They termed it grey literature, forming strong relationships between conventional academic publishing and social media. For Hall, *The Uberfication of the University* details how the financial crisis of 2008 did not discredit neoliberalism, but increased privatization, deregulation, and critiques of the state. This meant that the University was part of a postwelfare capitalist society where labour was reorganized, academics became micro-entrepreneurs, and the sector was aggressive, competitive and organized for profit. The university has moved from a state-regulated service to a sharing economy, following the pattern of the deregulation of hotels and taxis, through the disruption and intervention of data management intermediaries such as Uber and Airbnb. Regulation is avoided. There are no maximum hours for work. Workers are isolated. The uberfication of education can also be tracked in the movement from free MOOCs to expensive MOOCs. For example, in April 2015, LinkedIn purchased Linda.com, the professional development company. A social network became an education provider.

This cluster of transformations can be described as neoliberalism. This word is used frequently and inaccurately, but at its most foundational, refers to privatization, deregulation, and a critique of the public sector. Significantly, most universities are part of the public sector. Yet as regulation declines, these alternative providers provide cheap and easy access to courses. The intellectual standards of these courses are un(der)verified, as

skill development replaces knowledge development. Under-regulation is justified on the premise that competition and consumer choice will improve a product, even if that product is higher education. Performance in this system is evaluated through pseudo-metrics, including the website Rate My Professor (2023), student evaluations, and league tables and rankings for universities. Hall described such initiatives as, "auditing a way to manage academics." (2016). Scholars are patrolled by shame, public abuse and rankings of their 'ability,' or indeed, popularity.

Neoliberalism, with its origins in the 19th century, entered populist politics through the presidency and prime ministerships of Ronald Reagan, Augusto Pinochet and Margaret Thatcher. This was an intervention in the post-war consensus. The consequences of the Great Depression and the Second World War, alongside the need to rebuild public health, public education and the public infrastructure, meant that collective and state-based solutions were valued. Through Reagan and Thatcher, particular words and phrases gained traction, visibility, energy and momentum. These words and phrases include privatization, deregulation, globalization, free trade, monetarism and austerity. The private sector – through the market economy and competitiveness – could reduce the 'waste' of public institutions. The volatility and damage of free markets, as seen through the Great Depression and the Global Financial Crisis, are masked and parked when validating words such as choice, agency and freedom.

The consequences of neoliberalism on higher education are starkly revealed. Anibeth Desierto and Carmla De Maio have examined the impact of neoliberalism on both academics and students in universities (2020). In their desire to "adopt alternative philosophies," they probe the consequences of students being rebranded as consumers rather than learners. They show how the imperatives for care, lifelong learning and citizenship are lost and denied. The only way to conflate and overlay students with consumers is to decentre and marginalize learning and learners. Consumer↔students have graduate outcomes – a student version of key performance indicators – and evaluate their academic teachers on the easiness of the course and the 'hotness' of the academic (Rate My Professor, 2023). What we know about learning from Freire's pedagogy of care and pedagogy of the heart (2021), Kress's theories of multimodality (2009), or even Vygotsky's Zones of Proximal Development (Silalahi, 2019) is denied and dismissed. Andragogical care is replaced with profiteering carelessness. This is also a transformational movement of education from public good to private service, justifying high fees, and the ranking of universities to 'add value' to the often-exorbitant cost of a course (Desierto & De Maio, 2020).

The skewed impact of this ideology in higher education is shown by how particular concepts have been emptied of meaning and rendered benevolent and attractive, voiding a negative and destructive history. These concepts include 'competition,' 'agency,' 'choice' and 'free speech.' Through the Global Financial Crisis, the impact of greed, carelessness,

narcissism and anti-democratic imperatives were starkly revealed. Yet the global amnesia – the international forgetting – of this catastrophic destruction has only intensified the consequences of this neoliberalism. This is a failed neoliberalism that – like a zombie – continues to walk through economic and social systems. As Hall realized,

> At first the 2008 financial crisis looked as if it was going to constitute a major threat to the long-term viability of neoliberalism. Viewed from our current vantage point, however, it seems merely to have given the champions of the free market an opportunity to carry out with increased intensity their program of privatization, deregulation, and reduction to a minimum of the state, public sector, and welfare state. The result is a condition we can describe as postwelfare capitalism" (2016, preface)

This active and intentional denial of economic and social consequences – a displacement of reality – meant that public institutions, particularly public health and public education institutions, were not only bled of funding and certainty, but purpose and sustainability. Zombie neoliberalism infected the delicate social fabric that was already post-consensus, and post-expertise.

This was – and is – a postwelfare capitalist society, transforming the shape of academic labour. Academics – through internships and industry partnerships – become micro-entrepreneurs who are rewarded for their aggressive pursuit of grants, funding and profit, rather than quality, integrity and ethics. As state regulated services, such as taxis and hotels, are replaced by data management gatekeepers that reintermediate digital disintermediation, a sharing economy emerges. Again, sharing is a zombie concept, emptied of meaning and refilled with toxic content. Sharing – from childhood – is configured as a positive attribute, mitigating selfishness and bullying. But the sharing economy is not benevolent. It ensures that an under-regulated and over-monitored working class (no longer in stable employment) must work even harder. By avoiding state regulation of working hours and conditions, this "postwelfare model of capitalism" (Hall, 2016, loc 124) warps the potential of digitization to generate workplace efficiency and facilitate leisure time. Instead, this sharing economy has built platform capitalism, where everyone is a supplier. Everyone is an "isolated microentrepreneur" (Hall, 2016, loc 209). Everyone has – or is aspiring towards – a side hustle. Yet these bizarre phrases are required because work is unstable. Casualized, precariat contracts have ensured that the respect and integrity that is fundamental to a work ethic, with or without the Protestantism, has been lost. But so has leisure. Consumerism – shopping – has been the inelegant replacement for collective free time to play sport, walk, and meet and talk with others. Community is now formed through consumerism rather than citizenship.

The Movement from Patronage to Neoliberalism

Throughout their history, universities functioned on a patronage model or a guild model. White men taught other white men, deploying homological andragogical methods (Newman, 1996). Academics did not hold teaching qualifications, but used a lecture to communicate their knowledge, attempting to replicate themselves in the next generation of students (Exley & Dennick, 2009). Assessment was formed through examinations, including oral examinations and essays (Zachariah, 1993). Many of these models were based on the medieval churches, also an under-regulated space, albeit with a different cause and consequences. Formed during the early modern period – that is, the late 15th century to the 1800s and exemplified by the University of Paris model - students were controlled by faculty 'masters' to confirm the standard of the university. In the Oxford model, a tutorial system was deployed (Cosgrove, 2011). Teaching was decentralized. The guild structure and paradigm continued in the university system long after the industrial revolution configured new ways of organizing time, labour and discipline. The university, disconnected from profit, maintained power and control over the workplace because it was disconnected from capitalist imperatives.

The discursive detritus from religious organizations left its residue on university life. However, the innovations through the Germanic university model, with the increasing attention on scientific methodologies emphasizing repeatability and transparency, meant that education started to influence and impact more of the population. This historical trajectory was crystalized in the 1963 Robbins Report. The Robbins report presented four major objectives of a university:

> Skill-based instruction
> The cultivation of mind beyond limited specialisms
> A balance between research and teaching
> To promote, communicate and enhance a common culture as the foundation for citizenship (Robbins, 1963)

In the subsequent seventy years, scholars can track how far international higher education has moved beyond the cultivation of knowledge, balancing teaching and research, and enhancing citizenship. The model configured by Robbins required reliable pipelines for public funding. Through the twenty first century, and only intensified by the global financial crisis, neoliberal ideologies have denied, displaced and demeaned public funding and the public good. The movement from citizenship to employability, academics to managers, and standards to standardization, means benchmarks, metrics and stretch targets patrol and limit andragogical and research innovation, flair and courage.

Through the secular models of higher education, the sociology was clear. The student and workplace model were based on an academic occupying the space of a married white man, with a wife who completed the daily life tasks (Perna, 2001). The wife was

unrecognized for the work she provided to ensure the man would become a successful academic. This model of academia still circulates in our universities. For many baby boomer men, men now in their late 60s and 70s, they were educated with few women as classmates and colleagues. They have experienced a stability of employment beyond the hopes of subsequent generations, and their understanding of university work, including PhD supervision, differs from the other generations in our university. As Dean, I have two examples of this behaviour. Two men refused to complete a 10-minute professional development session about PhD supervision that maintained their status on a supervisory register. Listening to a woman conveying ten minutes of professional development content and writing 250 words in application of that research to their supervision was not a viable option for them. One man was 70 years of age. One was 69. They have worked in very few universities in their career, gaining a stable income and professional life for decades. They both confirmed that they will not be completing the training because one "doesn't do administration." The other stated that he "does not have time." Intriguingly, both reported to me they had twenty higher degree completions. This is where the generational complexity emerges. They assumed that graduating twenty PhD students is a high number, and I would be impressed and perhaps intimidated. I was neither impressed nor intimidated because this is a low number of completions in our expansive higher degree programme, particularly when considering their 40+ years of a career. These stories capture the generational challenges that bubble through universities. The Baby Boomer men were educated and worked in an under-regulated system, continuing patronage models from the 19th century. They educated people like themselves, as they had been educated. From this closed system, there were no critiques or alternative pathways to being an academic or a supervisor. This was and is an experiential ideology. However, a data set of one – a male baby boomer's academic career - is not generalizable. It is no longer functional.

The difficulty is that the context in which higher education exists, and higher degrees are positioned, has changed. Through the late 1980s and 1990s, the widening participation agenda emerged in our universities. Women, Indigenous students, students of colour, older students, students with impairments and disabilities, and part-time students appeared in lecture theatres and seminars. Rainbow-identified students were more visible in doctoral programmes. Homology did not function in such a diverse system, because these students had life experiences far beyond the trajectory of a young man who enrolled in a university degree and then stayed at the institution. These young men, as they aged and without the interventions of professional development, taught and supervised this diverse student group using the same andragogy – or lack of andragogy – that they deployed when the university degree programmes matched their sociological profile (Brabazon, Gribbin, & Sharp, 2022).

From the widening participation movement in higher education (Hoare & Johnston, 2011), regulation was required, including mandatory standards for professional

development in teaching and learning, curricula design, double marking, assessment committees, benchmarks, and external examiners in some nations. Teaching and learning processes were checked, verified and regulated. Suddenly, an activity behind a closed lecture theatre door or in a tutorial room was open for scrutiny and evaluation. Teaching experience was not enough. Homology did not enable student success. Expertise was required, and this expertise had to be verified, accountable and transparent.

University research was nationally regulated and managed, with clear requirements for human, animal and environmental ethics. After the Vancouver Protocol, research authorship and integrity were questioned and then checked with increasing formality in journals (Iphofen, 2020). As research integrity and ethics policies and procedures were increasingly ratified, Generation X enrolled in universities. This generation was born between 1961 and 1981, and would witness volatile economic conditions, multiple unstable jobs, exploitative contracts, and the necessity to move for employment between cities, states, provinces and countries. They also saw – and perhaps experienced – bullying, sexual assault and sexual harassment (Bickel & Brown, 2005). This is the generation that welcomed regulation and state interventions to stop the abuse of students and postdoctoral candidates. Governance and oversight are the strategies to intervene in and stop cultures of bullying, and theft of authorship and research (Brabazon, 2022).

Toxic consequences bleed from the patronage model of higher education. Major institutional strengths emerge when committing to regulation and governance, to hold the perpetrators accountable for their actions. The professional crack in the patronage model was that it was constructed to be exploitative. Universities became generational battlegrounds of very well qualified members of Generation X, who had enacted professional development in teaching and learning and gained educational qualifications, and the baby boomers who continued with homology, perpetuating an exploitative model of knowledge generation.

There is one more generation to add to this ideological transformation of universities: the Millennials. Born between 1981 and 1996, they grew up on and with digitized media, social media and accelerated culture. They also were socialized by neoliberalism, as this ideology infiltrated all systems and structures. Life became a shopping expedition. Consumerism saturated everything, including higher education. Certainly, from Generation X, higher education students were paying for their degrees. These payments created odd student cultures, accumulating debt, but also an odd commodification of knowledge. If a student is paying for a degree, should they pass it? (Brabazon, 2007).

From this generational snapshot, it is necessary to align this student and workplace culture to the uberfication of our university, noting these three generations are circulating in the institutions currently and concurrently. Overlaying this generational model is a

diversity of academic workforces, including tenured and stable staff, who may be restructured out of the institution, but have also been able to sustain 40+ years of stable employment with all the consequences on stable housing and family support. However, most jobs in universities are insecure positions, part time or on a short-term contract, where academics are living with stress, loneliness, exhaustion, distress and despair. This group is subsidizing the university, completing high level work for which they are paid very little. Fewer staff are teaching critical and difficult courses because the student reviews will rate them as difficult or non-vocational. Hall stated that,

> there is a very real danger that the range of those who have an opportunity to create, publish, and disseminated adventurous – what we might call brave – political and critical scholarship and research may grow even narrower in the future (2016, loc 410).

It is a real and significant need to manage a reputation – including high teaching review scores - so that semester long contracts and casualized work will be renewed and continued. Once more we return to Gary Hall's powerful statement. This is "auditing a way to manage academics" (Hall: 2016, loc 338). This management of academics via opinion, subjectivity and 'hotness' has resulted in heightened stress, loneliness, exhaustion and burnout, depression and – indeed – suicide (Sever & Ozdemir, 2022). Is managing a reputation really the point of academic life? Is this pandering to subjectivity and self-absorption the best use of a scholar's time? Or - to change discourses - is it economically efficient to waste the time of well-educated teachers and researchers in the quest to be popular, easy and compliant?

These questions are the consequences of under-regulation. There is an assumption – an ideology – that competition and consumer choices improve performance, innovation and achievement. But under-regulation also builds and reinforces cronyism, insider trading, gatekeeping cultures, and systems of abuse. The market regulates rather than the state. However, the academics that still nostalgically hark towards the patronage model of under-regulation are also problematic. This clash has been witnessed in Aotearoa / New Zealand in the 2020s. A small nation with eight public universities, the insularity has revealed consequences. There have been large financial shortfalls in annual budgets. While academics have blamed "managerialism" and "bureaucratization" (Hill, 2023), the causes of the 'crisis' are multiple, toxic and complex.

It is easy – and accurate – to locate managerialism as the bag that carries all the rubbish, inelegance, irrelevance, irrationality and confusion in the higher education sector. But the patronage model for higher education was also dysfunctional, cruel, gatekeeping and continued a toxic status quo. Unwin argued that there were 11 key indicators that confirm the problems of managerialism in universities. I have selected six of these indicators to discuss.

> 2. Decision-making by academics is largely restricted to the need to comply with policies made by central leadership in a top-down manner. Communication is predominantly top-down.
> 5. There is an erosion of trust between academics and university leadership, despite efforts to adopt terms such as choice, collegiality, ownership, consultation and empowerment.
> 6. There is intensification of work and increasing levels of uncertainty, stress and feelings of vulnerability. Some have to consult a lawyer to understand their options in change situations.
> 7. Processes for accountability and performance replace time for teaching and research, and there is a reduction in times and places for collegial interaction amongst staff.
> 10. There is disproportionately high recognition and reward for taking up managerial responsibilities. High quality researchers replace teaching and research time with managerial time.
> 11. There is a loss of the personal touch, of thanks for outstanding teaching and research, and sense of community and collegiality. Instead, there is a shift towards individualism and competitiveness (Hill, 2023).

The question is why managerialism emerged in our universities. Firstly, the differences between higher education and other industries have reduced. Universities are no longer a (work)place apart. Employment in universities is just like working for Ford (Beynon, 1973). There is nothing special or distinctive about higher education. The meta question is whether there should be distinctiveness and specialness. But the tier or stream of university administrators, following on from Stanley Aronowitz's argument in *The Knowledge Factory* (2001), has been created who have failed in research and teaching and occupy a third space: leadership. But this stream or tier has been created because academics did not enter leadership and would not complete the required administration to show quality, accountability, and transparency.

It is important that academic life – particularly in its patronage mode - is not romanticized. The policies and procedures were developed because of bullying, sexual assault, sexual harassment, continual breaches of research ethics regarding authorship, and gatekeeping of disciplines. The structural injustices in higher education, based on gender, sexuality, race and age, are profound. Those in power have maintained it through patronage, exploitation, and a denial of transparency and responsibility. Policies and regulation are strategies to hold the powerful accountable. Similarly, the comment about the "intensification of work" and "vulnerability" made by Hill are not isolated to universities but exists throughout the workplace and economy. Once more, should academics have special treatment and conditions while housing insecurity, health insecurity and food insecurity punctuate social structures outside of higher education?

Hill's critique of 'managerialism' raises a key issue. Should academics be 'accountable'? Should accountability be parked for 'collegial interaction'? This is a false

binary opposition and is disconnected from the lived reality of the precariat academic workforce. Collegial interaction is a nostalgic ideology, summoned from Oxbridge high tables and built on the sacrifice of wives and families to allow the 'gentleman scholar' to experience this mode of communication. There is no mention in Hill's critique of strategies to stop the clock of the neoliberal workforce, to enable caring responsibilities, grocery shopping or paying bills. This patronage-derived critique of universities is based on attacking managers, who may be incompetent. But this critique is the mask for losing the patronage model in higher education. The freedom of the elite – the protection of the elite – has been lost. Regulation and governance agitate and scupper the assumptions - the lie - of meritocracy that reinforces and propels patronage.

The hierarchies of patronage are also critiqued through the ruthlessness of neoliberalism. The assumed academic movement and promotion from an undergraduate to a postgraduate, and from a post-doctoral position to tenure-track appointments, have degraded A recent article in *Nature* by Linda Nordling reported the personal and professional lives of Manuel Chevalier and Mine Altinli:

> Today, the couple are renting a flat in Hamburg, Germany, where Altinli researches mosquito-borne viruses as a postdoc at the Bernhard Nocht Institute for Tropical Medicine. Chevalier is finishing a postdoc at the University of Bonn, some 5 hours away by train, although he works remotely. Both still enjoy their science. But both are now 35, and after eight years of postdocs in three countries for Chevalier, the impermanence of their lives has begun to chafe. If they'd had stable jobs, they would probably have bought a home by now, they say. The uncertainty grows more frustrating over time (Nordling, 2023).

The aspirational trajectory of academic life, with tenured stability as the apex, no longer exists. Even staff on tenure are now routinely managing restructures and profound instability. Is the quest for knowledge worth this sacrifice? While the aspirational hope of permanency was a lure to manage low wages and unregulated working hours, the carrot has disappeared while the stick remains. Altinli still blamed himself through the illusionary meritocracy of patronage: "I know I'm good. I'm working hard. And still I'm not sure if it will be enough to yield a permanent job in academia" (Altinli in Nordling, 2023). Working hard. Intelligence. These variables are not – and were not - the foundation of a successful academic post in the past or present. Luck, patronage, fashionable research methodological expertise, and desperation to fill a teaching role for the coming semester were much more important variables. Hill confirmed that, "Academics are deprived of decision-making power as they are not seen as possessing the necessary skills for efficient and economic management of human and capital resources" (2023). The problem is that the patronage model of academic life was neither benevolent nor fair. It encompassed cronyism, gatekeeping, sexism and ageism. Therefore, while neoliberal managerialism is deeply problematic, the nostalgic past of higher education must not be romanticized. The

neoliberal and patronage models of the university both unify through the marginalization and disrespect of regulation and governance. Both models allow rogue scholars to behave inelegantly behind the mask of 'free speech.' Most universities are public universities. The adjective of 'public' is now a zombie concept or category (Beck, 2001). If meaning is to be returned to the adjective, then accountability and transparency are required.

Neoliberalism and the Crisis of Purpose

A question that propels the research and trajectory in this article is, what is happening to the preparedness of students for a higher degree programme? The generational arguments specified in previous sections are pre-COVID discussions. A pandemic then enfolded the world in fear, paranoia, sickness and death. Because of social distancing mandates and working from home, students had to assume more responsibility for their learning. But did they? How many online lectures were unviewed? Were the kitchen science experiments conducted to the required standard? Indeed, were those science kits sent to the house ever used? (Caruana, Salzmann, & Sella, 2020).

These are not random or imagined questions. The consequences of a pandemic on undergraduate programmes are about to appear in doctoral programmes. A PhD is difficult. Most of the world's population cannot complete one and will never have the opportunity to even enrol. But what happens to standards in a higher degree when our universities are uberfied? Following the arguments in this article, students will demand more from their supervisors, because they are purchasing a service and expect to pass. Supervisors will be rated and evaluated for their successful and speedy completions. This imagining is already in existence in our universities. Most universities have a full record of the length of each student candidature, and the supervisors who complete students quickly. Universities also have a record of the supervisors that repeatedly fail to complete or whose students are enrolled for a very long time. This material may be used for annual performance reviews by line managers. But will we reach a point where that material is publicly available, like an uber rating?

There is an argument to be made about transparency. Should students have information about poor supervisors who exploit students, mismanage authorship, and prolong candidatures? If a student is a consumer of a service, then that information is part of a disclosure about a product. That is uberfication. Conversely, if the doctorate is part of 'public good,' then incompetent supervision must be revealed and through performance management and placed in a programme of improvement so that students do not suffer. To make this situation even more serious, the rise of the adjunct academy means students are being supervised by academics who are not paid by the institution. This bizarre context is part of what Peter Turchin described as "End Times" (2023). This cyclical instability has particular characteristics.

- Stagnating or declining wages
- Increased gap between rich and poor
- Overproduction of young graduates
- Declining public trust
- Increasing public debt (2023, x)

This combination of variables also shaped the conditions for the Trump presidency, Brexit, ongoing wars in the Middle East, and Deaths of Despair (Case & Deaton, 2020). This is a time of disintegration, a Gramscian interregnum, of populism rather than popular culture.

Noting the availability of 'student satisfaction' reviews and rankings, it may be inevitable that supervisor / advisor rating will emerge. If that is the case, then much more focus will be on the supervisor and supervisory quality. I am in favour of full regulation of the higher education sector, including doctoral education. I want strong policies regulating supervisory behaviour with regard to authorship, bullying, sexual assault and sexual harassment. But regulation is distinct from student ratings. Will the supervisors who make it easier for a student receive a higher rating? For the readers of this article, ponder this question. What is ranked as important in a supervisor? Are the appropriate variables and characteristics being judged? These questions lead to a crucial – and confronting – inquiry. What do we do, as citizens, supervisors and students, if the academic standards of post-COVID PhDs decline? This is not a hypothetical question. I recently examined two PhDs. Neither included a reference list or bibliography at the conclusion of the document. How was a thesis supervised and sent to examination without a reference list or bibliography? Yet more significantly, one of these theses was 'passed' by the institution, with my report being discounted. Any examination process has outliers. But one person – a Dean of Graduate Studies – was granted the right to discount a report with which he disagreed. If a reference list is now a dispensable part of a doctorate, then what else can now be marginalized or displaced through the examination process?

Scholars and regulators must monitor what will happen as the impact of COVID and neoliberalism entwine in the second half of this decade. Supervisors will be rated, and this neoliberal infusion will reveal unpredictable consequences. The nature of competition is that the poor supervisors will lose students. Regulation would have achieved that result, but neoliberal competition will as well. The more intriguing question will be how the casualized academic workforce manages the student consumer?

The subtitle of this article deployed Turchin's phrase 'End Times' (2023). In his exploration of political instability – fuelled by the increasing gap between rich and poor, overproduction of young graduates with advanced degrees, declining public trust and increasing public debt – Turchin probed the consequences of "elite overproduction and popular immiseration" (2023, 13). Neoliberalism added to the decline in the respect and authority of the state. He demonstrated that, "diminished economic conditions for the less

educated were accompanied by a decline in the social institutions that nurtured their social life and cooperation. (2023, 76). As displayed with such toxicity through Brexit and the Trump Presidency, the groups that are most assisted through public health, public education, public housing and public support voted against their interests (Brabazon, Redhead, Chivaura, 2018). Meanwhile, doctorally-qualified experts – and expertise – are locked in under-employment, and precariat positions. Therefore, I conclude this article with a warning, but also a call for courage.

Doctoral Education in End Times

Through uberfication, supervisors will serve their student consumers, and they will be monitored and assessed. Ali Padyab and Martin Ludgren, in an article titled "Stress in doctoral supervision" provide the answer. They interviewed PhD supervisors and located a laundry list of stressors:

Time pressure
Balancing work and personal time
Organization and administrative factors
Engagement with student's personal issues
Relationship with a co-supervisor (2023).

They show supervisors are locked into survival mode. They showed the benefit of doctoral supervisory training, which is mandatory in their home nation of Sweden, and the importance of generating training to manage this stress. Significantly, they also revealed that the reputational damage of poor supervisory experiences has a tremendous impact on the supervisor. Their research verified the earlier publications by Kyriacou (1987), which located fear of dismissal for incompetence, losing face or esteem, as key indicators of success. The significance of this research is crucial to acknowledge. Undertrained supervisors – who are not skilled in the research process - will make mistakes through the process and then mask these errors in fear of reputational damage.

The stress on supervisors and the capacity to mask errors and mistakes to avoid dismissal or discrediting is serious. An even more urgent question is what happens to PhD examiners through this uberfication. Standards may drop in theses – but as long as examiners do not pass them, then these low-level theses will not be rewarded with a degree. Therefore, any pressure on examiners, or any inelegant processes in the management of examiner reports, must be watched, called out and reported. The reason for this transparency and rigour is that completing a PhD is not like riding in an uber. It must be assessed by examiners. Students may complain about supervisors, universities, scholarships and fees, but the entire programme pivots on that quality assurance moment. Students can rate their supervisor, but examiners will still assess them and their research. Therefore, deans of graduate studies, associate deans (research), and higher degree

coordinators need to critique at every opportunity the generalizability of a data set of one. 'When I did my PhD' is irrelevant. Instead, we must interrupt the simplistic career narrative of a supervisor talking about their own doctoral experience as if it is generalizable. This is the patronage model. This is homology. It is always problematic, and currently it inhibits rigour, clarity and precision in doctoral supervision during a very different time for our universities.

While the patronage model continues historic inequalities, these neoliberal universities are ruthless. My husband Professor Jamie Quinton and I are living this ruthlessness at the moment. We are not only working in different universities, but our positions are in different cities and nations. To complete the tasks and roles in higher education for students and colleagues, we have parked our personal life to work long days, seven days a week, and without the help of a spouse or family members living in the same country. This is our present. For readers of this article, this may be your future. Uberfication seems convenient and easy, opening an app – tracking a car - offering a rating. This is quick and simple. But higher education – let alone a PhD – is not fast and easy. It is difficult, uncomfortable and challenging to learn and test ourselves each day. Yet uberfication means that neoliberalism has saturated public institutions with Vision Statements, Strategic Plans and stretch targets.

As our three generations continue to mix in our universities, I offer a last story – of hope from this dark context. I recently met with a young supervisor, a millennial, who has just finished her own PhD. She is about to supervise her first student, and asked if she could supervise him with me. I said yes. She asked how she could get into the Supervisory Register. She completed the training immediately, and then sat with me to talk about the areas that worried her, and to receive more information and context. Sitting across from me at my desk, she said, "I want to be a really really good supervisor."

She carries one of our futures if we choose to accept it. A well-educated academic, who is well published and continues ongoing professional development, wants to learn and wants to improve, so that she is the best supervisor she can be. She aspires to this level of achievement, not because she's being rated like an uber driver, but because it is a privilege to supervise, and she wants to give of her best. While remarkable people like this academic exist in our universities, our universities will have a future.

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Biography

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