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Academics teaching and learning at the nexus: unbundling, marketisation and digitization in higher education

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Abstract

This paper explores how academics navigate the HE landscape being reshaped by the convergence of unbundling, marketisation and digitisation processes. Social Realism distinguishes three layers of social reality (in this case higher education): the empirical, the actual and the real. The empirical layer is presented by the academics and their teaching; the actual are the institutional processes of teaching, learning, assessment, mode of provision (online, blended); the real are the power and regulatory mechanisms that shape the first two and affect academics' agency. Two dimensions of academics' experiences and perceptions are presented. The structural dimension reflects academics' perceptions of the emergent organization of the education environment including the changing narratives around digitisation, marketisation and unbundling in the context of digital inequalities. The professional dimension aspects play out at the actor level in respect to work-related issues, particularly their own. This dimension is portrayed in academics' concerns about ownership and control.

Introduction

That Higher Education (HE) globally is going through a period of uncertainty, transition and change is a truism. Even before Covid-19 made the troubles in HE stark, numerous factors were contributing to instability: economic, with neoliberalism dominant and with capitalism morphing into new forms especially surveillance capitalism (Zuboff 2018); technological (the current popular discourse being that of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (Schwab 2016)); social (in the form of "liquid modernity" (Bauman 2000). Of the trends that refract into higher education, marketisation (including new forms of labour) and digitisation (in many guises including that of the "platform university") have been amongst the most dominant, with unbundling being a relatively new consideration in education.

In this paper, by *marketisation* of higher education, we mean the process of introducing entrepreneurial competition into public institutions (Levidow 2002); by *digitisation* we mean educational provision that is mediated by digital technology and by *unbundling* we mean the disaggregation of educational provision into its component parts often through partnership with private providers and often using digital technology (Czerniewicz et al 2017; Swinnerton et al. 2018).. It is at the intersection of these three trends or shaping forces that new forms and models of teaching and learning are coming into existence. The experience is far from neutral especially as digitisation and unbundling are not intrinsically market related yet this is how they have largely come to play out.

The guiding research question in this paper is: How do academic teaching staff at universities in South Africa and England perceive the changes in higher education at the confluence of unbundling, marketisation and digitisation? Our particular interest is in how academics experience these shaping influences in terms of teaching and learning provision. .

The literature

While there is an extensive literature on marketisation and digitisation in higher education, the literature on unbundling is relatively emergent. These papers are often conceptual (Lewis et al 2019) while studies that focus specifically on academics' positions within these debates are scarce (McCowan 2017, Macfarlane 2011). To our knowledge none of these studies have sought to explore academics' views of the convergence of digitisation, marketisation and unbundling that brings about new forms of teaching and learning, indeed new models of provision.

Marketisation

When considering how marketization is enacted in HE, Ball and Youdell (2008) identify two types of privatisation of public education: *exogenous* and *endogenous*. While the former is about the involvement of the private, for-profit, sector in public education, the latter designates the process of introducing the language, norms and other business practices into public education.

Academics, studies have shown, have largely negative opinions about marketisation in HE for numerous reasons including the purpose of their teaching activities and the threats to their habitual practices (Cliff et al 2020, Collyer 2015, 320; Page 2019; Taberner 2018). For example,

while the recognition of academic achievement was previously based on the quality and public value of research and teaching, the marketisation of HE has introduced new "market principles such as efficiency" (Collyer 2015, 326) or changes in discourse and language, addressing students as consumers/clients (Bunce, Baird, and Jones 2017; Nixon, Scullion, and Hearn 2018).

This is a phenomenon decades in the making; in South Africa academics expressed concern about the "colonisation of their core activities by business practices" (Bertelsen 1998, p. 144), while in England, e scholars expressed criticism of the shift to "academic capitalism" (Slaughter and Leslie 1997). .

There is a further useful distinction between managerialism and marketisation (Collyer 2015, 328) with the former advancing the surveillance of academics while the latter pushing for 'production-oriented' practices. Academics' opposition to both managerialism and business management practices is evident across the globe, including Australia (Collyer 2015), England (Nixon, Scullion, and Hearn 2018), US (Judson and Taylor 2014), and Portugal (Carvalho and Videira 2019).

While university relationships with private providers such as Online Programme Management companies (OPMs) have become more widely known, there has been little investigation of the implications from the educators' perspective. One study found that teaching academics do not support the involvement of external for-profit providers in teaching and learning provision (Jaschik and Lederman, 2019) while another found the experience negative for academics employed on precarious conditions (Katkins, 2018). Elsewhere in our study, we analysed senior leaders' sense making of these relationships and found them to be ambivalent (Czerniewicz et al. 2020; Swartz et al. 2018).

Digitisation

The pivot to online teaching occasioned by Covid-19 will no doubt spawn research on academics and educator's experiences and perceptions. Prior to this, most of the research outside of distance education institutions focused on the integration of technology into traditional residential provision, where there had been a focus on how academics perceive online vs. face- to-face teaching from a pedagogical point of view (Harrison et al., 2017). . A recent survey of US academics' attitudes towards technology (Jaschik and Lederman 2019) shows that, even though they debate whether online provision can reach the same quality level as face-to-face teaching, there is a year on year rise in the rate of academics who support the increased use of digital technologies in teaching and learning.

Driven by thee the marketisation of the HE sector, and the prevalent digital turn educational technology is one of the fastest growing industries in the UK (Corver 2019). A search for new business models new of

teaching and learning has in turn led to considerations of the opportunities offered by the unbundling of provision.

Unbundling

The form and nature of unbundling in higher education has received attention in both practice and scholarship in recent years (Bacevic 2019; Newfield 2019; Czerniewicz 2018; Komljenovic and Robertson 2016; McCowan 2017; Robertson 2010). On the whole, unbundling is associated with the development of new business models which include, or rely on, working with private providers companies (Komljenovic and Robertson 2016), although there are rare exceptions of commons-based governance models (Lee 2013) and alternative perspectives where unbundling might lead to opportunities for HE to better serve students through personalisation and employability (McCowan, 2017). In terms of models of teaching and learning, unbundling offers different levels of granularity through, for example, microcredentials, increased flexibility across programmes and institutions, and new types of provision such as Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) which were envisioned as having the potential to increase access to higher education.

Theoretical framework

In the context of academics' navigating new forms of educational provision at this unbundling, digitisation and marketisation nexus, Social and Critical Realism (Bhaskar, 2010) holds powerful explanatory value for the analyses in the paper. Critical Realism is a useful lens because it provides a nuanced framework premised on a 'most plausible interpretation' of a complex context based on current evidence. Social Realism helpfully distinguishes amongst three layers of social reality: the empirical, the actual and the real (Bhaskar, 2010; Case, 2013; 2015) In this case the social reality is the higher education context.

The three strata of the higher education world relevant to this analysis can be elaborated on as follows: the *empirical* layer refers to the 'data' level: in our analyses,these are the interviews conducted with academics; the references to the context of unbundling, marketisation, digitisation; the academics, students, teaching and material contexts which form the basis of the engagement in teaching and learning.

The layer of the *actual* comprises, in our view, the pedagogy and learning systems; the assessment systems; curriculum; processes of marketisation, privatisation, digitisation, unbundling and educational technology systems. These systems and structures consist of their own unique histories, regulatory mechanisms, processes for and rules of engagement, monitoring and evaluation mechanisms.

In the *real* layer, lies the invisible and tacit social realities that impact upon or regulate the experiences and perceptions of these academics as they navigate the intersections amongst unbundling, digitisation and marketisation. The *real* is imbued with dimensions and dynamics of power, social class, gender, ethnicity, language an that – – operate in subtle and intangible ways on the experiences and players in this higher education context. Indeed, inequality and its

manifestations are aspect of the real in the context of this study. At the same time, we note that

the real is imbued with agency – individual and collective (Archer, 2003).

This paper focuses on the professional aspect of agency, that is teaching academics' capacity for agency in respect to their works (Eteläpelto et al. 2013). The academics we interviewed are not

passive recipients of the real, but have the capacity at individual and systems levels to shape, influence, resist, and become resilient.

An analysis interpreted through the lens of these three layers: the empirical, the actual and the real allows a rich and nuanced interpretation of academics' engagement with tangled realities.

This interpretation of the data underscores the new realities that academics have to navigate at the nexus of the *empirical* (people, players and contexts); the *actual* intersecting higher education, digital and market structures, systems and processes that form their teaching environments; and the *real* forces of inequality, differentiation, and power which undergird the context of higher education itself. Our analyses are informed by other Social and Critical Realist analyses that have been undertaken in higher education contexts which theorise how actors are products of systems but also have agency which allows them to transcend these structures and systems (Luckett and Luckett, 2009, Williams 2012)

The Study

This paper reports on one aspect of a larger UK-South Africa ESRC-NRF funded research project on the nature of the unbundled university. The aspect of the study reported on here is drawn from data collected in 2018 from focus groups with 44 academics at eight universities in South Africa and England.

These academics were from five universities in South Africa, three 'Historically Advantaged

Institutions' (HAI, Universities E, J and N), one 'Historically Advantaged Institution with Historically Disadvantaged Site' (HAI with HD sites, University P) and one 'Historically Disadvantaged Institution' HDI (University H). This categorisation is based on the historical status universities had during Apartheid (DHET, 2014). In England the academics were fromone Russell Group university (University G), one non-aligned University (University A) and one University Alliance member (University E). When we use the term 'academics' we are referring to academics who have 'teaching' as a large part of their role.

The participants varied in experience, ranging from PhD students working as teaching fellowsto senior

professors. They taught in a range of disciplines: Arts, Humanities and Education; STEM; Business; and Medicine and Health. We applied convenience sampling using various points of access to contact respondents and gather participants for this study, The focus group discussions were semi structured and gathered academics' views on the role of digital technologies in teaching and learning provision at their respective institutions, university partnerships with private companies, and their perspectives about current and future HE landscapes. Analytical comments further on in this paper are organised around these three foci.

Before data collection, we obtained permission from the Ethics Committees of respective universities and informed consent was obtained from participants. Interviews were transcribed and analysed using qualitative content analysis (Schreier 2014).

Using software (Nvivo), qualitative content analysis was undertaken in both top-down (deductive) and bottom-up (inductive) ways. The analysis was theory led in that we were interested in uncovering all three layers of social reality: the empirical, the actual and the real. The inductive approach meant analyzing and coding the data which provided descriptive characteristics of the categories.

Findings

The structural dimension reflects academics' perceptions of the new or emergent organization of the teaching and learning environment (the actual in Social Realist terms), including the changing narratives around digitisation, marketisation and unbundling in the context of inequalities in the HE sector (the real in Social Realist terms). The professional dimension aspects play out at the actor level in respect to work-related issues, including their positions relating to who has *ownership of and control in teaching and learning (the real)*. Each of these categories is now presented in detail.

The empirical layer is presented by the academics and their teaching; the actual are the institutional processes of teaching, learning, assessment, mode of provision (online, blended); the real are the power and regulatory mechanisms that shape the first two and affect academics' agency.

Structural dimensions

Although the focus groups with academics aimed at probing questions about the changing nature of teaching and learning, academics used these questions as springboards for broader reflections on the changing nature of higher education at the institutional and system level.

Changing narratives of HE and transformation in the organisation

Across both countries and all institutional types, the interviewees relayed that the ways that the language of the market has percolated into their practices at the expense of the social and intrinsic values of education, and changed the narrative of HE from one that tackles many societal injustices. The general view was that the confluence of marketisation, unbundling and digitisation in HE challenges the nature and the future of universities leaving their own roles as academics muddied and unclear.

Austerity, commodification of knowledge, and the future of the university

Acknowledging the reduction in state funding of HE in both countries, most of the respondents in this study believe that universities need to change in order to 'survive'. Cost-cutting and income generation have influenced many decisions which academics expect should rather be guided by educational and pedagogical reasons - this includes the introduction of technology in teaching and learning. They perceive the reasoning behind the decision to introduce technology as relating to efficiency, to cut "the cost of running those papers [printing and copying tests]" (SA University J). However, technology is not necessarily seen as posing a threat or being a problem per se, as the following excerpt shows:

> "The problem isn't the technology as such, the problem is that it's framed in a marketised relationship. That is the fundamental issue. So, MOOCs, and all these things, […] they can be wonderful. They open and make available knowledge that once was not available to huge populations, that's potentially incredibly valuable. That's something we should celebrate but instead, it takes place within the context of marketisation, where it is purely about financial transactions, not about relationships, not about social value or social use" (UK University E).

The 'actual' processes of digitization and marketisation come into conflict with the contesting 'real' dimensions of social equity and profit-making.

The predictions are often bleak with digitisation and marketisation closely intertwined without a clear understanding of their goals. At one South African University, a respondent stated: "The university is dying. […] I think that all of this move to go online and stuff is exactly what's going to happen as privatisation and much more kind of consumerist way of teaching and learning […] we're all incredibly

vulnerable because eventually it doesn't matter what we think about classroom discussion or whatever, it's all gonna happen on the internet anyway" (SAUniversity J).

At the same university another academic further added "I think the hypervisibilisation of technology as if it is the panacea to all our problems is the problem. " (SA University J)

They believe that digitisation commodifies education: "I think it changes the idea of a student, doesn't it? Because is going to university just about knowledge acquisition? If it's an online course, then that's all it is, that's the commercialisation and marketisation of universities,." (UK University G).

In the UK, the end of free education was arguably a turning point: "The introduction of fees, I believe, facilitated the conception of education as essentially a commodity, as a lucrative global commodity that is bought and sold" (UK University E).

Involvement of private companies

In both countries, academics distinguish between exogenous and endogenous privatization (Ball and Youdell, 2008). While they are critical of universities' adoption of business language and practices (endogenous privatization) , they are also skeptical about exogenous privatization . With reference to the *involvement of private companies* in public higher education, they point to other sectors: " public/private partnerships in the, you know, outside the higher education sector in England, or in the UK as a whole, has been largely a disaster for the end user […] most of the time it seems like the private companies make a lot of money, the services get worse and the public winds up with a lot of debt that we have to pay in the long run." (UK University G). This excerpt suggests that academics regard the involvement of private providers in public institutions as equivalent, worrying that the partnership with private providers in HE will bring about the same effects.).

Inequalities: digital, social and economic

Academics in this study reflected on how existing inequalities among students are affected by the convergence of marketisation, unbundling and digitisation processes in HE. This issue was raised more often among South African academics, many of whom are sceptical about the usage of digital technology, and have concerns about its role in widening existing divides. As one said,

Now, if we were in an equal society and all the kids or the students had equal access to pass and

succeed, it would be a different story. So, I do hope that in our use of the technology, it is not further entrenching the gaps between those who have and those who don't." (SA University J).

Academics from HDIs in South Africa were especially mindful of this issue, as one academic describes: "To date, I think we've got about 17,000 students registered, but I think we've got about 900 desktops, which gives us maybe a, a ratio of about 1 to 26." (SA University H). A critical realist lens helps us here to understand that socio-economic realities play out in unequal ways as a function of historical HE race, class and power inequalities.

The issue of digital access was apparent during the country-wide #FeesMustFall student protests that lasted from 2015 to 2017, when many South African universities tried to use technology to continue providing courses. Some lecturers interviewed used, for example, existing online courses to bridge the period of strikes/protests, whilst others reflected on the concerns they had on how these measures would be affecting inequality among students: "we had that discussion in our group like two years ago when the Fees Must Fall movement started. So, there was discussion just put all the materials online and then students can access it from their homes, but that's very unfair because I personally know a lot of students who don't have internet at home and they are on the train for two hours just to sit in the library and study" (SA University J). . The real dimensions of inequality and lack of access undermine the value of providing online learning as a means to enable education to continue, since it means that only the powerful (those already with access) really benefit.

The question of technological access is intertwined with concerns for physical safety in the South African context; this is especially relevant in historically disadvantaged sites in South Africa.

Academics report on University H's attempt to address access by running computer labs 24/7, but "that stopped at one stage because of security." (SA University H). Even when the University or National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) attempts to address the question of access by providing laptops to students, this poses serious risks to their safety: "students are vulnerable because of the technology. So, when they're walking around with their laptops or their phones they get robbed [...] And that's a huge issue for our students" (SA University P).

The Söuth African responses show how digitisation in an extremely unequal context such as the one in South Africa may negatively affect students from poor backgrounds. A Critical Realist lens refracts the actual process of digitisation into its economic, class and power inequalities. One interviewee described how certain policies affect poor students disproportionately: "I mean sometimes we're setting up our students for failure, especially with thistablet rollout In order

to get enough money, borrow, beg, steal to get that tablet because that's what the university's saying, and end up in a class where a lecturer tells you to put that tablet away" (SA University P).

However, even within the same institution, there is not consensus amongst academics regarding access discrepancies. At SA University N (HAI), some academics stated: "We haven't had any big issues or questions around access [.] we haven't given it much thought as a result." or as another one added: "Well, I haven't had complaints from people who said that they can't download the stuff or, you know, it's too expensive. I kind of operate on the assumption that everyone has access to a computer and if it's not their own personal computer they can use the university facilities. ", (SA University N). However, there are academics at the same institution who are wary of the existing inequalities among their student population and of putting them in a disadvantaged position compared to their well-off peers. Again here, Critical Realism is helpful analytically: the social class and economic realities of the lecturers themselves operate to construct how they see the positions of privilege (or not) of their own students.

While South African academics reflected on how the question of access deepens the existing inequalities in the student body, English academics reflected on how access affected their work and choice of teaching and learning platforms. The English academics interviewed did not question access to technology when it came to local students, which points to their assumptions about their teaching environment as well as the students they teach. Issues of digital access only came up regarding international students, especially those coming from conflict zones or countries with unreliable Internet access :

"In terms of use of technology, of course we use a learning platform, like a model which the university uses. It's not very easy because some of the students do not have a very good infrastructure in their countries, so we cannot really use really advanced technology. ." (UK University E)

Similar concerns are expressed at another university, that "there are certain technological difficulties when you have international students, they often block content or the time zone's different so you can't do online discussions in the same way so it's kind of having to think around those types of things." (UK University A). From a Social Realist perspective, the international students are positioned as 'the problem'; not the technology or the ways in which it is enabled.

Professional dimensions

Academics reflected on how their own professional agency is shaped by the processes of unbundling, marketisation and digitisation in HE.

Changing roles

Academics see their roles as being whittled down, arguing that while the language of change is promising, the reality on the ground is not, and that they are effectively becoming disempowered.

"They [management] create the constant sense of something new, exciting, innovative, entrepreneurial, you know, student choice, mix and match, it all sounds great. I think what

you're really talking about is de-professionalised institutions, where the staff have very few

terms and conditions." (UK University E). The 'actuals' of innovation and professionalism have been stacked up as at odds with each other, and the tension is enabled in this academic's view by

the 'real' power differentials between management, staff and students.

They see that the institutional landscape, framed within a consumerist business model of HE,

expects them to behave differently as it positions students as consumers who then in return expect to be treated as clients: "they [students] tell us, we're paying a lot of money. You need to

answer the emails." (UK University G)

The infiltration of business activities into academics' everyday work has become something they need to navigate, as seen in the need to raise third-stream income. For example, at one South African university, a respondent was worried about the expectations - and the consequences – of academics having to bring money into their own departments: "Now it's going to become an issue that all of us must fundraise. Yeah, and fundraising is a job on its own, I mean, whatever collegiality there may be between departments, it's gonna create conflict because we're all gonna go to the same funders" (SA University P).

Interestingly the pressure to contribute financially was reported differently in different types of institutions, and the perception was that this is more of an imperative at research-intensive universities. At an HDI institution in SA, respondents did not feel pressured to provide an income stream to the University in order to ensure academic promotion: "I don't see the university going to that revenue thing from a teaching and learning perspective. I don't think it's emphasised so much as it is other universities where they insist that, to be an academic of integrity, you must also show the extent of the university through that stream income." (SA University H). Nevertheless, academics see this kind of development as inevitable:

"I think it's just a matter of time before we start developing models, whether it be online programmes or any other forms of third-stream income, like short courses. I think in the near future, you know, we're gonna have to do that. " (SA University H).

. The ‘real’ of the new roles and activities is that academics feel pressured to act as profit-makers and market-players in a space that they perceive to clash with their educational and social-good roles. The 'real' is that academics are pressured to act as market-players in the service of privatisation

Ownership and control

Academics in both sites feel that university futures are decided “without us, out there somewhere in some vacuum” (SA University J) so keeping a control over what is within their power – such as their classroom – is one way for academics to exercise professional agency.

They recognise that even the individual institution may not have full control of its own future, hence the focus on their own terrain:

> “it might happen at a higher level, but even so, there are forces that are beyond even like the institution’s control, national-level budgets, like all of these sorts of – like, you know, we can think about how we want to shape some of the smaller spaces over which we have control,[like]my classrooms. My interactions with the people who I work with on a day- to-day basis. The people who I do research with, like the people who I write with. Yeah, like I’m in control of that to a certain extent.” (SA University J)

With regard to digitisation, their accounts suggest that they are not necessarily resisting the idea but rather resisting being left out of the debates, and resenting being imposed upon regarding what they should do. They recognise changing power dynamics of decision-making where institutional structures, with their built-in checks and balances, are failing: “We have all these bodies, you know, Senate, supposedly, the ultimate of academics, professor sitting there making decisions. I sat for three years in the Senate. It’s not where decisions are made.. It really is the executive council that makes the decisions and that’s it and then we get the directives done.” (SA University P). English academics have a similar experience, pointing out that they were never consulted about the introduction of online teaching and learning: “But that’s how it’s going. The teachers don’t like it, the students like it. We’ve never been asked if we want it. They just said that’s what we’re doing. We have to go with the flow.” (UK University G).

A more sinister response came from another South African University: “so where’s the push coming from? Not us, not the students, an external third force who has an affiliation with an internal powerful force.” (SA University J). In this latter case, an overt link is made between endogenous and exogenous forms of marketisation as the external forces of the market and the internal forces of

managerialism align.

Value of emergent forms of teaching

Repeatedly, academics' reflections on unbundling, marketisation and digitisation processes in HE circled back to students, engagement with students, and pedagogy. But there is no consensus and there were polarized views about the value of digitally-mediated forms of provision.

Academics in our focus groups reflected on the pedagogical possibilities that are afforded by technology. Many perceive online teaching as a rigid mode of delivery that does not provide possibilities for meaningful pedagogical actions especially as online does not seem to provide

them with human cues in facial and verbal form: "there's also a whole bunch of stuff that

happens in a classroom space which shows participation which is not only about when you speak and when you don't speak" (SA University J).

Similarly, some academics raised the question whether online can accommodate the need to

establish meaningful interaction between a teacher and a student, as illustrated in this excerpt from an academic who teaches online: "I feel absolutely no connection with the students and I still have no idea who they are. I've never seen their faces, and they never respond to my emails.

So, basically, I feel like I just uploaded stuff.., I reviewed three essays and I marked them, and that was it, so I don't consider this a teaching experience" (UK University E).

Interviewees questioned the quality of online courses, t: "I have to say it I have questions about assessment and academic rigor, how do you negotiate that stuff when you're not having an

interaction with students." (SA University J)And students who study online are regarded in a

similar way: "the quality of students is a bit low, we were also told to tone down the intensity of the lectures. So, you know, almost no theory, just descriptive information here and there. So, this

is not how I would be doing teaching at another university, especially at a Russell Group University, so this is really disturbing me deep inside." (UK University E)

Very often in the interviews, technology is presented as a way of managing large numbers of students in response to the massification of education, . In relation to this academics complained

that the existing tools are not used optimally or pedagogically, with the Learning Management

System (LMS), reportedly used as a management tool or repository for materials. In South Africa, some academics are concerned that the LMS is the only educational technology usage

occurring: "So I use Blackboard. So, Blackboard is the communication system with students, but also like a

depository for readings. They submit assignments there, but that was really it as far as technology was concerned" (SA University P).

In addition, for some academics the essential point is is that digital tools are not designed by lecturers which would put educational interaction (teaching) at the core. As one says: "if you had technology designed by staff, you wouldn't sever that relationship. You would use the technology to nurture that relationship. So, the problem isn't the technology itself" (UK University E)

On the other hand, some academics point out that there is an advantage to online learning because: "perhaps on a face-to-face model they [students] wouldn't put their hand up and start to discuss something, but actually they feel a lot more comfortable doing it online." (UK University A). This point was echoed at a South African University where one lecturer stated: "it's not [that] it replaces us. It becomes part of the conversation and they're conversing with each other and having – it's been wonderful actually because you've got even the quiet ones are entering stuff and engaging with each other so their voices are being brought out" (SA University J).

What is striking is that, with regard to digitally mediated teaching, academics recognise that it is simply part of the landscape. Their concerns are about how innovation is best fostered; their unhappiness is about directives from on high. They clearly prioritise the needs of students, especially those disadvantaged or lacking access in some ways.

Concluding discussion

What emerges is the complexity of the landscape which academics have had to navigate even as it shifts beneath their feet. Across two country sites, several disciplines and at different levels of the teaching pecking order, there is a shared sense by academics about how their institutional contexts are being de-routinised (Giddens, 1979), as is the foundational structure of HE. The two sites share similar systems will similar challenges. Although South Africa measures more dramatically on inequality measures, inequality is also manifest in many forms in England, including poor Broadband Internet access in rural areas as well as unbalanced economic and infrastructure investment (Bourquin et al 2019). It was therefore somewhat surprising that these issues were raised in terms of students outside of England rather than within the English HE system.

On a structural level in both sites, the changes observed are the result of the reformulated narrative of HE and even its purpose, inevitably involving digital technology, increasingly including private companies, and perhaps paradoxically deepening inequalities among students. On a professional level these changes question academic roles, who has ownership and control over the teaching and learning process and

are producing emergent forms of teaching and learning. These changes are affecting and are affected by academics and their agentic action.

Social Realism affirms the interdependency between structure and professional agency. How this relationship plays out has been the central profound sociological question for a long time. While structure affects the subject's capacity to act, it is also shaped by the agentic subjects. Yet how do actors influence shaping structures? Which voices are heard, and how do they get heard? In our study, this appears to have been manifested by a shift toward managerialism, and top-down decision making about increased use of digital technology and online education, and a perceived lack of agency within the academic community to shape the direction of travel, and the operationalisation of these changes. It is clear how the structural and the professional are inextricably linked; the impact of marketization, both exogenous and endogenous, has meant that the academic labour force generally has become less powerful and academics have lost their voices. These findings suggest that academics are unaware of, or even more insidiously, kept in the dark about decisions which will impact their work. There is a shadow side, an undertone to digitised unbundling which means that changes are percolating through institutional practices in informal ways, with decisions made at distance. Even though academics feel that the one arena in which they have control is their own classrooms, these decisions, are in fact changing their practices and their own professionalism.

Although they expressed unhappiness about the ways that decisions are made and about the dominant marketised narratives of the university, academics in our study did not seem in a position to insist on spaces to negotiate or reshape policy. The reasons for this are not clear: it may be due to teaching overload in the face of budget cuts or perhaps passive compliance expressing resentment and lack of engagement. The risk is that insufficient attention is being paid to the affordances of digitisation and unbundling to leverage innovative pedagogies as well as for flexible access. Understanding the shape of these trends and how they are being shaped by market forces is also important in order to resist the ongoing infiltration of marketisation into learning spaces. If academics are to negotiate their own positionality within these processes of unbundling, marketisation and digitisation, it is essential that there is more informed and engaged discussion in peer groups, with their students, within universities as well as across the Higher Education sector.

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