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***Pandemic Privatisation in Higher Education: Edtech and university reform.* By Ben Williamson and Anna Hogan 80 pp. (PDF) Brussels: Education International (2021). ISBN 978-92-95120-18-1**

Richard Sanders, Bournemouth University, UK

Email: sanders.richarddavid@gmail.com

Link to review

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With our lives becoming increasingly performed online during the global pandemic, both staff and students can be left wondering where this might be taking us to in higher education. During this time, the role of digital technology has significantly accelerated within the management and administration of institutions, alongside a necessary increase in its use for learning and teaching remotely. Technology of this kind has provided a lifeline to the continuation of educational programmes during those moments when on-campus delivery became no longer possible, but there is a developing thread of academic concern regarding what the future may hold for us in relation to educational technology. These concerns can be related to the realities that are solidifying around the uses of data; and for Williamson and Hogan this provides the context for stark warnings regarding the increasing involvement of the EdTech industry as a commercialising and disrupting influence on educational provision.

Alongside the publication being of general interest to staff and students concerned with how these realities may solidify, the report is also of interest to specific areas of study. This includes modules focusing on educational technology, neoliberal politics and governance in increasingly privatised and commercialised modes of delivery, as well as those interested in the discursive positioning of what is required in the organisational reform of education. The report also has several recommendations orientated towards the role of unions in addressing emerging issues, and branches for

staff or students would benefit from this insightful read within their ongoing union negotiation work.

Before getting into the key areas of discussion in relation to COVID-19, the authors provide a short section that details prior industry involvement in the higher education market. Here, EdTech and data are positioned as limiting the purposes of education alongside furthering a market for commercial organisations to deliver their own ‘experimental’ educational offerings. This provides a useful lead into ‘Mapping Organisations and Activities’ that initially sets out how particular ‘socio-technical’ imaginaries have further grown during the pandemic. Several actors can be seen as developing these imaginaries, such as educational and investment consultancies, business and media organisations, the World Economic Forum, IT corporations and government. These visions of the future rely on the role of technology and data to support the commercialisation and reconfiguration of education. Such imaginaries are then tied into several developing uses of technology during the pandemic, such as learning analytics and datafication, dataveillance, cloud computing, Learning Management Systems, MOOCs, and artificial intelligence. Many of these areas have been academically dealt with in greater detail individually, but a key strength of the work here is how each of these areas can be considered as relational in the drive to disrupt educational contexts. When these areas are then considered alongside the development of new forms of delivery underpinned by artificial intelligence (AI) such as the possibility of a Netflix-style streaming educational subscription services – and the development of micro-credential online courses such as Google’s six-month Career Certificates that would be treated as equivalent to a four-year university degree – you are left with the unerring feeling that we may already be on a journey with the reorganisation of education that will be difficult to challenge.

When moving into the key issues that these data-driven developments provide, the authors emphasise that the context of COVID-19 has accelerated their normalisation, and the situation is characteristic of a ‘disaster-techno-capitalism’ for a long-term reimagining of the sector. The provision of technological infrastructures such as cloud computing can be considered as a corporate precursor to the development of these longer-term alternative educational offerings; and issues are discussed around ‘university-industry hybridities’ that are likely to negatively impact staff and students

via opaque and questionable data practices and a further hollowing out of educational provision. This hollowing out is also related to programmed pedagogic environments, where educationalists are positioned on precarious contracts and learners become increasingly reliant on computer generated feedback. When coupling this with increased data surveillance, the reduction of academic freedom and the continuing reproduction of inequalities in online learning, it is hard to see how the public good within education will be maintained within the direction of reform discussed here.

The conclusion and recommendations to this bleak picture point towards the important role that staff and students have in creating alternative imaginaries for technology within education which can effectively challenge the increasingly normalised reality catalysed by the pandemic. The authors provide several areas for academic research that may support the construction of these alternatives, and they also emphasise the role of unions to support with advocacy and organised action. Although the work recognises that more positive uses and futures can be associated to technology, it does not offer any detailed thought on what these may be. Some may consider this as a weakness, but is it their responsibility to decide what these are for staff and student stakeholders, or is it more for these individuals to decide what is important for the contexts that they find themselves in? I would suggest it is the latter, and it is up to you to read this work and decide for yourself how convinced you are about the reform arguments constructed here which has the potential to be far-reaching and substantial. This represents a timely and considered train of thought that I can wholeheartedly recommend.