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# The Lancaster University Teach-Outs: Experiments in Radical Pedagogies and Reimagining the University

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## **Abstract**

*This article examines the teach-outs organised by staff and students at Lancaster University during the 2021-22 UCU strike. Guided by a critical discourse analysis of blog posts co-produced by staff and students during the strike and teach-outs, this article will examine how the teach-outs developed an education programme critiquing the neoliberal university and ‘student as consumer’ discourse, exploring forms of resistance, and creating radical pedagogical alternatives. Drawing on Mike Neary’s *Student as Producer*, this article argues the teach-outs were experiments in knowledge co-production and democratic decision-making that aimed to develop a collective capacity for resistive politics. *Student as Producer* was also visible in the overlapping discourses that explored worker-student forms of association and the critical-practical necessity of confronting academic capitalism. This article concludes that while the teach-outs demonstrated the possibility of an alternative to the neoliberal university, the struggle for the abolition of the neoliberal university is inextricably bound to the struggle against capitalism itself.*

**Keywords:** *teach-out, neoliberalism, student as produce, resistance, transformation*

## **Introduction**

In December 2021, staff at 58 universities in the UK took strike action over pension cuts, deteriorating pay and unmanageable workloads. The strikes continued into 2022 and in several universities, with varying support, groups of students joined picket lines in solidarity and to demonstrate their opposition to the neoliberal university. This paper explores the teach-outs organised jointly by staff and students at Lancaster University during the 2021-22 UCU strike. These teach-outs were simultaneously anomalous places of learning and sites of resistance to neoliberal structures in higher education.

This paper begins by focusing on the impact of neoliberalism in higher education in the UK, the emergence of ‘student as consumer’ discourse, and the collective resistance to neoliberal university reforms. Guided by a critical discourse analysis of blog posts produced by Lancaster UCU during the strike and teach-outs, this paper will examine the ways that participants critique, resist and offer new alternatives to the neoliberal university. This paper will also examine the pedagogical dimensions of the teach-outs.

The theoretical framework for this paper is Mike Neary’s (2010; 2012; 2020) ‘student as producer’ which is useful for understanding contemporary activism against the neoliberal university and the radical pedagogical processes of the teach-outs. Student as Producer is the model on which the Social Science Centre in Lincoln was based and this paper will explore this as one example of an alternative form of higher education (Neary & Winn, 2017). This paper argues that another university is possible, but that the struggle for the abolition of the neoliberal university is inextricably bound to the struggle against capitalism itself.

## **Neoliberalism and Student as Consumer**

Neoliberalism has become the dominant form of capitalist economic relations in the UK since the election of Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government in 1979. Floodlit by post-Communist, end-of-history ideologies in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union, it subsequently spread across the globe under the auspices of the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (McLaren & Farahmandpur, 2002; Radice, 2013). Neoliberal processes are characterised by the marketisation, commodification, degradation and privatisation of public services including health, education and housing (Hill et al, 2013). With a new emphasis on individual choice and consumption, the state increasingly lost its welfarist function as it saw public support for the poor and the marginalised as antithetical to the doctrine of personal responsibility. Instead, it reconstituted a form of "Victorian laissez-faire individualism" (Ball, 2013: p. 84) where individuals draw on their own resources for survival as social, political, and economic inequalities become further entrenched.

Capital has invaded every sphere of public life with higher education increasingly positioned as an economic utility producing labour-power – the knowledge, skills and creativity of people – for the labour market which will enable the nation-state to compete successfully in a global arena (Giroux, 2014; Holborow, 2012; Mintz, 2021). Rikowski (1997) notes that labour-power cannot be separated from personhood, meaning we become capitalised, taking the form of human capital which is brought by employers in the capitalist labour market. This neoliberal repurposing of education has therefore shifted the discourse from "learning to be" to "learning to be productive and employable" (Biesta, 2006: p. 172). Higher education has become conceived as an investment with the student cast in the role of consumer achieving "private profit through the

acquisition of credentials that function as positional goods within the labour market” (Morrison, 2016: p. 202).

Ball (2012: p. 18) is keen to note that higher education “has been previously implicated in the transitions of capitalism”, but the concept of the ‘neoliberal university’ (Heath & Burdon, 2013; Morrissey, 2013; Rhodes, Wright & Pullen, 2018; Ross, Savage & Watson, 2019; Rustin 2016) emerged as commercial values began to trump democratic and humanist traditions in higher education. The Jarratt Report, commissioned by university leaders in 1985, sought to understand how universities as “first and foremost corporate enterprises” could increase “value for money” (as cited in Vernon, 2018: p. 272). This prompted Thatcher’s government to squeeze more out of universities for less by focusing on reduction of costs while demanding an increase in productivity. Competition between universities to attract students, faculty and resources for research became more pervasive. By the 1990s, a consensus emerged among senior university managers that higher education should be treated, and paid for, as a private good. The ‘student as consumer’ discourse, stating students should ‘invest’ their own money in education, gained increasing prominence (Naidoo & Whitty, 2013; Newfield, 2021; Rustin 2016).

In 1998 the Labour government introduced £1,000 tuition fees and shifted the burden of funding universities from the state to the student. Labour later accepted the Browne Report’s recommendation to substantially decrease the grant funding for undergraduate teaching, but rejected their proposal to remove the cap on fees altogether. Nevertheless, the cap was raised from £3,000 per annum introduced in 2004 to £9,000 in 2012, while maintenance grants for students from low-income families was abolished in 2016 (Mayer & Eccles, 2019; Morrison, 2016). Instead, students have to borrow money in the form of

an additional loan, with evidence that fear of debt is deterring working-class students from progressing to university (Callender, 2017).

The positioning of students as consumers of education also links to the neoliberal discourse of excellence in universities. The rise in ‘McKinseyism’ – “the doctrine that things that cannot be measured have no value” (Walton, 2011: p. 21) – has created ‘performance indicators’ to increase efficiency through competition. The Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) and the National Student Survey (NSS) have imposed an audit culture upon universities that rank departments and universities, enabling the ‘self-interested individual’ to make rational choices based on a range of data indicators including teaching quality, student satisfaction and employment destinations (Cruickshank, 2016; Evans, 2020), although there is scant evidence to support the argument that students’ choices are based on traditional consumer principles (Carey, 2013). While the National Union of Students (NUS) initially welcomed the NSS, it became more critical of its intent suggesting the “survey unhelpfully promotes a consumerist, transactional view of education that does not fully encompass the participatory nature of HE” (UCU, 2014: p. 5). For Maisuria and Cole (2017), evaluations such as the NSS instill a consumerist attitude in students creating:

“a classroom ethos that a degree award is the result of an exchange of money, not ideas, and anything less than a 2:1 grade or a first is ‘not value for money’ (a phrase that appears 26 times in the 2015 Green Paper) and a poor ‘investment’ (16 appearances), rendering it in essence a commodity with poor interest” (2017: p. 610)

Vernon (2018) states the marketisation of Britain’s universities through audit culture has generated staggering growth in the size and cost of the management personnel: universities now employ more non-academic than academic staff. For Ollsen and Peters (2005: p. 325), the audit marketplace leads to ‘de-

professionalization’ in HE as “neoliberalism systematically deconstructs the space in terms of which professional autonomy is exercised”. The growth of managerialist university governance has led to a shift from an expert-led model of curriculum development to a consumer-orientated model (Carey, 2013). Graeber describes these managerial positions as ‘bullshit jobs’ because they do little other than create pointless practices for academics to justify their own existence (as cited in Maisuria and Cole, 2017). While there has been a proliferation of management roles in the neoliberal university, a growing number of part-time academic staff are on fixed term, hourly paid and zero hours contracts. These short-term academic contracts are cheap, flexible and disposable substitutes for more secure posts, hence their appeal in a hyper-competitive market (Leathwood & Read, 2020; Zheng, 2018).

The marketisation of universities and the re-conceptualisation of students as consumers creates pressures for success to be measured by “the degree of financial surplus created rather than on principles for the accumulation of academic or scientific capital” (Naidoo and Whitty, 2013: p. 217). This transformation of knowledge production under neoliberalism has led to a funding disaster with predictable results: lower pensions, job insecurity and cuts to courses. The consequences of the marketisation and financialisation in UK’s universities are starkly illustrated at Goldsmiths University where academic programmes and jobs are at risk for a loan that the university took from Lloyds Bank and NatWest. Marketisation sees private banks dictating terms to public universities (Freedman, 2022).

The UK government has also announced its intention to reduce funding for creative and humanities degrees based on arguments about labour-market utility (Bulaitis, 2020), which poses a threat for courses whose subject matter is explicitly critical (Noterman & Pusey, 2012). The state is targeting modes of

pedagogy that are antithetical to labour-power production and attempt to educate students about their real predicament under capitalism (Hill, 2004). Under neoliberalism we are not just witnessing cuts under a privatised funding regime, but a complete reclassification of what a university should be as it moves away from a public good of general benefit to society, to another commodity for the benefit of private individuals (Fenton, 2011).

### **Resistance and its alternatives**

Anderson (2008: p. 252) argues that academics are trained in analytic thinking and are “unlikely to passively accept changes they regard as detrimental”. However, a review of the literature revealed that levels of academic resistance to neoliberal and managerialist changes in British universities have been uneven. A key challenge to organising resistance is that capitalist logic has become deeply engraved upon people’s worldview, with Fisher (2009: p. 2) noting that ‘capitalist realism’ entails a “widespread sense that only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible to even imagine a coherent alternative to it”. While there had been strike action in response to pay demands in 2006 (Crace & Freeman, 2006) and to huge reductions of staff at universities including Leeds, Cumbria, Wolverhampton and Kings College London during 2010 (Caanan, Hill & Maisuria, 2013), the first manifestation of coordinated resistance to the marketisation of higher education was the student-led demonstrations and university occupations in autumn 2010.

The double crisis of austerity cuts and the increase of tuition fees to a maximum of £9,000 per year, both introduced by the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government in 2010, resulted in numerous collectives of students protesting on the streets in their tens of thousands (Castree, 2011) and occupying their universities (Hopkins & Todd, 2015; Ismail, 2011). A National



Day of Action to defend education was called on November 10th 2010 by the NUS and the University and College Union (UCU) in anticipation of Educational Maintenance Allowance (EMA) cuts and tuition fee rises. A significant number of student protestors diverged from the official route and occupied Millbank Tower: the headquarters of the Conservative Party (Hansen, 2010). The then NUS President Aaron Porter condemned the occupants as “rogue protestors” (as cited in Sealey-Huggins & Pussey, 2013: p. 85).

Frustrated by the passivity of the NUS and the leadership’s close links to the Labour Party, left-led rank-and-file groups such as the National Campaign Against Fees and Cuts (NCAFC) and the Education Activists Network (EAN) emerged to play a leading role in organising follow-up demonstrations and university occupations. While their demands to reverse planned cuts and fee increases were ultimately not achieved, Ismail (2011: p. 128) contends the occupations created a “free education zone, which was about creative thinking, alternative ideas and, crucially, a rejection of the marketisation of education”. Students used the occupations as a means of envisioning a new education, becoming “the seed for how students wanted their education to be” (Kumar, 2011: p. 139). The University of Leeds occupation hosted a ‘re-imagining the university’ conference with the organisers stating: “We need to resist the threatened cuts and the ongoing onslaught on education – but we also need a transformation” (as cited in Winn, 2014).

Following the occupations, many student activists formed groups that went further in advancing a more coherent anti-capitalist critique of education such as the Really Open University (ROU) and London Really Free School (LRFS). Pusey and Sealey-Huggins (2013) recounted on their involvement in the ROU in Leeds which was formed in January 2010 shortly after strike action was announced by the local UCU branch. The ROU went beyond defending the

university by challenging the forms and future of education. It reflected a “praxis of direct action” by emphasising the opportunity strikes provided for students to take control of their own education and sought to “experiment with radical pedagogical alternatives, based on participatory measures” (2013: p. 448). The LRFS squatted empty, high-profile properties to transform these spaces into self-organised pedagogical projects. Organising workshops on a range of topics from the Paris Commune to squatting, the LRFS sought to be an anti-capitalist alternative to the normative university: “In this school, skills are swapped and information shared...here is an autonomous space to find each other, to gain momentum, to cross-pollinate ideas and actions” (as cited in Pusey & Sealey-Huggins, 2013: p. 449).

The neoliberal transformation of Britain’s universities has also produced resistance from lecturers and academic support staff. Following the student protests in 2010-11, independent unions such as the Independent Workers of Great Britain (IWGB) and United Voices of the World (UVW) won pay rises and improved terms for precarious and outsourced workers at the University of London and London School of Economics (Bergfeld, 2018). While the UCU were unsuccessful in defending lecturer pay during five days strike action in 2013-14, the attack on pensions led to 14 days of strike action in 2018. Despite the neoliberal belief that ‘student as consumers’ would oppose the strikes, 61% of HE students supported the action (UCU, 2018) and 20 university buildings were occupied in solidarity (Mayer & Eccles, 2019). Evans (2020) argued that the pedagogy of the 2018 pension strike added to students’ understanding of the role of trade unions and the necessity of broader collective struggles to challenge the neoliberal university.

It was during these strikes that the teach-outs as a form of strike action began to emerge (Rendell, 2021; Weikert, 2020). Moving beyond disciplinary and

institutional boundaries, teach-outs consist of a teaching session outside the university structure that breakdown the hierarchy of universities and facilitate dialogue between participants about solidarity and resistance. McKnight (2019) described the radical utopian potential of teach-outs during the 2018 pension strike when staff and students drew links between strike action and how marketisation impacts rent prices on campus, poverty, and a lack of diversity. This learning space on the picket line created a “community essential to establishing a critical pedagogy that that tries to resist modes of cultural reproduction” (2019: p. 146). For Rendell (2021: p. 181), the teach-outs were a form of “critical spatial practice” providing alternative model of education in opposition to “those of the market, finance and expansion valued by neo-liberal universities in the UK”. During the 2019-20 strikes at the University of Winchester, Weikert (2020: no page) elucidates how teach-outs created a transformative space that tore down the “walls of academic disciplines”, with sessions organised on a range of issues including decolonising curricula, preventing Prevent, and challenging learners to think outside assessment criteria.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework for this study is Mike Neary’s (2020) Student as Producer which is grounded within Marxist social theory and critical pedagogy in opposition to the consumerist ideology of neoliberalism (Neary & Amsler, 2014). Student as Producer takes its title from Walter Benjamin’s (1998) lecture Author as Producer, presented to the Committee for Anti-Fascists in Berlin in 1934, in which he posed the question of how do radical intellectuals act in a time of crisis. Benjamin’s response was that not only should intellectuals produce revolutionary art and publications, but they should also seek to transform the social relations of production for a communist society (Neary & Saunders, 2016).

Neary (2010: p. 4) cites Benjamin as an influence because he presents a revolutionary pedagogy that proposes how intellectual labour can be radicalised by enabling students to see themselves as the subjects rather than the objects of the teaching and learning i.e. the student as producer not consumer. In *Life of Students*, Benjamin criticised the chasm existing in higher education as “a gigantic game of hide and seek in which teachers and students, each in his or her own unified identity, constantly push past one another without ever seeing one another” (1915: p. 39). Student as Producer aims to revolutionise academic knowledge production through collaborative research between staff and students based on enquiry-based learning and constructivist models of student participation, challenging “the very organising principles upon which academic knowledge is currently transmitted and produced” (Neary & Winn, 2009: p. 208).

Student as Producer differs from the concept of co-production (Carey, 2013; Leadbetter, 2005; Ng & Forbes, 2009) which creates innovative forms of student participation, but does not challenge the social relations of capital production. Co-production is subsumed with the consumerist principle of ‘student engagement’ and affirms a system it purports to critique. The theoretical basis for Student as Producer is Marx’s labour theory of value, based on a negative critique of the capitalist university on the basis of worker exploitation. Following the work of Postone (1993), Neary’s (2020) critique of labour focuses on how to dissolve the social relation of capitalist production in real time and to recreate the university as a “revolutionary political project” (2020: p. 3). This is achieved by connecting theory to an existing organisation form - the co-operative university – which will attack the groundwork of capital by reconstituting the ownership of the means of production so that academic

workers (including students) run the co-operative in which they are working (Neary & Winn, 2017; Winn 2015).

One such model for co-operative higher education was the Social Science Centre (SSC) which was an autonomous critical pedagogical project which ran from 2011-2019. It worked alongside the neoliberal University of Lincoln, but was “organised on the basis of democratic, non-hierarchical principles, with all members having equal involvement in the life and work of the SSC” (Social Science Centre, 2016). The SSC adopted the Student as Producer model to focus on the ways research-based knowledge production could be democratised. Recognising that students were already making an important contribution to academic life and that their labour was uncompensated, distinctions between teacher and student were broken down: all members were referred to ‘scholars’ (Neary & Winn, 2017).

## **Methodology**

This inquiry into the teach-outs at Lancaster University is guided by an open form of critical discourse analysis (Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000; Fairclough, 2013; Huckin, 1997; Van Dijk, 2001) which aims to uncover the constructions of higher education in the demands of striking academics and student activists (Cole & Heinecke, 2020). Van Dijk states the purpose of critical discourse analysis (CDA) is to analyse the “way social-power abuse and inequality are enacted, reproduced, legitimated and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context” (2001: p. 466). While CDA is not a unitary theoretical framework, it draws upon theories of power and ideology including Foucault’s formulations of power-knowledge, Gramsci’s concept of hegemony, and Althusser’s notion of ideological state apparatuses (Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000). Fairclough (2013) proposes a ‘material-semiotic’ reading of texts that has become the trademark of CDA, arguing that changing the world requires not

only an understanding of the material-structural factors associated with the character of capitalism, but also the semiotic (or discourse-analytical) factors that legitimise neoliberal ideas. CDA does not aim to describe any particular text in exhaustive detail, but attempts to identify the features of a text that are most noteworthy from a critical perspective (Huckin, 1997).

Influenced by CDA, this article analyses three discourses present in publicly available blog posts taken from the Lancaster UCU website during the timeframe of the teach-outs and the strikes. The discourses were developed from the following research questions:

- How do the blog posts provide a critique of neoliberalism in higher education?
- How are the concepts of hegemony, inequality, marginalisation, and resistance discussed during the teach-outs?
- How do the blog posts imagine an alternative to the neoliberal university that increases access, democracy, equality, and social justice in higher education?

These data sources were chosen because they were produced by the participants and descriptively illustrate the aims of the teach-outs, how they were organised and the programme of education offered. A purposive sampling strategy is demonstrated by the application of inclusion/exclusion criterion (George Mwangi et al, 2018). The programme of teach-outs (16 in total) were organised from February 14th 2022 to March 25th 2022. The teach-outs were organised online and, in most instances, blog posts co-authored by Lancaster UCU members summarised the main discussion points. A further analysis of blog posts published during the duration of the 2021-22 strike, but not linked directly to the programme of teach-outs, was also employed to further capture the debates and discourses around the strikes, the neoliberal university and its alternatives.

McKnight's (2019) research on the strikes at the University of Sussex made it clear the research should be respectful to those who did not mean to be the subject of research through their actions and this analysis will not identify individual participants. Critical reactions to CDA centre on the issue of interpretation and Schegloff (1997) argues there is a tendency for analysts to project their own political biases on to their data and analysis. I am a postgraduate student at Lancaster University who supported the strike and attended some of the teach-outs online. This paper is indebted to the striking workers and student activists who participated in the teach-outs. This study, however, is limited in scope and methodology because it is reliant on blog posts from one source summarising discussions from the teach-outs at a single UK university. It does not claim to represent all views or experiences of teach-out participants.

## **Results**

Following the analytical processes applied by George Mwangi et al (2018) in their CDA of criticality in higher education journals, a checklist was created and used to analyse the blog posts' content and concepts used. The checklist included questions such as: How does the blog post provide a critique of higher education and neoliberalism? How are concepts of hegemony, inequality, marginalisation, power, or resistance discussed during the teach-outs? Do the blog posts make recommendations for change that increases access, democracy, equality, or social justice in higher education? Three discourses subsequently emerged from this analysis of the Lancaster UCU teach-outs: critique of the neoliberal university, resistance to the neoliberal university and transforming the neoliberal university. They are further explored under the following sub-headings: critique, resistance and transformation.

Lancaster UCU members took industrial action over two interlinked disputes. The first dispute was the battle over pensions with employers demanding cuts that would amount to that would amount to 41% for a scheme member on £39,000 (UCU, 2022a). The second dispute was over the Four Fights: low pay, pay inequalities, unsafe workloads and casualisation (UCU, 2022b). The teach-outs took place on the days of the strike action, jointly organised by students and staff, to critique deteriorating conditions in the neoliberal university and to reclaim it by transforming it “into a place where students and staff can learn and work in conditions that are nurturing, supportive, empowering and democratic” (Lancaster UCU, 2022k: no page). The discourses evident in the demands of staff and students were imbued with class consciousness, but also addressed the institutional marginalisation of women, ethnic minorities, and trans staff and students.

### Critique

The discourse of critique of the neoliberal university is grounded in the deteriorating working conditions of academic staff, the positioning of students as consumers of education, and the marginalisation of minority groups on campus.

The discourse of sustainability is addressed not only in terms of a climate emergency engulfing the planet, but also the demands placed on staff which leads to mental and physical health problems due to exhaustion and a loss of time for scholarship, research and creativity. This contrasts with the neoliberal university’s view of sustainability in terms of profits, student numbers and competition (Lancaster UCU, 2021a). The description of higher education system as a “broken system” also highlights a discourse of despair. The language relating the impact of pension cuts on their future provides a stark illustration of this:



“The pension is hope.....Our pension is what enables us to imagine spending sunny days in the garden or playing with grandchildren. A pension that enables dignity is hope. And in a broken system of higher education, if they take away our hope, they leave us with a cold, bleak future” (Lancaster UCU, 2021b: no page).

While the attack on pensions was cited above as the last straw, the importance of the Four Fights on pay, casualisation, equality and workload was also stressed in future teach-outs. A speaker representing Lancaster University Unison branch spoke about the stress and uncertainty accompanying the proliferation of fixed term contracts in the neoliberal university (Lancaster UCU, 2022b), while testimony from one casualised staff member described “the pain, the frustration, and the devaluing that comes with many of these contracts” (Lancaster UCU, 2022c: no page).

The link between staff working conditions and student learning conditions was regularly drawn during the strike and teach-outs. Attempts by senior management to drive a wedge between staff and students by “ventriloquising student voices” was criticised in an open letter from a student to the Vice-Chancellor who connected student support for industrial action to the wider struggle against the marketisation of education:

“Lancaster University management is withering the very soul of academia by (a) perpetuating a toxic work environment of overwork, and insecure contracts leading to burnout and mental depression, discouraging new blood entering into the academic system; (b) prioritising profit over staff job satisfaction and wellbeing by suggesting such cuts to pay and pensions in the first place; and (c) compromising student experience and learning by not coming to the table with union organisers to find a solution that works for all parties, thereby forcing a strike” (Lancaster UCU, 2022d: no page)

The positioning of students as consumers of education was addressed directly in a blog article when another student criticised the neoliberal university's focus on "squeezing money out us" while failing to offer "a genuinely rewarding experience of learning" (Lancaster UCU, 2022e: no page). The treatment of students as 'cash cows' was highlighted in one teach-out where students discussed being charged for a room they could not occupy due to Covid-19 travel restrictions. For self-isolating students who remained on campus (many of them overseas students paying higher tuition fees), they were charged "£17.95 per day for supermarket-quality ready-meals delivered to their doors" (Lancaster UCU, 2022f: no page)

The discourse of marginalisation also exists in the critique of the neoliberal university with many students describing the campus as an unwelcoming environment. A teach-out on building an anti-racist university delivered by Why is My Curriculum White? (WIMCW) and the Lancaster University Race Equality Network (LUREN) centred on students' harrowing experiences of racist abuse, but also described structural injustices on campus. Students emphasised individual experiences are "symptomatic of a wider culture of racism" on campus and demanded the university "take immediate and meaningful action to build a genuinely anti-racist campus" (Lancaster UCU, 2022g: no page). Another teach-out featured students' experiences of misogyny, transphobia and queerphobia on campus. Intersectionality characterises many of these examples of marginalisation with one contributor focusing on the barriers (particularly social reproductive work) that mature working-class women face in accessing higher education (Lancaster UCU, 2022h).

### Resistance

The discourse of resistance positions trade unions and student activist groups as the twin social forces organising against hostile environment of the neoliberal

university. The teach-outs emphasised the importance of student-staff solidarity and recognised the role students played in building support for the strike:

“Students have been writing letters of support to staff. They have been organising events and a presence on the picket lines. Students have produced fabulous posters and flyers in support of this strike. They are co-organisers of our exciting range of Teach-out events and are now active in writing the [Lancaster] UCU blog” (Lancaster UCU, 2022i: no page)

Resistance to neoliberalism and the marketisation of higher education is clear through students’ demands in defence of the UCU strike and for a better, fairer university. A grassroots student group called Lancaster Students Support the Strikes (LSSS) emerged during the strike and used their networks to organise student support for the picket lines. During the teach-outs, students spoke about their own resistance to the neoliberal university, including organising rent strikes and mutual aid groups delivering free meals during the pandemic (Lancaster UCU, 2022f). Calls to decolonise higher education and the curriculum have been growing in Lancaster University as the student-led campaign Why is My Curriculum White? (WIMCW) has drawn attention to the whiteness of education structures and curricula (Lancaster UCU, 2022g).

Although the strike was organised by the UCU, the teach-outs emphasised the importance of cross-union collaboration in winning better terms and conditions for staff. The negotiation of a new policy on fixed-term contracts was cited as a collective success for the three unions – UCU, Unison and Unite - representing staff on campus. Despite a new policy being agreed, it was recognised during the teach-out on casualisation that “a chasm has opened up between policy and practice” for Graduate Teaching Assistants on casual contracts (Lancaster UCU, 2022c: no page). One participant posed the question of how staff on permanent

contracts could better support colleagues facing precarity. A related pattern that emerged from the data was the importance of sustaining staff-student solidarity beyond the strikes to challenge the neoliberalism both within the university and in communities adjacent to the university:

“Following on from Tuesday’s teach-out on student organising, the need was again stressed to build new networks of solidarity between students and staff, and to strengthen those between campus trade unions, perhaps with termly student-staff assemblies to facilitate intergenerational learning. Even beyond campus, it was suggested that there might be a need to for a wider people’s assembly in Lancaster to take grassroots activism into the community, building a broad coalition of local residents, including staff and students” (Lancaster UCU, 2022b: no page)

The demand to extend grassroots activism into the community and build new networks of solidarity recognises that critical educators and students cannot just limit their resistance to neoliberalism within institutional spaces. As Freire rightly argued: “the university cannot be the vanguard of any revolution” (as cited in Escobar et al, 1994: p. 62). Emancipatory education cannot by itself change consciousness. A broader social perspective for transformation is required, based on increased political activity outside the university and the formation of strategic alliances with social movements, consciously set against capital, for the emancipation of labour and humanity (Pavlidis, 2015; Shor & Freire, 1987).

### Transformation

The final discourse is reimagining the university, grounded in the supposition that real academic freedom will be realised in the construction of a “new and democratic university” (Lancaster UCU, 2022j: no page). This discourse appeared in demands emphasising the importance of knowledge co-production and democratic decision-making, with students calling for an education system

that contributes to “a collective furthering of knowledge” (Lancaster UCU, 2022e: no page). Concurrent with the teach-out activities were wide-ranging discussions on the need to reconceptualise the university:

“We re-imagine and reclaim our university, transforming it into a place where students and staff can learn and work in conditions that are nurturing, supportive, empowering and democratic” (Lancaster UCU, 2022k: no page)

This raises the question: how should this ‘new and democratic university’ be reconstituted? The closest contribution to a specific set of demands were the 10 points presented in a blog post about a sustainable higher education system (Lancaster UCU, 2021a). This presented a view of the public university where staff would be paid fairly, management would work with staff (not against), and there would be adequate time for “genuine scholarship at the heart of university learning, teaching and research” (Lancaster UCU, 2021a: no page). While the demand for genuine scholarship was not explored further, it appears redolent of Troiani and Dutson’s affection for the liberal university as “a space for critical thought, slow contemplation and transformative becoming for both student and university worker” (2021: p. 5). The 10 points are demands to work inside and reform the university within the dominant capitalist society, while the social relations of class exploitation are kept outside theoretical critique (Pavlidis, 2015). While many academics would understandably like a return to a more collegiate system of management, these demands do not address the role of higher education in the reproduction of inequality in contemporary capitalism (Radice, 2013).

The teach-out on Paris 1968 “soared through the philosophical and political theory of Marxism” (Lancaster UCU, 2022l: no page). The student revolt was soon joined by a general strike of 10 million workers and France found itself

poised on the precipice of revolution. Inspired by those events, participants discussed the need to “reimagine and reclaim, not just the university, but our physical world and society” (Lancaster UCU, 2022l: no page). It is not clear from the data whether the question of abolishing the university in its capitalist form was posed during the teach-out. This is a limitation of reliance on blog posts. However, the libertarian impulses of 1968 worker-student revolt encouraged students to rebel against the pedagogy of top-down educational institutions. Neary’s Student as Producer is influenced by a revolutionary form of university that emerged from the ashes of defeat in the form of the University of Paris 8 which employed radical teachers (Foucault, Deleuze, Guattari, Ranciere), taught a progressive curriculum, promoted social justice campaigns beyond the university, and organised teach-ins to engage factory workers (Neary, 2014; 2020).

The competitive pedagogical environment that ranks students was criticised in the teach-out focused on assessment. These competitive approaches to assessment “reflect the highly individualised nature of capitalist society”, whereby future employment prospects are determined by the grade they receive. Current approaches to grading harm student and socialise them to “see their futures as cattle in the market” (Lancaster UCU, 2022m: no page). Neoliberalism has created a reductionist view of education reducing students to the level of a commodity, with learning outcomes becoming a checklist against which employers can measure the employability of graduates (Holborow, 2012). The teach-out reimaged a university where assessment would celebrate achievement and support students to fulfil their potential:

“Assessment should be a happy place: the fact that that might seem a very strange idea tells us what is wrong with our education system” (Lancaster UCU, 2022m: no page)

The proposal to replace current neoliberal metrics for measuring academic performance aligns with the Student as Producer model of assessment which “favours academic judgement and values that underpin the democratic production of knowledge based on the principles of cooperation, the commons and the commonwealth” (Neary & Saunders, 2016: p. 16).

The teach-out on building an anti-racist university shone a spotlight on institutional racism, but again highlighted the importance of collective solidarity. The university’s response to instances of racist abuse was described as “evading accountability rather than prioritising justice and care” (Lancaster UCU, 2022g). However, participants made it clear that “spaces for support, solidarity and empowerment came from a grassroots network of staff and students” (Lancaster UCU, 2022g). It was stressed that being ‘not racist’ is insufficient to the task of building an anti-racist university; everyone needs to be an active anti-racist. If campaigns are not broad and inclusive, the burden of (emotional) labour falls disproportionately on the shoulders of the same core group of BAME students.

The teach-out on gender and queering identified similar patterns of institutional oppression. When complaints about abuse are made to the university, participants highlighted the bureaucratic procedures that dehumanise the victim: “people within this system can wipe their hands of any responsibility so long as they follow procedures...bureaucracy takes the heart out of people” (Lancaster UCU, 2022h: no page). BME and LGBTQ+ students and staff are more likely to identify hierarchies of disadvantage, strengthening the argument that university governorship should be devolved to staff and the student body. The multiple barriers that mature women face in accessing education led to a proposal that the reimagined university should follow Nancy Fraser’s caregiver model:

“Rather than offering specific courses for those with caring responsibilities, courses should be set up in a way that enables everybody, no matter their background or responsibilities, to access those courses fairly and in the same way” (Lancaster UCU, 2022h)

## **Discussion**

Students and staff in HE are facing an all-out assault on whole sections of knowledge production and education by an austerity-obsessed government, with the humanities and social sciences in particularly at risk because they are not perceived to be instrumental in the production of “worker/consumer citizens” (Boden & Nedeva, 2010: p. 40). Education is increasingly perceived as a consumer good where the qualifications that are funded are the ones that can be measured against employment statistics and GDP (English & Mayo, 2012; Morrison, 2017). The neoliberal restructuring of the university in response to market demands erodes the professional autonomy and working conditions of academic staff (Olsen & Peters, 2005). However, the university remains a contested site of contradictory functions, ethics and values. On the one hand, it is a public utility creating “docile, debt-ridden workers for capital” (Noterman & Pusey, 2012: p. 180). On the other hand, it is a potential space of commons where many students develop critical thinking, discuss radical ideas, and encounter resistance to neoliberalism for the first time.

The findings from the discourse analysis of the teach-outs illustrate the ways in which university workers and student activists critique and resist neoliberalism on campus, indicating a sophisticated understanding of the current socio-political, cultural and economic forces. Demands around reimagining the university focused on community (student-staff solidarity), democracy (a more democratic process of decision-making in the university), justice (improved pay and working conditions, job security, dismantling racism and patriarchy, action



against sexual violence) and pedagogy (assessment, activism, reciprocal exchanges between staff and students). While critical space for learning and research is being compressed through curriculum control, the teach-outs provided a space for “criticism of existing society and the search for promulgation of alternatives” (Hill, 2004: p. 186).

Workers’ strikes and student mobilisation are inherently “pedagogical events” (Wubben, 2017: p. 476) in that efforts to collectivise and struggle for change are opportunities for staff, students and the wider community to question the “highly competitive unprotected space” of the neoliberal university and discuss alternatives (Troiani & Dutson, 2021: p. 17). Blending pedagogy and activism, the Lancaster University teach-outs emerged in response to the UCU strikes and the attacks on public education. They were experiments in knowledge co-production and democratic decision-making that aimed to develop a collective capacity for resistive politics. In addition to building support for strike action, the teach-outs invited participants to develop an education programme critiquing the neoliberal university, exploring forms of resistance, and creating radical pedagogical alternatives. Lancaster UCU kept a blog which summarised the key points from teach-outs. They also published articles and open letters from students during the strike which laid bare the role of student as consumer.

Neary’s (2016; 2020) Student as Producer was visible not only in the democratic and collective production of knowledge during the teach-outs, but in the overlapping discourses that explored worker-student forms of association and the critical-practical necessity of confronting academic capitalism. Student as Producer identifies strongly with the academic and student movement of protests against cuts in higher education (Neary, 2014), and recognises the vital role trade unions play in the “process of democratic worker participation” (Neary & Winn, 2015: p. 114).

Neary (2010) also draws upon the work of Lev Vygotsky who argues the ‘student-worker’ is not just a learner of skills, but also an active contributor to the production of knowledge. While the neoliberal university produces students for wage labour, the teach-outs transformed the role of the student, drew on their experience in a particular social context, and produced knowledge appropriate to the needs of humanity. Inside this radical pedagogical framework, “the student becomes the subject rather than the object of history – they make history – and humanity becomes the project rather than the resource” (Winn, 2015: p. 50).

The teach-outs dissolved the distinction between teacher and student, and with it the division of labour, but as Pusey (2017: p. 17) argues: “We cannot wish away capitalist social relations or pretend that we are somehow ‘outside’ of them”. Therefore, it would be beneficial to imagine a new model of university creating open and non-hierarchical institutions of research and learning, within the context of the wider struggle for the revolutionary socialist reconstruction of society.

Student as Producer found its expression as a pedagogical framework in the Social Science Centre, a co-operative for higher education in Lincoln, which was a democratic member-run organisation with no formal distinctions between teachers and students (Neary & Winn, 2017). It was a dissident social institution that was the physical embodiment of revolutionary theory (Neary & Saunders, 2016), but as Kasmir (1996: p. 194) highlighted in her critique of the co-operative Mondragon University: “worker owners are not shielded from the forces of the world market”. The demise of the Social Science Centre reinforces Kasmir’s argument that it is difficult for ‘free universities’ and worker co-operatives to survive outside capitalism’s totalising trajectory.

While the teach-outs encouraged critical awareness of the dominant social relations and ideology within the neoliberal university, ultimately their transformative activity is limited to partial reforms within the current university structure. Though participants can be positioned as ‘transformative intellectuals’ for seeking to transform universities into democratic spheres (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1986), the texts did not frame this struggle as part of a larger agenda of anti-capitalist social transformation (McLaren et al, 2004). This, in part, reflects the economism of trade unions whose focus on workplace demands reinforce the political-economic divide (Hallas, 1973).

This paper argues that projects such as the Social Science Centre, and the teach-outs at Lancaster University, create the kind of social relations that are a requirement for realising any radical alternative to the neoliberal university, but that the radical transformation of the neoliberal university can only be achieved through a wider transformation of the social relations of capitalist production. Therefore, the struggle for the abolition of the neoliberal university is profoundly intertwined with the class struggle to abolish capitalist social relations.

## **Conclusion**

This paper presented a local case of staff and students protesting university reforms and cutbacks, focusing on the teach-outs that took place in Lancaster University during the UCU strike 2021-22. The teach-outs presented a discourse that there is an alternative to the student as consumer discourse in the neoliberal university. They could be described as a form of ongoing participatory action research (Neary & Saunders, 2016), where university workers and students come together to critique neoliberal processes in the university and consider the necessity of broader collective resistance. Based on democratic staff-student participation and co-production of knowledge, the teach-outs demonstrated the

possibility and actuality of an alternative to the neoliberal university. This opening up of pedagogic relations, based on class struggle in practice, collectively generated “new intelligences” that “emerge out of workers’ practices, rather than exploiters’ interests” (Neary, 2020: p. 148). The increasing neoliberal orientation of higher education has generated greater class conflict and more strikes since 2018, so the antagonism between the neoliberal university and the imaginary of a free, open and democratic university could be explored in more depth in future teach-outs.

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