

# **The Funnelling: Higher Education for Labour-power Production in the Shadow of Covid-19**

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## **Abstract**

*This article explores how the UK Conservative Government's Department for Education is taking advantage of the Covid-19 pandemic to restructure higher education in England towards labour-power production. There is nothing new in UK governments seeking to reshape higher education for labour-power development. But under cover of apparent concern for students' well-being in the pandemic, the consequences for higher education institutions viewed as slacking or heel-dragging regarding their labour-power production drives have never been greater following the publication of Establishment of a Higher Education Restructuring Regime in Response to Covid-19 (DfE, 2020a): market exit and closure. The Great Interruption in labour-power production generated by Covid-19 can pose the question of whether we continue to assent to our labour-power being shaped for capital, or whether we redirect flows of labour-power development in directions of post-capitalist futures.*

**Keywords:** *Covid-19, higher education, labour-power, educational restructuring, Great Interruption*

## **Introduction**

In July 2020, under the cover of Covid-19, the UK Department for Education (DfE) published *Establishment of a Higher Education Restructuring Regime in Response to COVID-19* (DfE, 2020a). This document focused primarily on restructuring higher education institutions in England (but not other nations of the UK) that were ‘at risk of market exit due to the challenges of COVID-19’ (Williamson, 2020, p. 3). If higher education (HE) institutions wanted money from the DfE then their claims on the public purse would be assessed in light of the following objectives according to Gavin Williamson, Secretary of State for Education: protecting the welfare of current students; preserving the ‘internationally outstanding science base’; and aiding higher education providers to generate ‘high quality courses aligned with economic and societal needs’ (ibid.).

In this article I show that Williamson’s ominously authoritarian sounding higher education restructuring regime seeks to funnel provision, teaching practices and student development into the stomach of capital. It is an educational regime for labour-power development that progressively narrows its focus; a reductionist machine that squeezes and propels work-ready graduates to points of perceived (as opposed to real) labour-power demand. As a funnelling process, this higher education restructuring regime is a program for enclosing education, imagination, institutions and aspirations into a narrow outlook based on the development of the unique capitalist commodity, labour-power, for the delight of capital and its human representatives.

## **Labour-Power**

Before looking at the *Restructuring Regime* document in detail, we first chart a brief outline of labour-power as a commodity form and then its social production through education. In *Theories of Surplus Value – Part 1*, Marx,

drawing on Adam Smith (1776), notes that: ‘The whole world of “commodities” can be divided into two great parts. First, labour-power; second, commodities as distinct from labour power itself’ (Marx 1863: 167). He repeats the same distinction later on (Marx, 1863, p. 171).

Labour-power stands apart from the general class of commodities as it is the only commodity that can increase value in the capitalist labour process over-and-above that which is necessary to maintain and preserve itself. The value of labour-power is expressed in the wage, but the transformation of labour-power into labour in capitalist labour processes, resulting in commodities of the general class, has the potential to generate more value than that expressed in labourers’ wages. Thus:

Labour-power is the unique, special commodity ... [and] ... As a commodity, it is the basis of capitalist production: the only commodity capable of creating more value than it takes to maintain and reproduce itself. When put to use in the capitalist labour process, labour-power has the capacity to create surplus-value. (Rikowski, 2019, p. 150)

For Marx:

By labour-power or capacity for labour is to be understood the aggregate of those mental and physical capabilities existing in a human being, which he exercises whenever he produces a use-value of any description. (1867, p. 164)

Thus, when labouring, the labourer brings together the necessary ‘mental and physical capabilities’ in order to produce something that has value in terms of its use, a use-value. This use-value does not have to be a ‘hard’ product – a brick, a cake – but could be of ‘any description’, such as forms of transportation. An interesting point is what might be included under ‘mental capabilities’. Over 20 years ago, I argued that these should include work and social attitudes, and personality traits (Rikowski, 2000, pp. 21-26).

Labour-power is a commodity that is owned by labourers: our skills, capacities and abilities reside in our bodies, our personhoods and in connections and entanglements with other labourers (as we co-operate with them in capitalist production). Labour-power in capitalism is loaned out to employers for their control and direction for a specific duration, in exchange for a wage. It is bought (by capitalist employers) and sold (by labourers) in what we know as the capitalist labour market, subject to a vast range of wages, contracts, and government regulations.

### **The Social Production of Labour-Power in Capitalism**

In the first two volumes of *Capital*, Marx ‘assumed that labour-power is “always to hand”’, and labourers are available with the requisite labour-power attributes for capitalist production (Marx, 1878, p. 577; in Rikowski 2002, p. 119). Yet Marx was clear that ‘education produces labour-power’ (1863, p. 210); education is an institutional element in the social production of labour-power in capitalist society.

The social production of labour-power is institutionally fragmented in capitalist society as a definite form of productive activity. It can be split into nursery, primary, secondary, post-secondary education and training, higher education, a host of training and work-based learning programs, re-training institutions, and furthermore labour-power can be enhanced and produced through the labour process itself as workers gain speed, know-how and capabilities through capitalist work.

Higher education, therefore, can be viewed as a significant element in the social production of labour-power in capitalist society. Indeed, the extent of the reduction of university education to labour-production indicates the strength and vitality of capital within the life of higher education and the subjection of

university staffs, students, managers and administrators to the power of capital and its accumulation.

From early 2020 in the UK, the Covid-19 pandemic has created a Great Interruption in labour-power production in the contexts of compulsory schooling and higher education. The flows of labour-power production through educational institutions have been interrupted through generalised lockdowns, staffs and students getting Covid-19 or self-isolating as a result of colleagues and peers testing positive, institution closures allied with online provision, together with periods of face-to-face learning being withdrawn or rationed. This Great Interruption of labour-power production will be a focus of future work, with specific attention paid to schools and higher education as institutional sites of this form of capitalist commodity production.

### **The Funnelling**

At the top of the funnel, close to the rim, come urgings for labour-power production for the *national capital*: the injunction for higher education institutions is to produce graduates with labour-power attributes deemed essential for the nation. As Rikowski notes:

The labour-power needs of national capitals refer to those labour-power capacities required for labouring in any labour process throughout the national capital ...[and]... Within this, there is the drive for quality (of labour-power) *vis-à-vis* other national capitals for gaining a competitive edge. This category [of labour-power needs] could be broken down into region and locality. (2001, p. 42)

This is precisely what Williamson argues for in relation to the Department for Education's restructuring regime for higher education institutions that get into financial trouble as a consequence of losing income from the Covid-19

pandemic. Williamson argues for ‘a future HE sector which delivers the skills the country needs’ (2020, p. 3). It is significant that Williamson has the ‘HE sector’ in his sight for the future, and not just those HE institutions seeking financial aid as a result of Covid-19: he views the HE sector in the future as being tied more tightly to labour-power production.

Moving down the funnel, Williamson argues that the HE sector should also support *regional* business needs (2020, p. 3). Some HE providers (not elite universities with an international remit) must enhance their ‘regional focus’ (p. 4) and reconfigure themselves towards the regional economy (ibid.).

Furthermore, university research should be geared not only to national needs but also to regional business requirements (DfE, 2020a, p. 9), which would include labour-power development as well as participating in the development of new forms of the general commodity (referring back to Marx’s two-fold conception of the commodity). The funnelling process regarding labour-power production proceeds down to the *local* level too (Williamson, 2020, p. 3). Universities should be more ‘firmly embedded in the economic fabric of their local area’ (ibid.), with renewed emphasis on technical education and advanced apprenticeships, thereby taking over some of the work of further education and vocational colleges.

The labour-power funnel narrows further when it is argued that STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) subjects should take priority over the arts and social sciences. Nursing and teacher training courses are also given the green light (Williamson, 2020, p. 4). Universities must ‘focus more heavily upon subjects which deliver strong employment outcomes in areas of economic and societal importance’, and again STEM, nursing and teaching are foregrounded (p. 3). Secretary of State for Education, Gavin Williamson argues that students need to be shepherded away from courses in the arts and

humanities and ‘dead-end courses’ that leave students with ‘nothing but debt’ (Drake, 2021, p. 3).

The narrowest tranche of the HE labour-power funnel is comprised of digital online teaching and learning (Williamson, 2020, p. 4), though it is recognised that this will only apply where it is feasible given the nature of the subjects and content being studied. This point is related to garnering international students for Williamson; that is, those who may prefer to study online without actually coming to the UK in a pandemic.

There is a threat which provides the encasement to the funnel: ‘not all providers will be prevented from exiting the [HE] market’ (DfE, 2020a, p. 6) if they carry on regardless of the flows the funnel projects and foments. Repayable loans will be made on condition that HE institutions’ provision is either already flowing through the funnel, or they have radical plans to convert towards the funnelling processes highlighted.

It is clear that Williamson and his supporters and intellectual mentors in right-wing think tanks is taking advantage of the Covid-19 pandemic to force through a restructuring of the UK’s HE that has labour-power production as a goal that trumps other rationales or aims of education. A few months before DfE (2020a) appeared, the think tank Policy Exchange published a report in February 2020 arguing that the UK HE sector was ‘at a crossroads’ and that radical action was necessary to avoid crisis in universities, especially as between 20-30% were deemed to be at risk of being financially unsustainable (Hudson & Mansfield, 2020, p. 11) – and this before Covid-19 struck. Hudson and Mansfield advocated eight areas for radical action to save the HE sector from crisis. These included to ‘make more of the curriculum relevant to employment needs’ and to ‘work with employers to close skills gaps and knowledge gaps’ thereby

‘enhancing productivity and prosperity through closer engagement with local and regional business and civic bodies (Hudson & Mansfield, 2020, pp. 22-23). Hence, HE provision should be more closely aligned with labour-power needs at the regional and local levels. Online digital pedagogy was advocated as one of the principal means for achieving these goals (p. 30).

A month after the DfE (2020a) document was published, the right-wing Institute of Economic Affairs (IEA) produced a report that largely supported the Department for Education’s plans for the restructuring of higher education, but argued for more radical action and ‘a fundamental rethink’ (Davies, 2020, p. 4). At the heart of this IEA report is the notion that the UK’s HE system has become bloated and unfit for purpose since the 1980s, and the Covid-19 crisis that has ‘burst the bubble in universities and higher education’ (Davies, 2020, p. 4), providing a great opportunity: to slim the system down, closing some universities and courses (Davies, 2020, p. 23), and resisting any ‘calls for a bailout’ (p. 5); and to expand the ‘genuinely human capital enhancing courses such as medicine, engineering and other STEM subjects, and vocational education and training’ (p. 23). Many of the other recommendations for HE change advanced by Davies dealt with the organisational, managerial, financial and governmental policies necessary for this renewed drive towards labour-power production.

In December 2020, the Department for Education issued guidance for applicants seeking emergency funding under the new Higher Education Restructuring Regime (HERR) (DfE, 2020b). A Higher Education Restructuring Unit (HERU) has been established to manage applications for funding from HE providers. Interestingly, in what the document calls the “Triage Stage” of the application process, if the failure of a higher education provider would *not significantly* cause harm to the national or local economy or society – with reference to a



range of ‘impact groups’ – then applicants would be excluded from assistance from the HERR (DfE, 2020b, p. 7). In the independent business review element of the HERR process, the HERU would pay special attention to the numbers of students studying STEM and teacher training courses at the applying institution (p. 8). After the independent business review, the applying HE provider must submit a Restructuring Plan that is aligned with the goals and stipulations of the HERR document published in July 2020 (i.e. DfE, 2020a). If funding is approved then it will be in the form of a loan, with terms and conditions agreed between the HE institution and the HERU, but with the Secretary of State for Education making the final decision ‘based on recommendations from officials and independent advice from the HERR Advisory Board’ (DfE, 2020b, p. 11). But that is not the final hurdle: the Chief Secretary to the Treasury has to sanction the release of funds (ibid.).

Of course, UK governmental injunctions and policies that seek to enhance labour-power production in higher education are nothing new, but this time – under the shadow of Covid-19 – there are extra financial and existential threats attached for HE institutions. Furthermore, given the Conservative Party’s large parliamentary majority, then perhaps the Tories believe that reducing higher education to labour-power production – encouraged by think tanks such as the IEA, the right-wing press and fellow travellers in academia – can go much further than any previous UK government has ventured. Applicants seeking a financial lifeline from the Tory government due to losses caused by Covid-19 can be saved if, *inter alia*, they toe the line on labour-power production, but only by being burdened with a loan.

### **Vicious Support and Resistant Criticism**

In March 2021, the Office for Students (OfS) published a consultation document that noted ‘a number of changes that the government would like to

see' as noted in a statutory guidance letter on how the OfS distributes recurrent funding to HE institutions (OfS, 2021, p. 5), one of these being:

- b. A reduction by half to high-cost subject funding for price group C1 students – that is, for courses in performing and creative arts, media studies and archaeology. (OfS, 2020, p. 6)

This supportive deflection took the heat off the Department for Education's obsession with STEM subjects in its July 2020 document (DfE 2020a) and its relative downgrading of arts and humanities subjects. Instead, criticism was heaped on the OfS. Bakare (2021) noted that many artists and musicians were shocked by the proposed 50% cut in 'high cost' arts subjects in universities. The Musicians' Union national organiser for education, Chris Walters, noted that 'Music was worth £5.8bn for the UK economy in 2019' and the Public Campaign for the Arts called the proposals 'an attack on the future of UK arts' (Bakare, 2021, p. 3). Jim Northover pointed out that the government's own figures 'show the creative industries contribution to the UK economy is £111bn, closely behind financial services' (Northover, 2021, p. 1). What this shows is that even in terms of labour-power production for the national capital, these cuts to arts provision in higher education are pretty dumb.

The messages the Department for Education and the OfS are sending out are already having a range of consequences. These attacks on the humanities are leading some non-elite universities to terminate their humanities courses. Aston University, for example, has recently decided to scrap its courses in history, languages and translation (Norton & Grossman, 2021). Some of the UK's leading historians argued that history could become a subject for the elite after Aston and London South Bank universities announced the phasing out of their history courses (Fazackerley, 2021a).

Students also seem to have viewed the writing on the wall, with a slump in applications to study English degrees since 2012 (from 10,740 applications to 7,045 in 2021), and ‘a boom in applications for subjects such as computer science, psychology and maths’ (Fazackerley 2021b, p. 1). Academic staff at Leicester University went on strike in June against cuts to English jobs, and Fazackerley (2021b) reports on other cases of jobs being cut in English departments in UK universities. Attacks on the arts and humanities and the championing of STEM subjects in higher education is also having consequences for schools. Creative arts students and teachers are down by a fifth due to underinvestment in these subjects, which will result in corresponding teacher shortages in the arts and humanities in schools downline (Weale, 2021).

### **Conclusion: The Great Interruption**

According to Hans Kluge, head of the World Health Organization’s Europe region, the pandemic has ‘caused the most catastrophic disruption to education in history’ (Henley, 2021, p. 1). More broadly, Covid-19 brought forth a Great Interruption: an interruption in *labour* with many productive units closed during lockdowns and patchy state support for workers on furlough; interruptions in *commodity production and supply*; but also with what we are concerned with here – interruptions in the *social production of labour-power*. Here, we have explored the drive to convert education to labour-power production in relation to the interruption and crisis in higher education brought about by Covid-19. But nursery, primary and secondary school education could also be addressed in further work: that is, how the Conservative government is resetting these institutions towards the social production of labour–power in the crisis times of Covid-19.

In this Great Interruption, the Conservative government, with its huge majority, and under the cover of Covid-19, has set about restructuring higher education

towards labour-power production, with an intensity that this historical conjuncture offers. Arguing that the arts, humanities and social sciences make a significant contribution towards the UK economy is a defensive and understandable strategy. Jobs and livelihoods are at stake. Yet this is consonant with labour-power production for capitalist work in the creative industries. It does not challenge the reality of education for labour-power production; it merely argues that this is extended and deepened in other sectors of the capitalist economy! Let us enhance the quality of labour-power for the creative industries to aid capital accumulation in those spheres of capitalist activity! This might sound radical to some, but it does nothing to challenge the reality of education and the labour-power capacities and attributes of students being crafted and moulded for capitalist labour processes, or the processes involved in turning humans into *labourers* for capital.

What is also required is a *critique* of labour-power in capitalist society, a critique of the reduction of education to the social production of labour-power. Most of all, efforts to build educational institutions aimed at terminating the rule of capital in education and social life in general are essential in order to forestall these constant attacks on education by human representatives of capital in contemporary society. Education has to be rescued, not for some impossible notion of ‘education for its own sake’, some fantasy of an island pedagogy – a pedagogy free of capital and its social forms – but for an educational future that celebrates critique and the ‘real movement which abolishes the present state of things’ (Marx & Engels, 1846, p. 57).

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