THE LABOUR OF COVID[1]

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This special edition of *Workplace* is about the effects of COVID-19 on the labour of post-secondary education. The global pandemic arrived in Canada at a time when many universities were facing the threat of performance-based funding policies. Ontario and Alberta were ground zero for these proposed changes. This, of course, was before the "common sense" revolutions spearheaded by anti-academic conservative governments in these respective provinces were interrupted by a virus that ultimately challenged a neoliberal hegemony. Universities and college systems across the world are battling the similar neoliberal models.

At the same time, COVID has exacerbated gendered and racial inequities on campuses, as scholars and staff are saddled with additional work and life responsibilities prompted by school and primary care facility closures. Now, as the pandemic appears to be waning in the wealthy economies, mandatory vaccination policies and fears of another wave of COVID sow further uncertainty for scholars, staff, and students. Popular e-learning platforms, like Zoom, might also pose new threats to academic freedom, not to mention serious privacy concerns, as cases from the United States suggest (McKenzie, 2021). So what can be said about the labour of COVID? Economic pressures and the private sector's desire for a just-in-time workforce might accelerate policies that eye universities as training centres (Bharti, 2021). This is part of what Larry Savage identifies in this volume of *Workplace* as the neoliberal university, characterized by "the growth of a precarious and contingent workforce, the intensification of work, a focus on revenue-generating academic programming and corporate-university links, and the undermining of collegial governance in favour of more corporate-oriented administrative structures" (Savage, 2022, p. 23). The extent to which scholars and other campus workers mobilize through their respective faculty associations and unions might determine the future of work and employment in post-secondary institutions coming out of the pandemic. Some modicum of resistance and cross-profession solidarity, therefore, must be a bookend to this discussion as academic labour prepares for neo-liberalism's counterattack in the post-secondary sector. For contributors to this journal, questions about self-care, increased workloads, demographic disparities, and the undermining of community-focused experiential learning opportunities have come to define the labour of COVID.

COVID INEQUALITIES

Despite the "we're in this together" rhetoric that shaped the initial narrative of the pandemic, it became clear that COVID was resulting in uneven effects across demographics. Data released by Statistics Canada on International Women's Day in 2021 demonstrated that women initially faced greater job losses than men, in part due to their

higher representation in retail, accommodation, and food services – industries that have been deeply impacted by COVID and susceptible to closures. Even so, official labour market data still fails to capture the deeper inequities generated by the pandemic, as emerging studies reveal.

Increased household responsibilities and ongoing work commitments increased this gendered inequity, along heightened mental health challenges (Statistics Canada, 2021; Beland et al., 2020). Surveys of academics in Canada and Australia found that longer-serving scholars were more productive and experienced less stress than their younger colleagues, as Foster, Campbell and Walsworth establish in their work in this volume. Indeed, COVID has produced variable outcomes based on a range of demographics. Student parents are particularly hard hit as they struggle to deal with questions about their children's return to school and their own capacity to continue with course work and research (Taj & Bhutani 2020). Full-time academics have not been immune to these trends.

One study released in *Nature* concluded that women's publishing rate has declined relative to men, who actually experienced an *increase* in preprints between 2019 and 2020 (Viglione, 2020). Findings such as this hint at the possibility of widening an already existing gendered wage gap in academia (Canadian Association for University Teachers, 2018) – something that has received substantial coverage by one of Canada's major daily newspapers, the *Globe and Mail* (Wang & Doolittle, 2021). The Canadian Association for University Teachers (CAUT) has similarly drawn attention to the threat COVID poses to precariously employed women, racialized, and Indigenous peoples as their academic careers are disrupted by course cancellations, caregiving duties, job losses, and hiring freezes (CAUT, 2021). Anti-Asian racism percolated on campuses, too, as the pandemic was being associated with Chinese and Asian Canadians (Leach, 2020). Indeed, COVID has both exposed and made worse already existing inequalities in post-secondary institutions in Canada. Those in the classroom have experienced similar inequities.

The labour of learning

Students have also faced new challenges as the novel coronavirus shut down campuses and undermined their employment opportunities. This has prompted Samuel Shelton (2022, p. 36) in this volume to identify the urgency of "transforming practices of care" to "better meet the physical, mental, emotional, and other needs of graduate students" during the pandemic. Indeed, COVID-19 has destabilized the academic workforce, disproportionately harming "disabled folks, people of color, women, queer and trans people", among other marginalized academics (Shelton, 2022, p. 36). As some studies suggest the "pandemic represents an unprecedented threat to mental health" across the globe, particularly for women and younger people (Xiong et al., 2020). School closures, loss of routine, and restricted social connections worked to exacerbate pre-existing conditions amongst students more broadly, prompting some experts to call for additional support programs to head off long-term negative implications (Grubic et al., 2020). An Abacus Data poll commissioned by the CAUT between April and May of 2020 revealed that in addition to their own financial situation, students demonstrated concern over their family's economic situation, along with an ability to secure government grants and scholarships required to pursue post-secondary education; fifty-four percent worried about their ability to pay bills over the subsequent months (Abacus Data, 2020). Tuition increases at Canadian universities in the middle of the pandemic certainly did not help alleviate financial stress (Draus, 2020).

In this context scholars have examined the connection between mental health and academic misconduct just as remote learning prompted an explosion of surveillance software used to monitor students as they completed assignments on-line (Tindall & Curtis, 2020). Pressure to buy new hardware, like webcams, to enable e-proctoring might be leading to elevated levels of anxiety and financial strain – a symptom of what critical scholars have long associated with panoptical surveillance (Eaton & Turner 2020). Frederick Winslow Taylor's (1911, p. 7) exuberance for managerial systems embedded in "a true science, resting upon clearly defined laws, rules, and principles, and capable of being applied to "all kinds of human activities" will find a comfortable seat in the e-learning classroom. A survey of U.S. undergraduate students showed that nearly a quarter of respondents experienced technical barriers that prevented them from fully participating in on-line courses, recognizing the class-based digital divide that characterizes post-secondary education (Digital Promise, 2020). These and other

factors associated with digitalization have been examined in international studies of how COVID-19 has disrupted education (Bozkurt et al., 2020).

The imposition of crude forms of video surveillance and facial recognition provoked some much-needed opposition amongst students (Stephanow, 2020). At my home institution, students mobilized against online proctoring software, claiming that it functioned as an invasive window into their personal lives. Proctortrack's use of "algorithms, and biometric analysis" to confirm identities is hyper-surveillance par excellence, and merits opposition by those under the system's gaze (Proctortrack, n.d.). The university, of course, responded with a prosaic appeal to the software's security protocols, rather than acknowledging the added strain this uninventive form of academic integrity control placed on already anxious students. A breach of these safety features in 2020 confirmed the students' concerns and undermined the company's promise of privacy (Frew, 2020). Under the guise of academic integrity, instructors became the guards in Bentham's panopticon. A political economic analysis is also warranted here.

Critical treatments of the processes of incorporating information into the commodity form established a framework for understanding these trends decades ago (see Mosco and Wasko, 1988). Electronic platforms like Zoom and MS Teams became *the* mechanisms of remote learning, yielding to their parent companies healthy earnings throughout the pandemic. Zoom alone experienced a 191% percent increase in total revenue in the first quarter of 2021, for a total of $956 million. According to the company, a commitment to "empowering customers to work and learn from anywhere" through an "expansive, innovative, and frictionless video communications" drove these results (Zoom Video Communications, 2021). A platform war seems to be brewing, and most of the biggest providers are working to position themselves as the leading vendors post-COVID (Case, 2020). And, as pandemic-induced stress provoked students to breach academic integrity principles, commercial file-sharing and "contract cheating" companies similarly sought to take advantage of the circumstances. A combination of predatory marketing practices used by cheating companies (White, 2020) and the inappropriate use of video-conferencing to invigilate exams created a perfect storm for post-secondary institutions (Eaton, 2020). Researchers even uncovered instances of blackmail, whereby contract cheating platforms threatened to report students who were considering cancelling their accounts (Isai, 2020).

For academic integrity expert, Dr. Sarah Eaton at the University of Calgary, the 40% to 200% increase in cheating can be attributed to students being "forced into online learning when they didn't want to be", not on-line learning itself. Students become prey to what she describes as a $15 billion USD industry under these conditions (Desai, 2021). COVID has certainly provided cheating services a generous financial opportunity. The price of shares for Chegg, a well-known "file sharing" company, shares grew from $29.21 in October of 2019 to $76.58 by September, 2020 (Lancaster & Cotarlan, 2021). The response involves a comparable technical solution (i.e., Turnitin, etc.), rather than identifying and addressing the underlying reasons why students turn to these services, along with the conventional assessment tools deployed in post-secondary institutions. This signals an expansive arms race of sorts in the academic integrity business. More worrisome, however, is the shift taking place in Alberta, where massive cuts to university operating grants paired with performance-based benchmarks accelerated the neo-liberalization of post-secondary education. Of course, Alberta served as a vanguard for audit-driven standards in the 1990s under the leadership of Premier Ralph Klein, followed by the "common sense" revolutionary, Mike Harris in Ontario around the same time (Bruneau & Savage, 2002). Consider recent developments as the Performance Indicators (PIs) movement 2.0. Karl Polyani's (1944) observation about liberalism's subordination of social institutions to economic interests and practices certainly resonates here.

Performance based funding

When Janice McKinnon's "Blue Ribbon Panel" was appointed by Alberta Premier, Jason Kenney, to review the state of public finances in the province, it came as no surprise that universities would be a target of the committee's focus. Her mandate letter from the government in May of 2019 was clear: "provide advice … on plans to balance the provincial budget by 2022-23, without raising taxes" (Toews, 2019). Advanced education received special attention in the report, and Alberta's ranking as spending more per student full-time equivalent than three comparator provinces (British Columbia, Ontario, and Quebec) was interpreted as reason enough for massive spending cuts (Blue Ribbon Panel on Alberta's Finances, 2019, p. 39). Austerity-driven policy makers abhor high bars in the comparator game.

As McKinnon's report reads, "Alberta universities and colleges depend far more on government grants and rely far less on tuition as a share of revenue compared to their British Columbia and Ontario counterparts while Quebec provides more in grant support" (Blue Ribbon Panel on Alberta's Finances, 2019, p. 40). The funding model must be linked to "the achievement of specific goals and priorities for the province" in order to provide the requisite skills for current and future labour market needs, along with what the authors describe as "broader societal and economic goals." Alberta's Minister of Advanced Education, Demetrios Nicolaides (2020) argued that performance-based funding is required to help stop "aimless and unproductive growth". COVID ultimately stalled the government's implementation of the report's recommendations, but Kenney's United Conservative government maintained a commitment to decreasing public funding by 20 percent over a four-year period (French, 2020). In 2021, the University of Alberta, one of the province's leading post-secondary institutions, would face a $60 million funding cut, resulting in additional layoffs and tuition increases (Bench, 2021).

How, exactly, reducing operating grants and raising tuition would better align universities with labour market needs, the government would not say. But, the policies do align with Harvey's (2006) understanding of neoliberalism, whereby government policy making orients itself to the interests of capital accumulation. For the Marxist scholar neoliberalism "can be best advanced by liberating entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade" (Harvey 2005, p. 2); market mechanisms can then be applied to any number of public institutions, namely universities and colleges. Bruneau and Savage (2002) solidify this claim in their recognition that traditional accountability mechanisms – namely collegial governance and academic freedom – become impediments to trade. "The market", they fear, "should govern universities, and business managers run them" (Bruneau and Savage 2002). The question is at what cost?

As Athabasca University professor Bob Barnetson (2020) points out, a "big loss of funding will be profoundly destabilizing" and unlikely to accomplish any of the province's objectives, save for public sector austerity as an end in itself. Australia's NOUS Group was selected to advance the U of A's administrative restructuring, following a similar process it had recommended at the University of Sydney in 2019. This "international management consultancy" (NOUS, n.d.) did so without meaningful input from staff, resulting in what U of Sydney faculty described as a "massive step backward for academic freedom, collegiality and academic quality" (CAUT 2021). It should come as no surprise that the overseers of these new accountability principles are on the list of what the late David Graeber would rank as "bullshit jobs" (2018) – those administrative occupations that contribute little to the overarching mission of post-secondary institutions yet receive so much praise from their political patrons.

Audit culture metrics like those advanced in Alberta, education scholar Marc Spooner (2019; 2020) suggests, threaten to disrupt research directions and transform universities into "entrepreneurial training centres" rather than focusing on "education and creativity for citizens". Noam Chomsky's (2018, p. 56) observation that the "neoliberal system… [wants] what economists call 'flexibility of labour'" resonates here, as well. Others report that performance-based funding models bring "modest or even zero results for institutional outcomes" (Whitford, 2020). Ontario's commitment to follow this path has similarly brought into question whether earning and employment potential is an adequate reflection of the quality of post-secondary programs, as they fail to consider general societal benefits and student experience in their equations (Gerrits, 2019). Smeltzer, Sperduti, and Leon's[2] contribution in this volume adds to the debate by identifying the workload implications for what are broadly considered to be "experiential learning" models that partner students with community organizations. Programs like these are being mandated by the provincial government as part of their outcomes-based system, in what the authors suggest are becoming increasingly "managerial, corporatized, and metrics-oriented" (p. 49). Efforts to advance a meaningful Reconciliation agenda at the post-secondary level, particularly initiatives aimed at "decolonizing education" (Battiste 2013), will necessitate a confrontation with these Eurocentric accountability standards. Can overburdened scholars meaningfully contribute the required affective energy necessary for these "praxis-oriented" community-based assignments? This is the condition of labour in the neo-liberal institution. But far more catastrophic fate might await universities that do not bend to this new reality.

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[2] Sandra Smeltzer, Vanessa R. Sperduti, Calvi Leon.

Ontario's commitment to new performance-based standards was overshadowed by the gutting of Laurentian University. The institution ultimately fired 100 faculty members and cut 69 programs after it filed for creditor protection in early 2021. Substantial loan obligations brought about by a capital spending spree, a province-mandated tuition freeze, the loss of Saudi students in 2018, and COVID crippled the university's capacity to continue without either provincial support or a radical austerity program (Greenfield, 2021). Instead, the province's "let them fail" approach resulted in the demise of a liberal arts programming, midwifery, and the severing of crucial ties to French language and Indigenous institutions. This is being used as a test case in restructuring and the deployment of micro-credentialing (Greenfield, 2021). Will Laurentian serve also as an example to other post-secondary institutions that are pressed by financial exigency to adapt to this COVID-induced neo-liberal reality? That remains to be seen.

Both Ontario and Alberta have tethered funding models to labour market and economic conditions that are largely beyond the realm of a university's control, positioning all post-secondary institutions as training appendages of industry. Indeed, as some scholars argue, the pandemic might be amplifying the neo-liberal agenda through remote teaching and credentials designed to force upon students a market-based logic of what to study and why. Faculty, in this system, are seen as "work-ready" employees capable of transitioning with little notice into remote career-oriented digitized educators (Brabazon, 2020). Academic freedom language embedded in collective agreements is ever-more important in this just-in-time production education model. As Spooner and McNinch (2018, p. xxv) point out prior to the pandemic, audit culture's "tentacles diminish disciplinary autonomy and local authority, bypassing criteria and performance review bodies." This kind of "managerialism and punitive accountability" seems to have been granted an expanded license during COVID. One expression of this approach is the advancement of micro-credentials – a neat manifestation of Taylorism in the academic factory. It's also a summation of human capital theories that presuppose a connection between educational credentials and economic advancement, however flawed (see Beck 1964; Lang & Manove, 2011).

At the author's home institution, micro-credentials are cast as trends that must be adopted to keep up with sectoral tendencies. A "Developed With Industry, For Industry" branding of the professional microcredential regime aligns "jobseekers looking to obtain hireable skills" with the needs of "businesses and industry partners" (University of Regina 2021). Note how business and industry are mentioned, but not the constellation of not-for-profits and community-based organizations that serve an important public function in the city. Three badges make up a microcredential with "zero prerequisites required." "These accolades are industry recognizable and shareable," and are meant to be added to a resume or social media profile (University of Regina, 2021). Busy professionals and full-time students are eligible to tap into what is certain to become a new revenue stream outside of the conventional degree programming structure.

As Wheelahan and Moodie (2021a, p. 212) outline in their critique of micro-credentials in higher education, "they are the newest tool used by governments to re-orient higher education towards a narrow focus on preparation for work." These credentials also possess the potential of disciplining higher education curriculum to "align it more closely with putative labour market requirements" (Wheelahan & Moodie, 2021a, p. 213). This, the authors argue, works to underpin the gig economy and its relentless demand for just-in-time labour (Wheelahan & Moodie, 2021b) – "gig credentials" for the gig economy. For labour and communications scholars Jamie Woodcock and Nicholas Graham (2020, p. 114), that means a system that fosters an "individualized pursuit with few opportunities to build a stable cohort of colleagues", just like gig work. Paul Willis' (1977) canonical ethnographic study of *how* labour power is produced and reproduced in the educational system resonates here – particularly if we wish to explore the extent to which students internalize or resist attempts to construct gig (read: neoliberal) subjects. Trademarked models are shifting from being the brainchildren of policy think tanks and international government organizations, like the OECD and UNESCO, to regional post-secondary policy. Ontario and Alberta examples in Canada showcase the advancement of this philosophy. Studies of alternative credentials suggest that these programs involve learners who are predominantly well-educated, employed, White, and older than the traditional student. Most expect immediate career benefits and improved job performance, and have no interest in pursuing further education (Holland & Kazi, 2019). Niche educational recognition models such as "alternative" credentials – while not currently in direct competition with existing degree programs – offer a neat manifestation of human capital theories, wherein social mobility hinges upon market-driven investments in one's education.

Post-COVID: A neo-liberal recovery?

On-line learning has put new strains on instructors and students who are already stretched thin by the pandemic. "Zoom fatigue" entered the lexicon of workplace stresses associated with the ubiquitous reality of teaching and service. Outcomes varied across demographics, as contributors to this volume point out. But universities have been successful at quickly turning their institutions into on-line delivery platforms, even where support for this transition was limited. Durham University flirted with the idea of providing online-only degrees before students, senators, and academics fiercely resisted what the University and College Union described as an "attack on the livelihood and the professional expertise of hard-working staff" (Hall & Batty, 2020). The move was skuttled after facing widespread resistance. While COVID forced even the most austerity-driven governments to embrace the importance of public institutions and policies like socialized healthcare and income supports, what can be said of the future of post-secondary institutions? Has the pandemic charted a path for a neo-liberal renaissance as performance-based funding models, hybrid teaching systems, micro-credentials, and increased workloads take hold?

As Larry Savage's article suggests, faculty need to mobilize against eroding professional standards by shifting from monetary to non-monetary issues at the bargaining table – part of what can be described as a new pattern of pandemic negotiations. That means prioritizing workload, scheduling, collegial governance, among other issues as unions head back to the negotiating table. Faculty associations, then, need to summon the capacity to resist the deprofessionalization of university and college education in an effort to confront the further commercialization of post-secondary labour (Savage & Webber 2013). Developments in the province of Alberta demonstrate why this model of resistance is necessary. But the privileged stratum of tenured scholars must also recognize the struggles facing students and the often-ignored precariously employed, as Shelton (this volume) and other contributors argue. Alliances with administrative and service support staff – and their respective unions - are critical here. Confronting neo-liberalization, the casualization of work, and low wages demands cross-profession solidarity on campus (see Stevens, 2018). That might require some serious introspection amongst insular tenured faculty.

Digitization and the feasibility of remote working options accelerated during COVID, like it or not. Foster, Samani, Campbell, Walsworth explore the lived realities of remote work even further, by comparing the challenges faced by "old timers" (those academic laborers with experience working from home) versus "newbies" (academics who were new to remote work). Here the authors address the interface of technology, familial responsibilities, mental health, job satisfaction, and the capacity to continue working during the pandemic lockdowns. Employer support and adequate training are key. Indeed, the labour of COVID is not something that can be easily switched on or off, but is instead made possible (or not) by a variety of social conditions.

Shelton, meanwhile, reminds us about the importance of self-care in academia, especially for the most precariously employed. "The outcomes of the pandemic", they argue, "have been deep and diverse for graduate students" and it "has made it harder for [students] to meet [they] varied needs" (Shelton, 2022, p. 38). Non-waged students had the same financial and familial responsibilities as full-time workers, but without the required economic supports. This exacerbated an already tenuous existence and uncertain futures in the halls of post-secondary institutions. Finally, Smeltzer et al wrestle with the demands of delivering community-focused forms of experiential by exploring the conditions under which such forms of affective labour can be managed ethically from a labour standpoint. The authors also raise concerns about the co-opting of these non-commodified experiential opportunities in a performance-driven system that recognizes industry specifically as the natural partner, not community-based entities. Not all co-op and work placements need to fit the mould of a neo-liberal work ready regime.

What the post-COVID world means for universities is not entirely clear despite dire predictions that "universities will never be the same" (Witze, 2020). Policies aimed at aligning labour market and industry demands with the delivery and content of scholarly activity is hardly new, even though the pandemic might be used as an opportunity to rekindle these and other objectives. Not to mention the loss of intellectual property rights over teaching materials like recorded lectures, slides, and notes that benefit institutions and make redundant casual staff (*The Guardian,* 2020). Lingering consequences of gendered and racial disparities, however, might persist well past the return to "normal". Will women and racialized faculty who were the most disadvantaged by

lockdown measures and family responsibilities experience a worsening wage and advancement gap? Can faculty associations marshal power at the bargaining table to address this through formal negotiations? There is also the question of how digitization and surveillance will continue to impact the enforcement of academic integrity, teaching, academic freedom, and the delivery of existing and future programs. International student enrolments, too, could press universities to reflect on the consequences of relying on this formidable source of revenue. Could Laurentian University serve as a warning to the entire sector in Canada as to what happens if institutions over-commit on infrastructure and programs? These and other concerns are explored by the contributions to this volume of *Workplace*. It is time to wrestle with how old problems will resurface once the sensation of COVID-19 subsides. Are academic workers and students prepared?

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